

DO NOT EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM THE HOUSING CRISIS

By

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(Under the Direction of Joshua Barkan)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I offer three deconstructive readings of texts that pertain to *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. First, I read the myths and metaphors of *the housing crisis* to show how they strip housing of its politics, history, and geography. Second, I theorize the violence of housing alongside the thought and practice of Moms 4 Housing in order to show how *the housing crisis* is unable to account for the politics of their movement. Lastly, I introduce the concept of “haunted housing” in order to show how housing is a system haunted by the exclusions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter. Dealing with ontologies of housing, the limits of representations, and practices of depoliticization, I argue that *the housing crisis* is a reductive discourse that tends to authorize, incentivize, and lend urgency to the construction of more houses, but ultimately falls short as a tool in the progressive struggle to ensure that basic housing needs are met.

INDEX WORDS: Housing, Crisis, Problematization, Mythology, Hauntology

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For Rita

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We face uncertain futures prompted by instabilities in the economy, the environment, public health, and seemingly all modern social and political institutions. As the arts, media, policy, and the academy attempt to make sense of our contemporary moment, their efforts have become saturated with the discourse of crisis. Urban scholarship concerned with housing crises in cities across the world proliferated in the wake of the 2008 global financial collapse. Beginning with a mortgage crisis (Ashton, 2009; Hernandez, 2009; Newman, 2009; Aalbers, 2012), followed by a foreclosure crisis (Rugh and Massey, 2010; Wyly et al., 2012), and most recently an affordability crisis (Wetzstein, 2017; Dougherty, 2020), we have come to know housing as a system *in crisis*.

With costs on the rise, shelter has become more inaccessible for poor and working people everywhere. According to Jacqueline Simone (2021), housing advocate and Policy Director with the Coalition for the Homeless, “a full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom rental in any state, county, or city in the country.” Or, to put it plainly, “the rent is too damn high!” (Kim, 2020). In Oakland, where this study is located, the median home price now exceeds \$800,000 (Asperin, 2023) and homelessness increased 131% from 2015 to 2022 (City of Oakland, 2022). Housing problems are getting worse, homes are less affordable, more people are displaced, and buildings remain underutilized!

These actually-existing burdens and vulnerabilities that we recognize as features of *the housing crisis* define housing conditions for many in Oakland and cities around the world. However, if, as David Madden (2024) asserts, the study of 21st-century urbanization involves “the constant generation of new perspectives on... crisis (271),” then as we critique and resist the burdens that we unevenly endure, I suggest we also critique and resist *crisis* as the prevailing discourse used to understand such conditions. Following theorists of crisis (Koselleck, 1988, 2006; Klein, 2007; Berlant, 2011; Hall et al., 2013; Roitman, 2014; Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; White and Nandedkar, 2021; Perkowski et al., 2023; Hochstenbach, 2024; Madden, 2024), I offer three manuscripts that advance a critique of *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California.

To that end, *crisis*, as I approach it for this study, is not an actual housing condition or an objective description of such a condition; it is, instead, a political discourse through which housing is unevenly produced and maintained. I argue that *crisis* constructs housing in at least two ways. First, the discourse of crisis constructs normative housing. Crisis claims are never neutral, they are always political and relational: to invoke housing *in crisis* is to evoke housing *not in crisis*—a vision of how housing *ought to be* based on perceptions of how it *used to be* (Roitman, 2014). The normative logic of crisis, then, reproduces geographies of housing, it sets and resets agendas around architectures, household compositions, urban spatial structures, tenancy, and ownership. *Crisis*, in other words, constructs and enacts visions of what counts as housing and who count as residents.

Second, the discourse of crisis constructs physical housing. The consensus is that cities around the world face a housing supply shortage. If the problem is a lack of affordable housing, then innumerable headlines, policy recommendations, and political speeches have

responded by repeating the commonsense refrain of *the housing crisis*: build more houses! (New York Times Editorial Board, 2019; Dougherty, 2020; Sisson et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Burn-Murdoch, 2023). The claim that housing is *in crisis* lends urgency and legitimacy to policies that incentivize the construction of new buildings. But what is wrong with building more houses?

My concern is not with building houses *per se*, but how the issue is conceived, how its problems and solutions are produced and reproduced, its problematization. As journalists, policymakers, scholars, politicians, and activists identify more and more urban harms as features of *the housing crisis*, the proposed solutions are less about alleviating the burdens of those in need of shelter, and more about removing the barriers to building more houses. *The housing crisis*, then, is not a friend to progressives, it is a political discourse easily enrolled in service of a reactionary real estate agenda of deregulating land use zoning, deregulating building safety code, deregulating labor standards, lowering wages, subsidizing private development, and otherwise supporting the commodification and financialization of land and housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Brill and Raco, 2021; Hochstenbach, 2024).

My critique of *the housing crisis* involves showing how the meaning of crisis depends upon the theoretical frameworks and political conditions in which it operates (O’Conner, 1987; Madden, 2024). The “economic-ness” of *crisis* (Clarke, 2010), i.e., its economistic tendency (Hall and Massey, 2010), reduces a vast field of socio-political contradictions to a simple matter of supply and demand. “Developers and governments,” as Hochstenbach (2024) argues, “have appropriated the term ‘housing crisis’ to depoliticize it, undo it of its radical potential and instead push for a market-friendly agenda” (2).

Quantified, commodified, and financialized conceptions of housing, then, have become the terms of debate, they structure the field through which we understand housing problems and can pursue its solutions.

Following Butler's (2004a) approach to *critique* as "an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility for different modes of living" (4), I interrogate *crisis* in order to open up the possibility of housing. The processes through which we produce and maintain shelter are historically, geographically, culturally, and architecturally differentiated spheres of action and fields of meaning that take on forms and expressions that we have yet to recognize. The atomized, commodified, and financialized buildings that we live in may be home but they could never exhaust the potential of how we might house ourselves and each other. In other words, I am committed to the political potential of housing; thus, I sought out to challenge the presumptions of *the housing crisis*, to shake them free of their certainties, to blur and contradict their prevailing categories, to call attention to, unsettle, or otherwise open up what has come to constitute housing *in crisis*.

To do so, I studied media and policy research narratives around three issues associated with *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. A primary aim of my readings is to show how these issues have been narrated to make sense within the logic of *the housing crisis*. First, I studied affordable housing, specifically a policy in Oakland to preserve what is referred to as "naturally occurring affordable housing," to show how it mythically and metaphorically reproduces prevailing notions of housing *in crisis*. Second, I studied media narratives of the Moms 4 Housing movement, specifically their 2019 reclamation of an investor-owned house in West Oakland to take back control of housing for their

community, to show how news accounts of the event domesticate Moms 4 Housing and appropriate their politics to fit the logic and assumptions of *the housing crisis*. Finally, I studied media narratives of the tragic 2016 Ghost Ship warehouse fire in Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood for how depictions of habitability and uninhabitability represent housing issues as problems related to the production of houses rather than the socio-political issues of maintaining shelter.

By locating my study of *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California, I imply, as a geographer, that there might be something unique about *housing* and *crisis* as they play out in Oakland in relation to other places. I mention this not to insist that my study only applies to Oakland, but to insist that housing issues are geographically differentiated. There is no such thing as *the housing crisis*, the socio-spatial relations of housing produce uneven patterns of investment, disinvestment, segregation, and migration that find expression in differing ways in relation to the differing histories and geographies of place. One of the main claims across the breadth of my research, then, is that *the housing crisis* is a reductive and universalizing discourse that flattens the differentiation of housing issues.

That said, I locate my study in Oakland because I am familiar with its histories and geographies. I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area from 2004-2015, where I worked in nonprofit community development and affordable housing before attending graduate school. I did not participate in the events that I write about, but I have personal attachments to them. I followed them closely as they unfolded for they affect aspects of my cultures and involve members of my communities. This dissertation, however, is not a study of these events as much as it is a study of how they are narrated as products of *the housing*

crisis, it is a study of how discourse shapes issues, objects, and events in accordance with its logic and assumptions.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is as follows. I begin with a description of housing as a constellation, an outline of various orientations to the politics of crisis, and a theorization of *the housing crisis*. Next, I introduce and summarize the three manuscripts that comprise this dissertation: 1) *The myths and metaphors of the housing crisis*, 2) *Appropriating Moms 4 Housing*, and 3) *Haunted Housing*. I go on to describe three themes that pertain to all three manuscripts: 1) an ontology of housing, 2) representations of housing, and 3) the depoliticization of housing. Then, in a section titled *elements of inquiry*, I outline my overall approach to reading *the housing crisis* as a problematization and describe the types of texts I read for each manuscript. Finally, I conclude with a description of the dissertation title and I reiterate its key claims.

Geographies of housing and crisis in Oakland, California

Housing is a name for many things at once. It is a policy object, a commodity structure, and an asset class; it is home, wealth, and debt; it is an event, a technology, and a system of violence; it is mythical, discursive, and architectural; *housing is the variegated cultural processes involved in the production and maintenance of shelter*. Housing, then, is a multifaceted institution that conditions our engagement with all other institutions of modern socio-political life. As such, it facilitates, constrains, provides, and withholds in different ways for different people in different times and places. While such a dense field might suggest irreconcilable tensions, I go on to support all of these claims because they each grasp different aspects of housing.

To deal with the density of housing, I approach it as a *constellation*, a metaphor that describes an ever-shifting relationship between elements variously existing *in* and *as* different moments of a universe. According to Henri Lefebvre (2020),

Sometimes the light from each [element] is superimposed, sometimes one hides or eclipses the other. They interfere. The brightness of each either grows or pales. They rise or descend to the horizon, draw away from one another or converge. Sometimes one seems dominant, sometimes another (4).

When we look at the stars, we do not see them as they are, we see them as they were, light years away; thus, their presence is never fully here nor there, yet we attempt to read them nonetheless, albeit in different ways: astronomically, astrologically, aesthetically. I draw on the constellation metaphor, then, to help situate my reading of the many unfolding and contradictory elements of housing. As a constellation, the universe of housing is marked by the uneven superimposition, eclipse, descent, convergence, and dominance of its many socio-political elements. While the house may be a physical object, it is not a fixed property, it is a conditioned process, the product of a culture's organization of *housing*—the historically and geographically uneven socio-material practices and discourses that constitute the production and maintenance of shelter. Housing, in short, is the condition that makes houses possible.

To be clear, I recognize this is an unconventionally open-ended description of housing. This is not to detract from the materiality of housing, the very real forces and practices that structure how we produce and maintain shelter. I approach housing this way for two reasons: first, my theoretical commitment to the historical transformation of meaning and materiality leads me to strive for clarity in my study without conclusively

defining my terms in an effort to remain open to the ways they could become otherwise; and second, my dissertation is not a direct inquiry into these forces, it is a study of how the pervasive discourse of crisis shapes conceptions of them. I cannot offer an exhaustive list here, but there are more comprehensive explanations of the forces that structure housing to be found in urban geography scholarship.

Geographers have long attended to the many issues of housing both within and beyond moments understood to be in crisis. For instance, there is a rich history of scholarship that concerns the legal and financial practices that structure housing, such as redlining and suburbanization (Jackson, 1987; Hillier, 2003; Rothstein, 2017), or the gentrification debates around the class and racial dynamics of neighborhood change in the U.S. (key texts include Glass, 1964; Zukin, 1982, Logan and Molotch, 1987; Smith, 1996; Lees, 2000; Newman and Wyly 2006). In the wake of the 2008 global financial collapse, scholars sought to understand the geographical relationship between subprime mortgage lending and foreclosure (Aalbers, 2009; Hernandez, 2009; Rugh and Massey, 2010; Aalbers, 2012; Wyly et al., 2012). More recently, the discussion has turned to financialization and the corporatization of rental properties (Christophers, 2015; Aalbers, 2016; 2019; Madden and Marcuse 2016; Fields, 2018; Stein, 2019; Wijburg, 2021) as key contemporary forces that structure the uneven geography of housing.

If we turn to crisis, we find a full engagement with the project to historicize crisis conditions in the literature of Marxist political economy (Marx, 2024 [1867]; O’Conner, 1987). For such scholars, crisis is not an aberration, but a contradiction necessarily inherent to capitalism. Thus, Marxist political economists demonstrate how capitalism is a system dependent upon its crises. For instance, David Harvey (2018), following Marx, defines

capital as “value *in motion*” (194) to describe how the overproduction of a commodity produces a surplus, and how the capital contained in that surplus loses value as it is no longer *in motion*. Rather than resolve this contradiction of overproduction, Harvey argues that capital attempts to displace it or project it anew through the creation of new geographies of production and consumption. He describes *crisis*, then, as the “irrational rationalizer” of capitalism (305), for the destructive processes of geographical expansion and economic restructuring used to keep value *in motion* are “enforced through catastrophes and crises” (185; see also: Klein, 2007).

However, *crisis* is never merely a formal economic concern alone. Nancy Fraser, for instance, finds orthodox Marxist theories of economic crisis essential yet incomplete. She eschews overly economistic approaches and instead frames capitalism as “an institutionalized social order” (2015) to account for “Marx’s hidden abode” (Fraser, 2014), i.e., the indispensable yet often unrecognized “non-economic background conditions” of the capitalist social order, such as the raced and gendered labor of social reproduction as well as nonhuman natural resources, each needed to maintain human society under capitalism (Fraser, 2015: 160–2). (For more on the geographies of social reproduction, see: Katz, 2001; Winders and Smith, 2019; Rodríguez-Rocha, 2021; for more on the critique of “natural resources,” see: Bridge, 2009).

Therefore, in addition to Marxist political economy, geographers have long studied the dynamics of social movements that work against the inequities brought about by such crisis conditions (Nicholls, 2007; Koopman, 2015; Routledge 2015; Chakraborty 2024). These scholars are interested in how geographical concepts such as space, place, or scale shape the development and effects of social movements. Key considerations include the

subjectivity of those involved in social movements, the identity of community and place, and how these constructions enable forms of resistance.

Although social movements galvanized around, or understood in terms of, for instance, the concerns of *feminist geographies* (McDowell, 1999; Nagar et al. 2002; Bondi and Davidson 2005; Mollett and Faria, 2018; Boyer et al., 2023), *indigenous geographies* (Cameron, 2015; Barnd, 2017; De Leeuw and Hunt, 2018; Iralu, 2021), or *Black geographies* (McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Shabbaz, 2015; Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Hawthorne 2019) are never unrelated to concerns of housing, geographers also study social movements directly related to urban housing struggles such as *the urban commons* (Eidelman and Safransky, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Borch and Kornberger, 2015; Huron 2015), *the right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2008; Merrifield, 2011; Bodirsky, 2017), and other forms of resistance to gentrification (Newman and Wyly, 2006; Lees et al., 2018; Addie and Fraser, 2019). A core tenant of this scholarship is that urban space should not be determined by market forces but produced and managed by its inhabitants.

While my dissertation builds upon the literature and is committed to the political stakes of both Marxist theories of crisis and social movement struggles against crisis, my object of analysis—the discourse of crisis—calls for the types of questions raised within poststructuralism and poststructural geographies (Doel, 1999; Popke, 2003; Murdoch, 2005; Ettlinger, 2014), a minor subdiscipline of geography that contains a series of distinct theoretical orientations.¹ Throughout this dissertation, I find myself continually returning

¹ I should mention, yet bracket, notable fields that have emerged in the past few decades informed by Deleuzian concepts (Deleuze 1994; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) such as affective geographies (Pile, 2010), assemblage (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011), non-representational geographies (Thrift, 2008), evental

to a fundamentally geographical question central to Marxists, social movements theorists, and poststructuralists alike: how do socio-spatial relations appear to fix the meanings of political objects, historical events, and social practices as self-evidently natural?

Deborah Dixon and John Paul Jones published a series of articles (1996; 1997; 1998) contending with what they later refer to as *Derridean geographies* (2005). These are debates around the ontological and epistemological perspectives and commitments of poststructuralism as it relates to geographical thought and method. Written in the form of a conversation, they (1998) discuss confusions and tensions between the work of poststructuralists and spatial scientists as a result of contrasting ontologies and epistemologies. A key aim across much of the work gathered under the label of poststructuralism is to explore the limits of representation, the instabilities of meaning, and the ethics of interpretation; therefore, while spatial scientists study an objective and unmediated version of reality, poststructuralists insist that reality is always already socially mediated.

A key feature of Derridean thought is the interpretive reading practice of *deconstruction*. Geographers have attempted to deconstruct ideas, issues, and practices as diverse as maps and mapping (Harley, 1989), the spatial scales of the *region*, *locality*, and *place* (Paasi, 1991), the mathematical justifications of quantitative geography (Barnes, 1994), the concept of *context* (Barnett, 1999), and queer space (Oswin, 2008). Cloke and Johnston's (2005) edited collection, titled *Spaces of geographical thought*, gathers attempts to deconstruct many of the foundational binaries of human geography, including

geographies (Shaw, 2012; Lin, 2020), and postqualitative geographies (St. Pierre, 2019; Allums, 2020; Boyd, 2022).

space/place, nature/culture, state/society, and time/space. The structure of these binaries, according to such scholars, reveals more about the socio-political order in which they are produced than any objective reality or real world in which they exist.

Another poststructural approach to geography involves studying the historical construction of conceptual objects. Bruce Braun (2002), for instance, describes how “the rainforest,” often taken for granted by environmentalists as an endangered natural feature of the landscape, can be productively studied as a discursively constructed object at a center of political and ideological struggles over the definitions of nature and culture. In another instance, Joel Wainwright (2008) describes how historical and geographical knowledge of the Maya civilization’s milpa agricultural system reproduces indigenous peoples of Belize as objects available for domination by contemporary projects of international development.

In an instance more directly related to housing, Craig Willse’s (2015) book, *The value of homelessness*, describes how social services and the social sciences each construct homelessness as a conceptual object; thus, rather than ending homelessness, they end up managing homelessness as a particular social problem. Employing a similar argument, Emma Crane (2016), by “reading Wacquant in Oakland,” describes how well-intentioned anti-poverty programs have the effect of reproducing and maintaining political marginality and racial vulnerability in Oakland, California.

Therefore, while I never lose sight of the political and economic insights of Marxian theory, and I look to social movements as a way to read housing conditions in Oakland, I pursue broadly poststructuralist critiques of *crisis* as a discursive formation that shapes how we understand these conditions (Koselleck, 1998; 2006; Klein, 2007; Hall et

al., 2013; Berlant, 2011; Hong, 2012; Roitman, 2014). *The housing crisis*, then, is not a thing in the world, it is a discourse, or “ideological artifact” (White and Nandedkar, 2021), a narrative used to frame housing issues (Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Hochstenbach, 2024); thus, we can only know *the housing crisis* through its effects, or more accurately, through political interpretations of its effects. For this reason, I am drawn to the discursive politics of *crisis*, the work it performs as a discourse that shapes the domains of action and fields of meaning that it encounters (Brill and Raco, 2021; Perkowski et al., 2023).

The discursive politics of crisis include struggles over representations of crisis. For instance, a claim that something is *in crisis* presents a “moment of potential change” (Hall and Massey, 2010: 57) without determining the direction or outcome of that change (Roitman, 2014: 85); therefore, the effectiveness of a crisis claim depends upon how convincingly it is mobilized as an explanatory device, how compellingly it is narrated. At the same time, the already established discourse of *crisis* regulates the narratives that emerge from the various interpretations, explanations, plans, and policies that structure conceptions of the issue at hand (Jessop, 2013: 24). The literature on the discursive politics of crisis, then, engages an array of problems to show how *crisis* lends authority, legitimacy, and urgency not to objective reality but to partial and situated political claims.

Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) offers a useful example of the discursive politics of crisis, wherein she describes *crisis* as a “redefinitional tactic” (101) used to lend urgency to a problem that one believes has not garnered the attention it deserves. *Crisis*, then, is an issue of recognition. Misrecognizing the everyday issues of embodiment within capitalism, scholars and activists often mistake crises for *slow death*, “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its

experience and historical existence” (95). A claim that something is in crisis, for Berlant, is a reflection of *crisis ordinariness*, “the structural intractability of a problem the world can live with” (102). In other words, what we recognize as a crisis is often not exceptional at all, but a disturbing or distressing aspect of life that is all too ordinary. A crisis claim, then, explains more about the person making the claim than the object claimed to be in crisis.

Following these poststructural critiques of *crisis*, I argue that *the housing crisis* is a reductive and objectifying political discourse. By this I mean, its use enables a broad series of social inequities that are the effects of the system of housing to be reduced to a set of problems contained within the physical object or conceptual figure of the house. Although its use is often well-intentioned, *the housing crisis* fixes housing metonymically; in other words, the object of the house stands in for housing—the processes through which we produce and maintain shelter. As a result, these systemic qualities of housing are obscured.

For instance, in the U.S., the persistent histories of racial segregation (Self, 2003; Camp, 2012; Chakravartty and da Silva, 2012; Gibbons, 2016), deindustrialization (Gilmore, 2007; Sugrue, 2014), gentrification (Tissot, 2015; Madden and Marcuse, 2016), and climate migration (Dawson, 2019; Wainwright and Mann, 2018) all take place through the geographies of housing. Yet, these processes, these uneven movements and containments of community, are not always recognized as forces that constitute housing. Central to this study, then, is my insistence that these social, political, economic, and ecological processes *are* housing—they are to be studied, known, experienced, resisted,

and lived as housing precisely because they are the conditions through which we produce and maintain shelter.

To that end, what we recognize as *the housing crisis* is nothing new; for many communities, unsafe and precarious housing have been the only conditions available for generations. In addition to the histories of anti-Black racism in the U.S., we can look to the conditions of 19th century English working-class housing (Engels, 1987), the immigrant tenements of New York and Chicago (Addams, 1902), the slums and urban informality in the Global South (AlSayyad and Roy, 2003), the U.S. prison system as “one of the most massive public housing projects in the history of the world” (Cuevas, 2012: 615), or the gender and sexual oppression built into buildings and urban planning (Hayden, 1982; Frisch, 2002; Hanhardt, 2013).

However, the experience of unsafe and insecure housing is not understood to be the crisis; instead, a system is identified to be *in crisis* to the extent that its condition threatens the legitimacy of the prevailing socio-political order. For instance, Black and Latino households lost homes to foreclosure at an alarming rate throughout the mid-2000s, but this massive loss was not identified as a housing crisis until it began to impact middle-class white neighborhoods (Wyly et al., 2012). Crosby et al. (2012) identify *the housing crisis* as “a middle-class experience that for others is just the same old ‘making do and getting by’” (140). This is why, again, I approach *the housing crisis* with skepticism, not as an objective description of housing problems, but as, following Roitman (2014), “a particular (and thus political) solution to what is declared a problem for certain people” (49).

Approaching *crisis* as a political discourse, then, I show how its use produces and maintains housing in particular ways in Oakland, California. Oakland is a key site for the

study of *the housing crisis* because of its urban histories and geographies that are emblematic of the forces that have shaped housing in the U.S. Robert Self's (2003) book, *American Babylon*, is a key text on the modern development of Oakland, wherein he describes a place produced through the white flight suburb development of the 20th century and the resultant underdevelopment of its disinvested Black urban center. A useful companion text is Chris Rhomberg's (2004) book, *No there there*, which offers a social movement history of the political struggles between white middle-class nativism, working-class unionism, and the Black civil rights movement throughout the 20th century.

It is within this historical context of racialized uneven development that critical urban geographers study Oakland, a place known for vulnerability to harm and resistance to the forces that produce it. Donna Murch's (2010) book on the rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland is an important account of this resistance in the 20th century. Contemporary resistance takes the form of environmental justice work concerning the uneven distribution of toxins in the air (Fisher et al., 2006) and soil (McClintock, 2012), as well as issues of access to healthy food (McClintock 2008; Alkon et al. 2022) and adequate transit (Golub et al., 2013; Behrsin and Benner, 2017).

Oakland is a socially and economically polarized city that continues to rapidly transform, and urban geographers have sought to understand this rapid transformation through studying the relationship between race, space, and gentrification (Schafran, 2013; McElroy and Werth, 2019; Ramírez, 2020a). The displacement and dispossession of the Black community was the impetus for Moms 4 Housing, a group of previously homeless Black mothers who reclaimed a vacant investor-owned property. Moms 4 Housing's action resembles the efforts of the Occupy Oakland Foreclosure Defense Group (Occupy

Oakland, 2012); however, while Occupy Oakland occupied the foreclosed homes of their community, Moms 4 Housing, responding to the financialization of housing and the corporate ownership of rental properties (Fields and Raymond, 2021), reclaimed an investor-owned property to take back community control of housing (Ramírez, 2020b; Goldstein, 2023).

The geography of resistance to gentrification in Oakland also hinges on its image as a global center of the arts, music, and culture, a feature understood to attract people, investment, and development from all over the world. Balliger (2021a), for instance, studies the history of local community murals in Oakland to show how the concept of *community* itself, reflected in these public arts projects, signals a neighborhood primed for gentrification. Heitz (2022), in another instance, describes how urban development efforts in Oakland rely on images of its Black art and culture, which contribute to gentrification and the displacement of its Black residents. Werth and Marienthal (2016) approach gentrification as a discourse; “as a situated and unstable constellation of meanings and resonances,” they write, “the talk of gentrification is central to contemporary forms of urban cultural politics in places like Oakland” (720). Studying a monthly downtown art festival, they show how the conceptual openness of gentrification allows its organizers to make young Black men and political protesters appear out of place.

An important question this work asks, then, is how can local art and culture continue apace without displacing those who produce this work? A less studied aspect of the Oakland arts scene is its history and geography of post-industrial warehouses transformed into do-it-yourself unpermitted art studios, music venues, and housing collectives (Balliger, 2021b). In 2016, one such warehouse, the Ghost Ship, set fire and took the lives of 36 people

(Pulitzer, 2017). It is within this context of rapid gentrification, dispossession, the transformation of local arts and culture that a tragedy such as the Ghost Ship fire might become a flashpoint in political and ideological struggles over housing *in crisis*. I turn now to descriptions of the three manuscripts that comprise this dissertation, two of which address Moms 4 Housing and the Ghost Ship fire.

Three manuscripts

I present this dissertation composed of three manuscripts: 1) *The myths and metaphors of the housing crisis*, 2) *Appropriating Moms 4 Housing*, and 3) *Haunted Housing*. In each of these manuscripts, I studied a different issue to show how different dimensions of housing are shaped in and through the discourse of crisis. After a summary of each manuscript, I will outline three main themes common to all of these studies. These themes include: 1) an ontology of housing, 2) representations of housing, and 3) the depoliticization of housing.

The myths and metaphors of the housing crisis

In the first manuscript, I studied, as its title suggests, the myths and metaphors of *the housing crisis*. After I outline a theory and practice of reading mythologically and metaphorically, I read an archive of affordable housing policy research to trace the politics that are authorized and obscured through the myths and metaphors deployed in these texts.

Following Barnes and Duncan's (1992) approach to metaphor as a way to redescribe a previously unfamiliar feature of reality within culturally familiar terms, I offer two examples of how current housing realities are redescribed through the metaphor of crisis. First, I show how policy representations of *crisis* depict housing burdens and

negative outcomes, such as images and narratives of eviction, homelessness, and housing activism, rather than depict the positive outcomes for corporate landlords, financial institutions, and others who profit or otherwise benefit from *the housing crisis*. This is the case, I suggest, because while representations of burden support the status quo politics of service provision and authorize incentives for private development, representations of corporate profits might support a radical politics of redistribution or decommodification.

Second, I study the metaphor of collision, a rhetorical gesture that results in depictions of *the housing crisis* as an external force that collides with the people who experience it. As Dougherty (2020) writes in *The New York Times*, “[w]hen California’s housing crisis slammed into [or collided with] a wealthy suburb,” his description rhetorically isolates *the housing crisis* from the histories and geographies of place. The social, political, and economic practices that produce the burdens and displacements we recognize as *the housing crisis* are obscured. The continuity between the history of redlining (Rothstein, 2017), for instance, and contemporary housing issues is lost when such practices are not understood as constitutive of how these places came to be what they are today.

I expand the metaphor of collision to study a common phrase used to describe socio-political injustices; “the housing crisis,” as Treuhaft et al. (2018) write, “has *hit* low-income communities of color the *hardest* (5, emphasis mine). The metaphor of collision, in this instance, the language of those “hit hardest” or “most impacted” by a phenomenon, redescribes systems of oppression in terms of one bounded, stable, coherent object hitting another, it redescribes people, places, and the injustices they endure as natural and already existing prior to their collision. However, people and places do not pre-exist social

phenomena, we are not separate from the historical practices and systems of meaning through which we emerge, we are continuously reproduced through them. My critique, then, is not against centering people who are most impacted by an issue, event, or unjust policy *per se*; rather, my intent is to call attention to the depoliticization that metaphors might perform in the redescription of such issues, events, or policies.

Next, following Roland Barthes (2012), who refers to myth as “depoliticized speech” (255), I claim that *affordable housing* is a myth because it depoliticizes people, places, and value. Although *affordable housing* represents a vision of housing justice where everyone is safely, securely, and affordably housed, I show how the concept strips housing of its history and affordability of its geography, how it naturalizes housing markets and depoliticizes struggles for safe and secure homes, how its representations often focus narrowly on the buildings themselves (e.g., the quantity, costs, and physical conditions of a region’s local housing stock) at the expense of the conditions, practices, people, places, and structures of value through which these buildings are produced, maintained, and unevenly distributed. The myth of *affordable housing*, then, is that the burdens of housing are the unfortunate yet inevitable outcomes of a seemingly natural economic order rather than the politics and policies that unevenly value people and places.

To work through the myth of affordable housing, I offer a reading of an exemplary instance of policy mythmaking found in recent initiatives in Oakland and other cities to preserve what is referred to as “naturally occurring affordable housing.” NOAH is a mythical concept because it naturalizes and depoliticizes the process that make these homes affordable. NOAH is a name for areas in working-class neighborhoods adjacent to gentrifying neighborhoods that are, for the time being, relatively affordable without

government subsidy. The relative affordability of these areas, however, is anything but naturally occurring, it is the product of decades of devaluation through policies and practices such as segregation and disinvestment that have primed these working-class neighborhoods for their current phase of speculative reinvestment.

Appropriating Moms 4 Housing

In the second manuscript, I study media coverage of Moms 4 Housing, a group of previously homeless Black mothers who, on November 18, 2019, reclaimed a vacant house in Oakland, California to shelter their families and call attention to housing injustices. With the help of community members, the moms cleaned and repaired the building, they brought in appliances, paid utilities, named the building *Mom's House*, and began to build a home for themselves and their children. Two weeks later, Wedgewood LLC, a property investment firm that owned the building, served the mothers an eviction notice. Wedgewood LLC later agreed to sell the house to Moms 4 Housing through the Oakland Community Land Trust. *Mom's House* is now completely renovated and operates as a nonprofit organization that offers transitional housing for women as they prepare to secure permanent housing.

Although media narratives contextualize Moms 4 Housing, almost without fail, as a response to *the housing crisis*, I read their actions, writings, and public interviews as critical urban theory texts that offer critiques of housing in contradiction with the logics and assumptions of this discourse. If *the housing crisis* organizes urban space to meet the demands of capital, Moms 4 Housing, in contrast, organize each other to meet the needs of their community. My argument, then, is that the primary discourse available to

contextualize the Moms 4 Housing movement is unable to recognize or account for these Black mother's housing politics. To that end, I show how media narratives structured by *the housing crisis* truncate, domesticate, ignore, or outright deny their collective politics while they appropriate these women and their actions as evidence in support of private housing development.

A key conceptual shift occurred when Moms 4 Housing transformed an Alameda County Assessor's Office statistic into a rallying cry: "There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are people without homes" (Moms 4 Housing, 2024). Oakland's high vacancy rate directly contradicts *the housing crisis*, it shows that the problem is not a scarcity of houses, but an abundance of houses *held vacant* by corporate investors. The prevailing solution, then, to build more may not only be ineffective but it may make housing burdens and other community harms worse as the scope of speculation compounds, expands, and intensifies with the construction of new houses as yet more speculative commodities.

In an interview with KQED radio, Moms 4 Housing organizer, Carroll Fife, describes housing as a system of violence (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020). On the one hand, violence finds physical expression through the uneven movements and confinements of community such as segregation, eviction, gentrification, and incarceration (Fife, 2020). Moms 4 Housing identify a key force of this displacement as the speculative activities of corporate investors. On the other hand, violence finds normative expression through the cultural constructions of people and places that condition us to accept such violence as normal (Chambers, 2007). In other words, through the dehumanization of people and the

devaluation of places, the violence of housing remains unrecognizable *as violent* due to *who* suffers such violence and *where*.

Haunted housing

In the final manuscript, *Haunted housing*, I offer a hauntology of *the housing crisis*. Following Jacques Derrida (1994) and Avery Gordon (2008), I enlist the metaphor of the ghost to draw a haunted ontological distinction between *houses* (physical buildings) and *housing* (the socio-spatial relations through which we produce and maintain these buildings). In other words, I move away from the *haunted house*, the popular narrative of a spectral presence who inhabits one's home, towards the concept of *haunted housing*, a name for the seemingly absent yet never-not-with-us spectral presences that inhabit the everyday production and maintenance of shelter. The ghosts that interest me, then, are not the ones who haunt individual houses, but the ones who haunt housing.

Ghosts are the elements of modern socio-political life that we attempt to exclude or discard, yet they refuse to stay away. The ghost, according to Gordon (2008), is a "social figure" (25), and its "haunting is a constituent element of modern social life" (7). Thus, their return demonstrates inadequacies in the concepts that structure our lives, they make visible the contradictions and ambiguities between a conceptual logic and the histories and geographies it fails to describe. If ghosts are everywhere and constitutive of everything, then, following Derrida (1994), it is "necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of [every] concept" (202). To do so, I studied media narratives of the tragic Ghost Ship fire with a single question in mind: *how is housing haunted by its exclusions?*

On December 2, 2016, an electrical fire killed 36 people during a music performance at an unpermitted live-work warehouse art collective known as the Ghost Ship. I divided media narratives of the tragedy in two categories. First, following Simon (2017), there is the “flammability” narrative, wherein the fire was seen as inevitable due to the Ghost Ship’s construction, design, and lack of oversight. The residents were blamed as dangerous for the makeshift architecture of the converted 1930s warehouse, the city as irresponsible for not enforcing building code violations, and the performance attendees as reckless for entering a building in such condition. Second, journalists and housing advocates positioned the Ghost Ship fire as a product of the housing crisis (Anzilotti, 2016; Grabar, 2016; Levin, 2016; Starc, 2016). The unpermitted conversion of the warehouse into a life-work space was cited as evidence that a lack of affordable housing forces low-income residents into unsafe and unstable living conditions. I argue that both *the flammability narrative* and *the housing crisis* fail to meaningfully address the fire as a housing issue because they are only able to view the Ghost Ship as an uninhabitable space *outside of housing*.

Following Judith Butler’s (1993) work on the *constitutive outside*, a Hegelian concept that names how categories are defined by what they exclude, I theorize the ghost in terms of the constitutive outside. Ghosts, always already absent *and* present, show the boundaries between the inside and outside of a category to be porous and tenuous at best, each contaminating and reconstituting the other. The *uninhabitable* is a spatialization of the *constitutive outside*, the “uninhabitable zones of social life” (Butler, 1993: xiii), which, in this instance, designates housing conditions that are “unlivable and unimaginable” (McKittrick, 2006: 130) as well as forms of life that are “subject to seemingly endless lists

of deprivation” (Simone, 2016: 138). The uninhabitable, however, is never actually *outside* the category of housing, but exists as its neglected yet necessary *constitutive outside*.²

Condemned as uninhabitable, media accounts were reluctant to even refer to the Ghost Ship as housing, opting instead to call it a warehouse, venue, or simply a “space” (Levin, 2016; Rosen, 2016). The modern commodified, financialized, and objectified housing order requires the repudiation of the uninhabitable as unimaginable for the prevailing system to appear as the only imaginable way to house a population. The Ghost Ship, then, haunts housing, it is its constitutive outside; while positioned as outside of housing, the Ghost Ship remains materially and conceptually enmeshed in the systems through which we produce and maintain shelter. Therefore, if ghosts are social, rather than always attempting to exclude them, we might “learn to live *with* ghosts” (Derrida, 1994: xvii–iii) if we hope to create more livable and habitable ways of housing ourselves and each other, including those who are no longer, or not yet, with us.

I turn now to descriptions of the themes common to all three manuscripts.

An ontology of housing

A central theme that underpins all three manuscripts is a slippage in the distinction between houses and housing. *Houses* are architectural objects or residential buildings narrated within our social and economic order as commodities in a system of private property. *Housing*, conversely, names the social, political, and economic processes through which

² In another instance, people who must sleep in their cars, under highway overpasses, or in city parks may live outside of houses, but they do not live outside of housing. Their presence pervades the material and conceptual systems through which we produce and maintain shelter. Homelessness, then, is a key example of the constitutive outside of housing for it shows how approaching the problems of housing in terms of the number of houses is as reductive and Malthusian as approaching the problems of life in terms of the number of lives.

we produce and maintain shelter. Housing includes the discourses that regulate the legibility of buildings *as houses* within such an order: a series of statements, statistics, and constructions are arranged, repeated, and affirmed through policy, practice, and everyday conversation to materialize the appearance of certain architectural forms, household compositions, and land use patterns as natural and normal. Housing, then, is never simply a collection of houses: *housing is the condition that makes houses possible*.

Housing, at the same time, requires houses, it is reproduced within and upon the concrete tangibility of its surfaces. The physicality of buildings and the materiality of their distribution produce a powerful effect: it is difficult to parse individual houses from iterations of housing. The built environment, in other words, ideologically reproduces the socio-spatial relations that produce and maintain it. Razing modest single-family homes in working-class Black neighborhoods, for instance, in order to construct luxury apartment towers is an iteration of housing. Buildings embody the structure of value that grounds the destruction and displacement of community; their concreteness reifies and obscures the injustices of housing.

Housing, however, is never settled or fixed because our ways of knowing and living it always already exceed the limits of its categories. The relationship, then, between housing and houses is one of both constraint and enablement. I do not suggest a simple dichotomy between the open materiality of housing and the closed physicality of houses, but there is a productive ontological tension between them. Thus, a central claim of the following three manuscripts is that if *the housing crisis* is not working, which I argue it is not, then thinking ontologically about housing might foster new perspectives and generate new problematizations that may better suit contemporary housing needs.

As it pertains to the metaphors of *the housing crisis*, I find the ontological distinction between housing and houses at work in the metaphor of collision, wherein *crisis* is depicted as an external force that collides with those who experience it. The result is that houses are reified as physical objects and crisis as an objective force or phenomenon. However, as I show in *The myths and metaphors of the housing crisis*, an awareness of the rhetorical gesture of collision reveals an ontology more attuned to how the harms and burdens recognized as features of *the housing crisis* are not external to houses but are reproduced through the systems, institutions, discourses, and social relations through which we produce and maintain those houses.

As it pertains to media depictions of Moms 4 Housing, the ontology of *houses* is reproduced through narratives that position their movement as a response to *the housing crisis*, a discourse that structures the issue as a supply problem that can be solved through building more houses. In contrast, Moms 4 Housing's thought and practice are aligned with an ontology of *housing*, they show housing to be a relational and socio-material system that makes houses possible. "There is not a scarcity of housing," argues Dominique Walker of Moms 4 Housing, "I don't think housing needs to be built to be affordable. There's housing here. So we just got to figure out how to get folks into these homes that are sitting vacant" (Wang, 2020). If the problem, for them, is not supply but speculation, then their solution is not building more *houses* but reclaiming *housing* as a system for their community.

The ontological distinction between housing and houses is perhaps most prominent in the concept of *haunted housing*. "Hauntology" is a Derridean portmanteau that describes ontology as haunted by the exclusions necessary for it to appear united and coherent.

Following hauntology, I begin with the haunted house, a ghost story that rests upon the ontology of *houses*, wherein a ghost haunts the residents of a house, to then introduce *haunted housing*, a concept that rests upon an ontology of *housing*, wherein houses cannot stand on their own, for they are built upon the many haunted systems that ground the prevailing housing order. Indigenous dispossession, racial segregation, private property, wage labor, and land use zoning are a few instances of inherently exclusionary systems upon which houses are built. If we know, as Derrida (1994) asserts, that “ontology is a conjuration” (202), then we are better equipped to question its perceived coherence and challenge what is presumed to be essential about the relations that reproduce it.

Representations of housing

A primary task of this dissertation is to show the ideological closure at work in representations of *the housing crisis* in media and policy research. To that end, there is a strong thematic emphasis on the limits of representation and the malleability of meaning in all three of the following manuscripts. Following Stuart Hall’s (1997) definition of representation as “the production of meaning through language” (2) that “enables us to *refer to* the ‘real’ world of objects, people, or events” (3), representations that *refer to* housing in crisis are not essential and natural but historical, geographical, and political. *Crisis*, then, is not an objective description of housing conditions but a political representation that contributes to the reproduction of such conditions.

Representations of affordable housing are a key feature of *the housing crisis*. Yet, if myths redescribe socio-spatial relations as natural, timeless, and universal (Barthes, 2012), then affordable housing is mythic for it obscures how the production of value is

structured within housing markets. The housing policy definition of *affordable housing* is not simply housing that is affordable; instead, *affordable housing* designates a specific category of government subsidized housing that is restricted from the market structure of property value. For this reason, *affordable housing* is often synonymous with *below-market-rate* housing. There is a distinction, then, between two categories: subsidized or restricted *below-market-rate* housing on the one hand, and unsubsidized or unrestricted *market-rate* housing on the other. The result of this distinction is that *below-market-rate* housing, seen as culturally constructed through government subsidies and deed restrictions, renders *market-rate* housing, and, in turn, the actions and structures of housing markets in general, all appear natural, timeless, and universal.

The limits of representation are perhaps most evident in media narratives of Moms 4 Housing. I offer a close reading of a common description of Moms 4 Housing “as a rotating group of four homeless mothers who took up residence in the empty house... to highlight the shortage of affordable housing” (Ravani, 2020). The language used in this description to *refer to* Moms 4 Housing represents them, I argue, in opposition to how these women represent themselves. Briefly, Ravani’s sentence above erases their specificity and intent as a particular group of organized Black mothers who reclaimed a vacant investor-owned house from financial speculators as a strategy to take back community control of their city. Their action was not to highlight an affordable housing shortage; instead, “[e]verything was done,” according to Dominique Walker, “with a specific strategy to bring awareness to corporations hoarding homes” (NoiseCat, 2020). There is a significant gap, then, between the ‘real’ world and representations of it.

Turning to media coverage of the Ghost Ship fire, representations of flammability pervade, if not define, the mainstream account of the tragic event. The interior of the building was described as a “giant maze...[with] tons of corridors, that kind of went into little hideaways” (Miller, 2016a), which housed a textured arrangement of paintings, pianos, books, rugs, and antique furniture extending from every surface. A previous resident described the Ghost Ship as “a filthy firetrap, with frequent power outages, overloaded outlets, sparks and the smell of burning wire. A camping stove with butane tanks served as the kitchen” (Sulek et al., 2016). The Ghost Ship, then, was repeatedly condemned in the media as a “labyrinth of rooms and nooks crowded with... highly flammable” objects and artifacts (BondGraham, 2016). Given such descriptions, it is difficult to imagine the deadly fire as anything but inevitable under these conditions.

Gregory Simon (2017) describes how media representations of places *as flammable* are produced as such through the logic of capitalist urbanization. Writing in the context of wildfires, he points to the economic incentives of suburban sprawl as an incendiary process that constructs houses at the wildland-urban interface that are more likely to burn. Representations of the Ghost Ship’s flammability, with their emphasis on the physical structure of the building rather than the social structures in which it existed, serve the same logic of capitalist urbanization. The aim, then, is to go beyond the representations of flammability to consider the social, political, and economic conditions that structure housing injustices if we want to better understand places such as the Ghost Ship, why they might catch fire, and why those in danger might be more likely than others to inhabit such incendiary geographies.

Representations of the Ghost Ship's flammability also served to support narratives of its *uninhabitability*. Seen as uninhabitable, media accounts of the fire articulate how the Ghost Ship was not housing at all, how it existed *outside of housing* as an informal space from which to survive the problems of housing. According to advocates and journalists who contextualized the fire as a product of *the housing crisis*, the shortage of affordable housing forces people into unsafe and unstable living arrangements such as the Ghost Ship. However, if the discourse of crisis incites a discourse of housing, then these pervasive representations of the Ghost Ship's uninhabitability also work to articulate its supposed opposite: habitability, or the qualities that come to define what constitutes appropriate households and forms of housing. What constitutes housing, then, is continuously reproduced through the movement between what is considered *housing* and *not (yet) housing* as the limits of its discourse.

The depoliticization of housing

The final theme that cuts across all three manuscripts is the depoliticization of housing. As mentioned above, a primary aim of my study is to reassert the political potential of housing in the face of crisis. If *housing*, as articulated here, is an open horizon and unresolvable mode of existence beyond the object of the house and the logic of capitalism, then my critique takes aim at the ideological closure at work in *the housing crisis*. Through the reduction of housing issues to a supply shortage, and the reification of markets as the only mechanism capable of addressing these issues, *the housing crisis* is an objectifying discourse that disavows the transformative potential of how we might house ourselves and each other.

In policy texts, *housing* is metaphorically redescribed as a *policy object* largely removed from the conditions of its existence; in other words, it is reproduced its own domain with its own logics isolated from many of the social, political, and economic practices, processes, and institutions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter. I recount, for instance, how “[t]he collision of a tech-driven economy and California’s housing crisis” (Treuhart et al., 2018: 8-11) is a narrative that metaphorically redescribes *housing* and *the economy* as separate entities with their own internal logics. This seemingly impartial narrative, I argue, operates as a depoliticizing gesture, it establishes a conceptual partition between *housing* from *the economy*, which reflects an ideological predisposition to not see economic intervention and restructuring as within the purview of housing policy.

My reading of the depoliticization of housing through metaphor aligns with Aalbers and Christopher’s (2014) claim that housing policy research conceptually reproduces housing as a domain isolated from its political economy, and Mitchell’s (1999) claim that contemporary politics is less about control within these domains than reproducing the distinctions between them. Geographies of housing are, in fact, inextricable from their political economies. However, if the socio-political and economic burdens of housing are isolated to the narrowly construed domain of *housing policy*, debates are limited to the most efficient way to incentivize the private development of more houses; thus, it becomes unthinkable to intervene in political and economic structures to ensure that even the most basic housing needs are met.

The depoliticization of housing is perhaps most clear in media depictions of the Moms 4 Housing movement. The narration of Moms 4 Housing as a response to *the housing crisis* redescribes them from the beginning in ways that appropriate their

movement to fit the logic and assumptions of crisis. A contradiction between progressive language and reactionary politics structures *the housing crisis*, which, I argue, results in aesthetically politicized representations of these women and depoliticized representations of their thought and practice. These Black mothers are treated as heroes in the media, yet their struggles are individualized, their politics are stripped of their history, geography, and collectivity.

In such depictions, Moms 4 Housing represent *the housing crisis*. For instance, these “women—all Black, working mothers—became a *symbol* of the Bay Area’s housing crisis” (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020), they “occupied a vacant house and became *icons* of the homelessness crisis” (Paulas, 2020) (emphases mine). These women, in short, are treated as celebrities. The result is courageous yet one-dimensional depictions that could never represent the ideas and actions of these women, let alone the contemporary housing issues they struggle against. These representations are ultimately depoliticizing gestures, when media profiles of these women are offered in lieu of meaningful examinations of their politics or explanations of the systemic violence of housing.

Haunted housing is a concept that foregrounds the processes through which we produce and maintain shelter, it is attentive to the material and discursive exclusions needed for the prevailing housing order to appear coherent and reproducible. It is a critique of representations that normalize the socio-political exclusions produced through the everyday activities of housing under capitalism. Such exclusions occur through representations of housing that are limited to *houses*, bereft of descriptions of *housing*, the conditions that make houses possible.

For instance, due to the intimate relationship between people and places, oppressed communities are relegated to what McKittrick (2006) refers to as *the uninhabitable*, the unimaginable spaces of our urban environments, which spatially reinforces these communities as unimaginable within the geographical order of social life (Butler, 1993: xiii; Simone, 2016). The uneven distributions of habitability and humanity go unnoticed, they are segregated out of recognition or accepted as an unfortunate necessity to maintain the prevailing order. It is imperative, then, that we attend to our socio-political ghosts, the uninhabitable, those ignored people and obscured places seen to exist beyond the pale, that nonetheless constitute housing.

Elements of inquiry: a problematization of *the housing crisis*

For my dissertation, I amassed an archive of media and policy research texts that address *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. I read these texts as a form of *problematization*, an interpretive practice attentive to the deconstruction of *housing* and *crisis*. Deconstruction, as I invoke it here, is a commitment to the idea that there are no ultimate foundations from which to make essential or universal claims across time and space. Problematization, as I go on to describe, is deconstructive in the sense that it is a constructive way of *doing* that also contains the conditions of its own *undoing*. In other words, problematization at once names the construction of an issue as a particular problem, and it is a practice of reading for how a problem is constructed and reconstructed as such.

My reading of *crisis* as a problematization of *housing* locates moments where meaning has been temporarily fixed, where the movement of *différance* (Derrida, 1982)—the ways in which meanings differ and defer—has crystallized long enough to rest a claim

upon it or launch a political critique from it. Refusing the certainty of crisis claims, I search for moments of ambiguity when a text contradicts or transgresses the system it has been constructed within, when metaphors begin to fray, when an overreliance on binary categories no longer masks the insecurities of an argument. Following Butler (1992), I attempt to “suspend all commitments” to individual objects of the world in order to trace the political work, i.e., “the consolidation and concealment of authority” (15), conducted in their name. Thus, rather than seek solutions to *the housing crisis*, a key to problematization is to show how problems are produced and the politics that are authorized by such problematizations.

Problematization as a deconstructive reading practice

Problems are often perceived as obstacles to be solved or overcome, but problems are not “ready-made” (Deleuze, 1994: 158), they are not objective concerns that exist in themselves. “One cannot respond to a problem,” According to Savranksy (2021), “one has not learned how to pose” (9). Problems, then, are historical, geographical, cultural, and political; in other words, they must be learned. While countless contradictions emerge from the uneven differentiation of our lives, few are ever recognized or experienced at all, others go unnoticed altogether, others are normalized, and others become *problematized*, or constructed as problems that become perceived as obstacles to be solved or overcome.

Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) define problematization as “the process of putting something forward as a ‘problem’... to provide a particular way of conceptualizing [something] as a ‘problem’” (38). If *problematization* is the process of constructing issues as problems to be solved, then *the problematic*, in contrast, names an open and “unsolvable

mode of existence” (Savransky, 2021), a horizon of uneven differentiation where each provisional solution produces evermore contradictions (Bowden, 2018: 56). Problematization, then, involves the construction of material and conceptual boundaries around existence. There is power in this process, in the political construction of a problem, the conceptualization and management of its causes, symptoms, and solutions.

Problems (the effects of problematization) regulate the conditions through which we imagine and attend to the issues and objects of our world (Wasser, 2017: 56–7), they shape how we understand and govern ourselves and each other. If a dominant group identifies the behaviors of an oppressed group as the cause of their own oppression, then the oppressed group itself is constructed as the problem. For instance, “the culture of poverty” narrative problematized Black poverty not as a product of 400 years of anti-Black racism, but of Black culture. With the problem constructed as such, proposed solutions did not involve the social, political, or economic restructuring of American culture, but further attacks on Black culture and Black families. The stakes of problematization are high; if we exist in relation to the cultural problematizations of our history and geography, then a given set of problems has profound impacts on our lives.

Julie Guthman (2011) refers to problematization in terms of “problem closure,” wherein many dimensions of an issue are reduced, objectified, and closed around “a specific definition of a problem” (15). A critical aspect of problem closure involves tracking how other dimensions of an issue are excluded from a problematization, or how a specific problem “prevents other ways of thinking” about an issue (21). If problems do not emerge organically, then they are, for Guthman, constructed in order to align with “politically tenable solutions” (17). Any proposed solution to a problem, then, is not a

direct response to an issue in the world as much as it is a politically tenable response within a particular cultural problematization of an issue.

“There is no presumption,” for Bacchi (2015), “that a problem exists” in the first place (9); therefore, problems are not objective conditions but political constructions, and problematization is a mode of reading that “gives access to the spaces within which ‘objects’ emerge as ‘real’ and ‘true,’ making it possible to study the strategic relations, the politics, involved in their appearance” (Bacchi, 2012: 7). The aims, then, of problematization are a) to reveal the construction of objects; b) to show how, despite appearances, these given objects remain under construction; and finally, c) “*to make politics visible*” (Bacchi, 2012: 5), to show how political projects are supported and reproduced through the production of problems.

The housing crisis as a problem

Media and policy research texts are key sites of problematization, they contribute to the organization of society and how we come to know the issues, objects, and events of our world as problems. Following Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), I do not read these texts for how they “*address* problems,” but for how they “*produce* ‘problems’ as particular types of problems” (6). While media and policy research texts are, of course, political, they are depoliticizing to the extent that they narrate issues as problems that exist in themselves rather than as “the effects of political processes” (Bacchi, 2015: 8). Thus, it is critical to read such texts as descriptions of how the issues, objects, and events of our socio-political world are understood as problems that seemingly exist outside of politics.

My problematization of *the housing crisis* begins with the assumption that housing is a problematic, the “unsolvable mode of existence” (Savransky, 2021) that takes many forms, the open political process that can always be built, maintained, and distributed in new and different ways. *The housing crisis*, in contrast, as a problematization, is a temporary solidification of a particular problem with a particular solution that “prevents other ways of thinking” (Guthman, 2011: 21) about housing. As a reason to be hopeful, I assert that the ideological closure of the housing problematic is always incomplete; therefore, my critique of *the housing crisis* is also a practice of writing against the definitional work performed through the discourse of *crisis*.

To do so, I read 120 media articles and policy research texts in order to trace two overarching concerns of problematization across various issues, objects, and events that pertain to housing in Oakland, California.³ First, I trace how the processes that constitute housing *in crisis* are enclosed within the object of the house. In other words, I show how the fetishization of houses as fixed objects (be they architectural, technological, financial, or policy objects) obscures the processes, practices, and social relations that reproduce housing. Second, I trace how events and social movements that pose a threat to the prevailing system of housing are enclosed within the discourse of *crisis*. More specifically, I critique media narratives of the Ghost Ship fire and the Moms 4 Housing movement as products of an exceptional moment *in crisis*, when, in fact, they are the ordinary products of longstanding political and economic contradictions in the modern commodified housing order.

³ See Appendix A for a complete reference list of the empirical texts used in the three studies that comprise this dissertation.

In my study of the myths and metaphors of *the housing crisis*, I read 28 policy research reports and opinion pieces for how the discourse of crisis incites a discourse of housing. The reports I studied were published by leading progressive Oakland or San Francisco Bay Area-based research institutes and nonprofit development organizations. These are well-intentioned mission-driven organizations with the goal of solving *the housing crisis*. However, I read these reports and opinions not for their solutions, but for how they construct normative notions of housing, and how their mythical and metaphorical redescriptions of housing enable ways of knowing its problems and solutions in terms of *crisis*.

I read 62 media texts that pertain to the Moms 4 Housing movement within one year of their reclamation of Mom's House (November 18, 2019 – November 18, 2020). Although these media accounts narrate Moms 4 Housing as a response to *the housing crisis*, the women describe their housing problems in ways that contradict this discourse. Therefore, I show the distinctions between these two problematization of housing issues in Oakland, and how media accounts appropriate their movement to fit within the logic and assumptions of *the housing crisis*.

Lastly, I read 30 new media accounts within one year of the tragic Ghost Ship fire (December 2, 2016 – December 2, 2017), ten of which earned the *East Bay Times* the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Breaking News Reporting (Pulitzer, 2017). Many of these articles were published within the immediate days following the fire as city officials sought to determine its cause and consequences. In the articles that position the Ghost Ship warehouse fire as a product of *the housing crisis*, I show how conceptions of normative housing are reproduced

through narratives and images of the Ghost Ship as non-normative housing or a space outside of housing.

If “housing politics lay not just in the allocation of resources,” as Craig Willse asserts (2015), but “in the very conceptualization of the problem” (8), then *the housing crisis* is neither natural nor innocent, but a historical and geographical conception that authorizes and reproduces a socio-political order. Scaffolded by theories of neoclassical economics and practices of capitalist urban development, *the housing crisis* is a problematization that may accommodate concerns for the burdens of maintaining shelter but it takes action to remove the barriers to private development. Thus, while *the housing crisis* might lend urgency and resources to building more houses, the political economy in which these houses are built does not ensure that basic shelter needs are met.

Do not expect too much from the housing crisis

The title of my dissertation, *Do not expect too much from the housing crisis*, is a reference to *Do not expect too much from the end of the world* (Jude, 2023), a Romanian film that explores many of the themes that concern our current milieu of crisis. Following the everyday activities of a precarious gig worker, the film depicts a world that ends not in spectacular collapse but in a way that we already experience, albeit unevenly, as death by a thousand cuts. With the increasing commodification, financialization, and corporatization of our lives and culture, our autonomy and political potential are slowly, almost imperceptibly, chipped away. And critically, throughout the film, we are reminded over and over that everything is bad, yet no one is to blame. As a result, aspects of our humanity, or the conditions that make us recognizable to each other as humans, in my reading of the

film, have already deteriorated in ways that render us unevenly vulnerable to the harms that we associate with the end of the world.

The film's portrayal of the normalization of our socio-political decline, and our inability to locate the blame for that which harms us resonates deeply with my critique of *the housing crisis*. Housing operates as a form of citizenship that conditions our participation in the institutions of modern life. Where we live determines our access to schools and employment networks, it shapes our health outcomes and family dynamics. Many people are one health diagnosis, job loss, or climate disaster away from living without shelter. However, those without shelter do not live outside of housing, they are instead redescribed within housing as visible reminders of the normalization of our socio-political decline.

The social and economic costs of housing are, of course, appalling, its burdens are distressing, but these harms are distinct from the prevailing discourse used in media, policy, and scholarship to name such harms. *The housing crisis* is not an objective description of housing conditions, it is a political problematization. As such, housing problems and solutions are constructed and reproduced in ways that make it difficult to account for the structures, politics, and interests at play that make housing a violent and harmful process.

Progressive journalists, policymakers, and scholars call upon *crisis* to lend urgency to dire housing conditions in cities all over the world, but when media accounts, policy reports, and scholarship are filtered through this reductive discourse, they take on its logic and assumptions. The result is that *the housing crisis* can accommodate progressive narratives that center housing justice, yet its moral claims to house and care for the most vulnerable rest uneasily alongside the economistic frame of *crisis* used to facilitate a real

estate agenda of deregulation, private development, and the commodification of housing. With this contradiction as my point of departure, I offer a reading of *the housing crisis* that shows how the myths, metaphors, ontologies, and narratives of housing *in crisis* redescribe the people, places, issues, objects, and events of our world.

In particular, I offer three deconstructive readings of *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. First, I read the myths and metaphors of *the housing crisis* to show how they strip housing of its politics, history, and geography. Second, I theorize the violence of housing alongside the thought and practice of Moms 4 Housing in order to show how *the housing crisis* is unable to account for the politics of their movement. Lastly, I introduce the concept of “haunted housing” in order to show how housing is a system haunted by the exclusions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter. Dealing with ontologies of housing, the limits of representations, and practices of depoliticization, I argue that *the housing crisis* is a reductive discourse that tends to authorize, incentivize, and lend urgency to the construction of more houses, but ultimately falls short as a tool in the progressive struggle to ensure that basic housing needs are met.

I do not pretend to have a solution to our housing problems, but I have found that the discourse available for us to describe them is unable to address our most pressing housing needs. A major aim of my dissertation, then, is for *the housing crisis* to raise a red flag for my reader. I hope my research prompts a new set of questions whenever there is a claim that housing is *in crisis*. What does this claim mean? What are its political motives? What could be its unintended consequences? In short, what role does the discourse of crisis play in the production and reproduction of the issues, objects, events, people, and places of our world? My research suggests that it reproduces them in alignment with the interests of

private development. Therefore, if our goal is to relieve housing burdens and get people sheltered, we need new problematizations of our housing issues beyond the discourse of crisis.

CHAPTER 2

THE MYTHS AND METAPHORS OF THE HOUSING CRISIS⁴

⁴ Harris, M. To be submitted to *Housing Studies*.

Abstract

If *crisis* is a metaphor—a way to redescribe a previously unfamiliar feature of reality within familiar terms (Barnes and Duncan, 1992)—then, I ask, how are current housing realities redescribed through the metaphor of crisis? They are, following Roland Barthes (2012), redescribed mythologically: *the housing crisis* strips housing of its history, and affordability of its geography, it naturalizes housing markets, and depoliticizes the struggle for a safe and secure home. *The housing crisis*, then, is a discourse that relies upon myths and metaphors that obscure the history, geography, and politics responsible for the costs and burdens of housing. I first offer a theory and practice for reading the myths and metaphors that shape media and policy understandings of *the housing crisis*, then I read an archive of affordable housing policy research to trace the politics that are authorized and obscured through the myths and metaphors deployed in these texts. My critique takes aim, specifically, at how these myths and metaphors isolate, objectify, and reify housing; in other words, how they domesticate the politics of *housing* in the name of *crisis*.

Keywords: housing, crisis, affordability, mythology, metaphor

Introduction

The concept of *crisis* emerged in Ancient Greece to name “the crucial turning point” in a medical condition that forced one to make a decision with life-or-death consequences (Koselleck, 1988: 103–4, n15). Since then, *crisis* has undergone seemingly countless translations and transformations across the fields of medicine, theology, law, politics, philosophy, economics, science, history, climatology, public health... until now, where “there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept [of crisis]” (Koselleck, 2006: 358). Through such translations, *crisis* operates as a metaphor, a way to know something through the terms of something else, a way to redescribe the previously unfamiliar within a familiar configuration (Barnes and Duncan, 1992). Metaphor, then, functions as a critical tool for the redescription of reality (Smith and Katz, 1993), which begs the question, how is our current reality redescribed through the metaphor of crisis?

To approach such a question, I turn to *the housing crisis*, a discourse drawn upon by policymakers, scholars, and renters alike to contextualize, narrate, or otherwise explain the current housing realities of burden and displacement. However, I approach this contradictory discourse with caution; while *the housing crisis* can accommodate progressive narratives that center housing justice, its moral claims to house and care for the most vulnerable rest uneasily alongside the economistic frame of *crisis* used to legitimate and lend urgency to a real estate agenda of deregulation, private property

development, and the commodification of land and housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Brill and Raco, 2021).

Crisis, then, is neither objective nor neutral, it does not simply convey the state of affairs through facts that speak for themselves; rather, *crisis* relies upon a series of myths and metaphors that depoliticize the social conditions that reproduce what we recognize as features of *the housing crisis*. Thus, beginning from the assumption that the burdens of housing are distinct from the discourse used to explain them, I read housing policy research as mythology. Following Barthes (2012), I approach mythology as a practice of reading for how historical socio-spatial relations come to be known and lived as essential, timeless, and universal; specifically, for how myths strip housing of its history by depoliticizing the uneven value of people and places. Critically, such myths are maintained, in part, through metaphorical redescriptions of the burdens of housing in ways that fit intelligibly within the discourse of *crisis*. In short, I read the myths and metaphors in housing policy research that cite *the housing crisis* for how these texts might end up perpetuating the housing injustices they purport to fight against.

The outline of this study is as follows. I open with a review of mythology as conceptualized by Barthes (2012) and metaphor as conceptualized primarily by Martin (1991), Barnes and Duncan (1992), and Smith and Katz (1993). I go on to describe the relationship between myth, metaphor, truth, and interpretation before describing how I read the myths and metaphors in affordable housing policy research that address *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. I offer two readings of *the housing crisis*: first, I show how metaphors isolate, objectify, and depoliticize housing; and second, I address the myth of

affordable housing through a recent policy initiative to preserve what is referred to as NOAH, or Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing.

In the first instance, a reenactment of the mythic struggle between *good* and *evil* plays out through the concepts of *prosperity* and *crisis*. I show how the seemingly strict binary opposition between good prosperity and evil crisis structures the claims and representations of *the housing crisis*—specifically, how the fact that prosperity under capitalism requires that crisis is disavowed or elided within the narratives of *the housing crisis*. I go on to show how the metaphor of *collision*—through representations of colliding, slamming, impacting, and hitting—essentializes people, places, and housing as policy objects independent of the political economy in which they exist.

According to Aalbers and Christophers (2014), housing policy research conceptually reproduces housing as a domain isolated from the mechanisms of politics and the economy. Housing, then, is metaphorically redescribed as a policy object removed from the conditions of its existence, i.e., the myriad political and economic practices, processes, and institutions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter. Although the geography of housing is, in fact, inextricable from its political economy, as long as the socio-political and economic burdens of housing are reduced and isolated to the narrowly construed purview of *housing policy*, effective political and economic interventions aimed at meaningfully restructuring housing systems remain unspeakable.

Second, I pursue what I call *the myth of affordable housing*. My claim here is not that affordable housing does not exist, but that affordable housing should not exist because it is an accomplice of the political economy that makes shelter unaffordable in the first place. The concept of *affordable housing*, defined as subsidized below-market-rate

housing, functions to obscure affordability, depoliticize housing struggles, essentialize market-rate housing, and seemingly naturalize housing markets. To work through the myth of affordable housing, I offer a reading of an exemplary instance of policy mythmaking found in recent initiatives in Oakland and other cities to preserve what has come to be known as naturally occurring affordable housing, which is demystified as homes in working-class neighborhoods adjacent to gentrifying neighborhoods that are, for the time being, relatively affordable without government subsidy. NOAH is a concept that deprives housing of its history; the relative affordability of these houses is anything but naturally occurring, it is the product of decades of devaluation through segregation and disinvestment that have primed these working-class neighborhoods for their current phase of speculative reinvestment. I conclude with a summary of these mythological and metaphorical readings of *the housing crisis*.

Mythology and metaphor

Mythology commonly refers to the origin stories of Ancient Greek, Egyptian, or Nordic folklore, but myths are not limited to the tales of Gods and Goddesses. Following Roland Barthes (2012), for whom myth is “depoliticized speech” (255), I refer to mythology as a process through which the uneven social outcomes of history, culture, and politics are narrated as elements of human nature. Social relations and historical conditions are depoliticized, dehistoricized, and objectified through mythic narrations that naturalize, essentialize, or otherwise fail to explain them (Wright, 2006: 3–4). Myths, then, produce a “natural image” of reality “emptied of its history” (Barthes, 2012: 240), which creates the

impression that political and geographical differences are natural, essential, timeless, and universal.

The myth of objectivity maintains that if our language is plain and precise, unadorned, *without metaphor*, then we express our ideas clearly and we are understood effectively. However, we cannot, even if we wanted to, communicate without metaphor, for, according to Spivak (2016), “there is no pure language that is free from metaphor” (xcvii). *All language is metaphorical*. This is not a call to embrace convoluted layers of rich, mixed, and extended metaphors, but an invitation to think and make meaning beyond the binaries of objective and subjective, scientific and artistic, literal and metaphorical. Metaphor is not limited to the subjective or artistic; indeed, it is not limited to language at all, it is “implicated in the very fabric of society and social processes” (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 12). Metaphors, then, are “pervasive in everyday life” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 4), they “*ground* our perceptions” (104), clarify our ideas, justify our claims, and warrant our actions; they shape those who speak them, they persuade us to take up their meanings, hail us as those who hold particular values.

Metaphor operates through the use of terms from an existing system of meaning (referred to as the secondary system) to explain something in another (the primary system). As such, metaphor enables an understanding of something new through a process of “metaphorical redescription... [whereby] the primary is seen ‘through’ the frame of the secondary” (Hesse as cited in Barnes, 1992: 122). Emily Martin (1991), for instance, shows how popular, medical, and scientific narratives describe processes of biological reproduction (the primary system) through the frame of gender norms (the secondary system), wherein *active masculine sperm* are narrated as embarking on a hero’s journey to

discover and penetrate *passive feminine eggs*. If such narratives are not objective accounts of biological reproduction, but redescriptions of an unfamiliar process through a frame in which a culture is already familiar (Barnes and Duncan, 1992), then, in this instance, the previously unfamiliar biological process is made familiar through gender norms, even if, as Martin demonstrates, this narrative runs contrary to biological evidence.

Metaphors, then, are necessarily contingent, mutable, and incomplete; otherwise, metaphor would be *identity*, one thing would simply *be* the other rather than being known through it. Our truths, however, continue to develop within the ever-changing process of “reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar” through metaphor (Smith and Katz, 1993: 68; see also: Barnes, 1992: 121; Derrida, 2016: 300). Critically, the metaphors that make the events, objects, and encounters of our world familiar do not emerge from our imaginations, they develop through the repetition of ideas and practices grounded in the social relations of a time and place (Harvey, 1996: 164); that is to say, *metaphors are geographical*.

Geography too is metaphorical; spatial concepts such as *position*, *location*, *margin*, *center*, and *territory* are appealing resources for the metaphorical redescription of our social, political, and economic realities. However, as Smith and Katz (1993) warn, spatial metaphors have a tendency to obscure how space is reproduced through social practices; such metaphors are often grounded in a conception of space as “a co-ordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations” that reproduces us as atomized individuals who traverse an external reality delineated by capitalist social relations (73). The assumptions of existing systems of meaning, then, carry over, through metaphor, into how we understand such redescriptions. For this reason, *metaphors are political*; through their use, we knowingly and unknowingly maintain and rework cultural assumptions. The aim, then,

is not to attempt to think or speak without metaphors—thought and speech require metaphor—the aim is to “wake up sleeping metaphors” (Martin, 1991: 501), to question the cultural assumptions and social relations upon which our concepts and metaphors rely.

Reading myths and metaphors

Myths are not based on truth, they are based on *use*; that is to say, myths produce their own truths based on what is socially, politically, or economically *useful*. Myths, in other words, are not false statements or misrepresentations of reality as much as they are constructions of what is considered true based on what is useful within the parameters of “a certain knowledge of reality” (Barthes, 2012: 228). Myths work, in part, because truth is not contained within words; rather, truth is historical and geographical, it develops and transforms within systems of difference contingent upon socio-spatial categories that variously highlight and obscure dimensions of reality (Derrida, 2016). For this reason, a reader cannot locate or uncover the truth of a text through its metaphors, *there is no preexisting truth to be located*; instead, a metaphor, according to Spivak (2016), “points at its own truth” (xcvii). This is not to say that truth does not exist—truths exist, but they are neither neutral nor objective; instead, because truths are social and political, they “already come theory-laden” (Barnes, 1992: 120), i.e., they emerge through interpretation.

If our ability to interpret empirical information relies upon the metaphors that make such information recognizable and legible in the first place, then metaphor is how our interpretations *create* the truths and realities they appear to merely interpret. Interpretations, then, require cultural metaphors as much as the phenomena itself (Harvey, 1996: 163; Butler, 2009). In other words, interpretations do not correspond to a

foundational world or “bedrock reality” that exists prior to interpretation (Barnes, 1992: 118); instead, interpretations of our social reality are interpretations of prior interpretations and the logic of the metaphors used to redescribe them (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 11).

One of the ways that myths and metaphors produce truths and meaning is through the *effect* of binaries, wherein the repetition of ideas and practices come to normalize and seemingly naturalize hierarchical distinctions between two qualities, entities, or domains, such as here/there, man/woman, or white/Black. Timothy Mitchell (1990), for instance, describes how capitalist social relations reproduce a binary distinction between “tangible and material” *social practices* and an “abstract and enduring” *economic order*: through policies, narratives, and legal structures, the economy appears “to stand outside actuality, outside events, outside time... as a framework that enframes actual occurrences” (1990: 569–70). Economic forces, then, appear external to the social practices of everyday life, while they remain integral to the continuous everyday social reproduction of truths, meaning, and reality.

The everyday mythic reproduction of truth brings us to *the housing crisis*. If public policy shapes and contains the boundaries of political debate, *the housing crisis* debate in Oakland, California can be traced across its contemporary local housing policy research reports. I read these reports with two questions in mind: first, how do representations and arguments concerning *the housing crisis* rely upon mythical narrations of *housing* and *crisis*; and second, how is *housing* metaphorically redescribed as a policy object segregated from the domains of politics and the economy? I go on to show how such reports are expressions of how housing policy research operates with the presumption that housing exists as its own domain isolated from the domains of politics and the economy (Aalbers

and Christophers, 2014), and how contemporary politics is less about control within these domains than reproducing the distinctions between them (Mitchell, 1999).

Alternatively, I begin from the presumption that *housing*—which I define as the production and maintenance of shelter—is necessarily inseparable from politics and the economy; from there, I trace how these domains are metaphorically redescribed as distinct from each other. If, according to Barthes (2012), reality is “emptied of its history” (240), then I am interested in what has been emptied from a given event, object, or category through its mythic narration. My goal is not to disparage well-intentioned non-profit housing research, but to demonstrate how *the housing crisis*, even when taken up by progressive organizations, is a discursive framework that reduces and constrains how we understand contemporary housing issues. The aim of my reading, then, is to *wake up sleeping metaphors* or historicize and politicize the mythologies of *the housing crisis*. For as long as the socio-political injustices and economic contradictions of housing are reductively contained within the narrowly constructed purview of *housing policy*, any effective political and economic interventions aimed at the root of such issues remain unthinkable.

The myths and metaphors of the housing crisis

To put my theory and practice of reading myths and metaphors to use, I now turn to a close reading of media and policy texts that address *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. My critique of the myths and metaphors used to support claims regarding *the housing crisis* takes aim, specifically, at the various instances of the rhetorical isolation and reification of *housing*, i.e., the objectification of the socio-spatial systems through which we produce and

maintain shelter. The issue at hand, the stakes or commitment that animates my critique, is my concern that the political potential of housing—as a socially, historically, and geographically open sphere of action and field of meaning—is closed or reduced as a result of its redescription through the myths and metaphors of crisis.

Prosperity, crisis, and the metaphor of collision

The PolicyLink report, *Solving the housing crisis is key to inclusive prosperity in the Bay Area* (Treuhart et al., 2018), conforms to a familiar narrative structure of policy research: *x* problem must be solved in order to achieve *y* goal; *the housing crisis* must be solved in order to achieve inclusive prosperity. *The housing crisis*, then, is represented as the obstacle keeping communities from achieving prosperity, it is seen as a key condition of exclusion. Such a claim rests upon and reproduces a binary distinction between *prosperity* as unquestionably good and *crisis* as unquestionably bad. The concepts of *crisis* and *prosperity* are “emptied of [their] history” (Barthes, 2012: 240), they are essentialized as separate ends of the moral universe of the report while the historical practices and conditions that enable them are obscured by a mythic narration of the struggle between good and evil.

Prosperity functions in the report as an unquestionable ideal, it is a depoliticized term that signals the individual attainment of high-income employment and wealth generating private property. At the same time, it is presumed that such forms of prosperity should be inclusive, i.e., everyone should have access to them. However, this particular form of prosperity is structured such that not everyone can have access to it, the wealth generated by private property must come at the expense of those who are excluded. As

described below, many landlords, homeowners, investors, politicians, and corporations prosper from the precise conditions that others experience as crisis (O’Conner, 1987; Koselleck, 1988; Klein, 2007; Berlant, 2011; Harvey, 2018; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020). *Prosperity* and *crisis*, then, rely on each other, they are reproduced in tandem, but the legibility of *the housing crisis* discourse requires that this contradiction be explained away; the oppressive and exploitative means through which prosperity is achieved must be excluded from the report to secure the coherence and political stakes of its argument. And as long as the historical integrity of the relationship between prosperity and crisis is mythically denied, there will be limited explanations for why housing is so dire for so many.

The explanation offered for why housing conditions are so dire in the Bay Area is that “housing costs... are outpacing wage gains” (Treuhart et al., 2018: 8). If the message is that housing costs are increasing too fast for working people, then a mythic or depoliticized relationship between *housing costs* as a source of crisis and *wage gains* as a source of prosperity grounds the explanation for why people cannot afford to live in the region. Yet, if I were to invert the terms of this claim—*housing costs* and *wage gains*—to state that *wage gains are failing to keep up with housing costs*, this inverted claim relays similar information but restructures the message to politicize the relationship between housing and wages, it redirects the responsibility toward economic practices and the commodification of housing, rather than the amorphous field of housing costs, the prevailing explanation of *the housing crisis*.

The mythic binary of *prosperity* and *crisis* grounds narratives and metaphors throughout the report. For instance, a chapter titled “The collision of a tech-driven economy

and California's housing crisis" (Treuhft et al., 2018: 8–11) metaphorically redescribes *the housing crisis* through the narrative of a car crash. The economy, represented as a vehicle driven by the tech sector, collides with California's housing system, already in crisis. *The housing crisis*, narrated through the metaphor of collision, reproduces the myth that housing and the economy are separate and autonomous forces guided by self-contained logics that pre-exist their collision. Housing and the economy, however, are not separate, their logics are neither internal nor unrelated, and the uneven outcomes produced through their relationship are never discrete.

In addition to the metaphorical redescription of the economy as driven, with intention and to great effect, by the tech sector, the chapter also metaphorically redescribes *the housing crisis* as driven by "runaway housing costs" (Treuhft et al., 2018: 8). Keeping with the collision metaphor or car crash narrative, the term *runaway* elicits an image of a large truck without brakes barreling down the highway, the implication being a loss of control. The *runaway* metaphor obscures explanations of the social relations and material practices of labor, capital, city governments, renters, landlords, and other real estate interests who operate within the system of private property that structures housing costs. The *runaway* metaphor, then, redescribes housing costs as autonomous, on-the-move actors in themselves, or as features determined by an economic order that is *out of our control*. In such explanations, actions and actors are erased, and the economy appears to be a natural condition to which we must conform if we hope to remain sheltered.

The metaphor of collision, however, is not limited to the car crash narrative, a more common articulation of this metaphor is found in the following sentence, "Though the housing crisis is far-reaching, it has *hit* low-income communities of color the hardest

(Treuhaft et al., 2018: 5, emphasis mine). The image of collision expressed in phrases such as *those hit hardest* or *those most impacted* by a phenomenon reproduces essentialized descriptions of people and places as entities that pre-exist their contact with such phenomena. *Collision*, then, enables metaphorical redescrptions of exploitative social relations and other systems of oppression in terms of one bounded, stable, coherent object hitting another; in this instance, *crisis hitting low-income communities of color*. The problem with this mythic description is that people and places do not pre-exist social phenomena and events; we are not separate from the historical practices and systems of meaning through which we emerge, we are continuously produced and reproduced through them.

Reading policy as mythology, then, is a way to historicize and politicize its socio-spatial categories. *Low-income communities of color* is not a natural or inevitable category, but one reproduced through the uneven impacts of housing policies and historical practices such as Jim Crow segregation (Massey and Denton, 2003), white flight suburbanization (Rothstein, 2017; Taylor, 2019), mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Cuevas, 2012) subprime mortgages (Hernandez, 2009; Wyly et al., 2012), foreclosures (Rugh and Massey, 2010), and gentrification (Gibbons, 2016; Schafran, 2018). Although oppression and exploitation could never exhaust the histories and geographies of any community, these conditions help us understand how people and places are unevenly reproduced and valued through social relations, discourse, and practice. In other words, it is through the processes of social reproduction needed to maintain shelter that we maintain capitalism, the social and economic order that devalues people and places to maintain them as profitable for

exploitation (Katz, 2001). Communities are never conceptual objects separate from the systems of housing—they are produced and maintained through each other.

The progressive tendency to center those hit hardest by an event or policy is certainly well-intentioned; it is, however, important to question what might be obscured through this metaphor of collision. For instance, perhaps the phrase *those most impacted*, which is intended to highlight the uneven *negative impacts* of a phenomenon, might be more useful if it were to highlight the positive rather than negative impacts. By this I mean, the common images and narratives found in progressive policy and media, those of people sleeping in RVs or under highway overpasses, activists protesting in front of city hall, or workers with two hour commutes to work—those *negatively* impacted by *the housing crisis*—often come at the expense of, or in ways that obscure, those *positively* impacted by *the housing crisis*, i.e., the homeowners, bankers, real estate interests, individual and corporate landlords, and others who profit or otherwise benefit from the conditions identified as symptoms of *the housing crisis*. In other words, it is the renter who shouts “the rent is too damn high!” (Kim, 2020), never the rentier.

Policies that assist those most negatively impacted by housing issues are, of course, immediately necessary—I am in no way arguing against any forms of autonomy or assistance for anyone facing any housing burden—but such issues will ultimately remain as long as we maintain the structures that reproduce them. My critique, then, is not of centering those most impacted *per se*, but of representations that take up the language of social justice and center those most *negatively* impacted by housing burdens in support of policies likely to disproportionately benefit those most *positively* impacted. The questions become: how might housing be problematized differently if media and policy centered

those most positively impacted by the crisis? And how might *the housing crisis* be understood differently if media and policy described how the social and economic order through which we produce and maintain shelter is responsible for the contradictions that result in such uneven distributions of burden, harm, wealth, and profit?

If metaphor is a necessary dimension of knowledge production, then policy texts are rich sources of metaphorical redescription that come to shape and manage our world. The metaphor of collision, in short, objectifies people, places, and processes, it redescribes them as objects that appear to pre-exist the conditions of their existence. The result, in this instance, is that *housing*, *the economy*, and *low-income communities of color* are treated as myths, i.e., as natural and inevitable entities rather than the products of history, geography, and politics. By conceptually partitioning *housing* from *the economy*, debates around how to address our housing issues are limited to determining the most efficient way to incentivize the private development of more housing units; if so, it becomes unthinkable to intervene in political and economic structures to ensure that even the most basic housing needs are met.

NOAH's arc: The mythic narration of affordable housing

Media and housing policy texts explain *the housing crisis*, first and foremost, as a lack of affordable housing, and the solution is presented as simply to build more houses (New York Times Editorial Board, 2019; Dougherty, 2020; Sisson et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Burn-Murdoch, 2023). The dense and variegated social, political, economic, and ecological contradictions of housing are reduced to an issue of supply and demand. Thus, if myth, following Barthes (2012), is “depoliticized speech” (254), I contend that *affordable*

housing is a mythical concept that depoliticizes people, places, and value. By claiming that affordable housing is a myth, I do not mean that affordable housing does not exist; instead, my claim is that *affordable housing should not exist* because it is an accomplice of the political economy that makes shelter unaffordable in the first place. *Affordable housing*, then, is a retronym that offers a symbolic resolution to a series of political and economic contradictions (Jameson, 1981).

In other words, although *affordable housing* is represented as a horizon of housing justice—where everyone is safely, securely, and affordably housed—I aim to show that such representations often focus narrowly on the buildings themselves (i.e., the quantity, costs, and physical conditions of a region’s local housing stock) at the expense of the material conditions, practices, people, places, and structures of value through which these buildings are produced, maintained, and unevenly distributed. The myth of *affordable housing*, then, is that the burdens of housing are the unfortunate yet inevitable outcomes of a seemingly natural economic order rather than the politics and policies that unevenly value people and places.

The standard housing policy research definition of *affordable housing* is not simply housing that is affordable; instead, *affordable housing* specifically designates a category of government subsidized and regulated *below-market-rate* housing. *Below-market-rate* names housing with deed restrictions that maintain long-term affordability through restricting the future selling price of the home to the price paid for the home plus any increase in the area median income; *below-market-rate* housing, then, is a category of housing removed or restricted from the structure of market rate property value. A common metaphor used to describe this process is *conversion*. A prominent policy initiative in

affordable housing reports that address *the housing crisis* is to preserve existing affordable housing through *converting* it from market-rate to below-market-rate in order to maintain its affordability for generations.

The policy definition of *affordable housing* establishes a binary between two distinct housing categories: subsidized/restricted *below-market-rate* housing on the one hand, and unsubsidized/unrestricted *market-rate* housing on the other. Hinged upon the practices of subsidy and deed restrictions, the legal intervention involved in the construction of *below-market-rate* housing appears to naturalize its supposed opposite category: unsubsidized and unrestricted *market-rate* housing. In other words, *affordable housing* is a mythic concept because it eschews examinations of affordability or the politics of housing markets, and instead makes *market-rate* housing appear natural in relation to *below-market-housing*, which is seen as culturally constructed through government subsidies and deed restrictions.

I turn now to an exemplary instance of how the mythic naturalization of *affordable housing* plays out in Oakland and elsewhere through a recent policy emphasis around what is referred to as NOAH or *Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing*. As mentioned above, the central claim of *the housing crisis* discourse is a lack of affordable housing; therefore, the key policy initiative is building more houses, and the second is often to preserve already existing or “naturally occurring affordable housing.” The argument is that naturally occurring affordable housing is “hiding in plain sight” (Brophy and Shea, 2019), and preserving it is “cheaper and easier than building new [houses]... you’ve got to maintain what you have” (Willis, 2020).

NOAH is variously defined as pre-existing (at least 20 years old), privately-owned, often multi-family rental housing without government subsidies, income restrictions, deed-restricted affordability covenants, or rent controls, yet it nonetheless remains relatively affordable for low-income households (King, 2017; Phillips, 2020; Willis, 2020; Kling et al., 2021; NOAH Impact Fund, 2024). According to Phillips (2020), NOAH is a key resource because it accounts for the “vast majority” of affordable housing in the US. At the same time, NOAH is seen to be “at risk” (Thakur and Warwick, 2020; Chen, 2023); as market speculation increases, it leads to higher rents, i.e., the loss of affordability: “when rents are raised, low-income families lose access to this housing” (NOAH Impact Fund, 2024). Because NOAH is seen as “the largest and most at-risk supply of affordable housing” (Kling et al., 2021), the emphasis on preservation seems to increasingly focus on this particular category of naturally occurring affordable housing.

The City of Oakland Housing Cabinet recommends a policy to “acquire naturally occurring affordable housing” among its top strategies to preserve affordability for Oakland residents (Housing Cabinet, 2020: 16–26). The use value of NOAH for policymakers is precisely that it is seen as naturally affordable, “it serves so many people,” according to Phillips (2020), “and does so without public subsidy” (12). However, to preserve NOAH, paradoxically, it must no longer be NOAH, its affordability becomes unnatural through being acquired, subsidized, and/or deed restricted. The acquisition of NOAH in Oakland entails financial support for nonprofit housing and community development organizations, the establishment of municipal and regional NOAH funds, as well as incentives for “private owners of at-risk NOAH developments to sell to affordable

housing entities” (Chen, 2023). Similar strategies and funds can be found in Atlanta, Chicago, Minneapolis, Chicago, and other major US cities.

The concept of *naturally occurring affordable housing* and the policy emphasis on its preservation introduces at least three problems. First, as it pertains to the myth of *affordable housing* described above, the category of NOAH, even more explicitly than the category of *affordable housing*, is understood *as natural* precisely because it is unsubsidized by the government; NOAH’s affordability is nominally and definitionally *natural*, which reproduces subsidized housing as unnatural or culturally constructed. To be clear, my problem is not with understanding subsidized housing as a cultural construction, all forms and values of housing are cultural constructions; instead, the problem is the other side of the coin: the mythic understanding of housing markets as natural and inevitable. And NOAH, as a framework for understanding housing value, categorically naturalizes the practices of mercenary housing markets and depoliticizes their uneven outcomes.

Second, while such natural/unnatural binaries are problems in themselves, there is also an issue with the politics authorized by such binaries. Although housing markets are often described in media and policy research as ruthless and unforgiving, they are never meaningfully questioned or forcefully challenged in policy documents that advocate for NOAH preservation. There are few critiques of housing commodification; instead, the market is taken for granted as the essential or natural system through which housing is produced and distributed. Representations of NOAH and the naturalization of markets, then, seemingly isolate housing as a domain separate from or impervious to political and economic interventions. Within the context, *the housing crisis* is not framed as a political or economic challenge but as a moral one.

With *the housing crisis* as a moral challenge, the emphasis is not on political and economic interventions in the development process; the emphasis is instead on the differences between good “mission-driven” and bad “speculative” developers and ways to incentivize or otherwise enable the good developers. The preservation of naturally occurring affordable housing is seen to require “mission-driven developers [with] access to the capital and financing needed to compete with market-rate developers” (Kling et al., 2021); stated differently, “organizations doing [mission-driven affordable housing preservation] need access to nimble financing so they can be competitive in the market and snap up buildings just like speculators” (King, 2017). The distinction between good and bad developers is mythic because it draws attention away from the systems that produce dire and uneven housing conditions; instead, federal, state, and local governments are advised to finance mission-driven developers so they can better compete against speculative developers within the prevailing system. The result is that the development structure remains unquestioned, and the solution to our many protracted housing burdens is seen as a matter of simply supporting the well-intentioned developers committed to the right forms of development.

Third, while the stated intent of efforts to raise awareness of NOAH is to preserve affordable housing, many of the practices involved—such as increasing visibility, standardizing forms, metrics, and terminology, as well as creating development funds, investment strategies, and statewide databases for storing and sharing information on NOAH properties—pose material threats to low-income communities. The preservation of NOAH, through the standardization of “at-risk” housing as “an investible asset class” (Kling et al., 2021), cannot come at the expense of displaced communities. In other words,

I am concerned the increased visibility and standardization of so-called naturally occurring affordable housing will also increase its market speculation.

Following King (2017), who writes that “there is nothing *natural* about NOAH’s affordability,” I argue, alongside Cortright (2017), that the key myth perpetuated through NOAH is that it just so happens to be affordable; NOAH’s affordability is the political and economic product of decades of raced, classed, and gendered disinvestment and devaluation—and such disinvestment is not simply an inevitable stage in the natural cycle of housing. By naturalizing the uneven political economy of housing, NOAH is primed for displacement, investment, and speculation. NOAH, then, is another name for what Neil Smith (1996) refers to as a rent gap, or a “disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use” (65). The uneven development of urban space is not a feature of the natural world; rather, according to Smith (1996), “the complexity of capital mobility in and out of the built environment lies at the core of the process” (49). More specifically, the devalorization of a space through its disinvestment eventually produces the conditions for its revalorization, and the rent gap becomes wide enough that speculative investment is seen as the rational economic decision.

Placing NOAH in conversation with the rent gap, then, highlights the ambiguity in statements such as “NOAH properties represent a key source of wealth in low-income communities” (Kling et al., 2021). To what extent is this a source for low-income communities to build wealth in the form of home equity, and to what extent is it a source for corporations to build their portfolios through the speculative acquisition of NOAH properties? The problem here is that corporations get returns on investment and low-

income communities get restrictions that bar them from home equity. NOAH, the latest narrative in the myth of affordable housing, shows us how the status quo is upheld and injustices are perpetuated when the structures of development are seen as natural rather than political, historical, and geographical.

Conclusion

If *crisis* is a metaphor—a way to redescribe previously unfamiliar features of reality within familiar terms (Barnes and Duncan, 1992)—then how are current housing realities redescribed through the metaphor of crisis? They are, following Roland Barthes (2012), redescribed mythologically: housing is stripped of its history, affordability is stripped of its geography, the housing market is naturalized, and the struggle for safe and secure homes is depoliticized and individualized. *The housing crisis*, then, is a discourse that relies upon myths and metaphors that obscure the history, geography, and politics involved in the contemporary costs and burdens of housing.

I cautiously approach *the housing crisis* as a contradictory discourse. On the one hand, it signals a progressive desire for housing justice; its deployment calls attention to the injustices of displacement, eviction, and other social and economic burdens of housing. On the other hand, it authorizes an exclusionary politics of deregulation, commodification, financialization, and private development; its deployment naturalizes the violence structured into the systems of finance and real estate through which we produce and maintain shelter (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Brill and Raco, 2021).

Thus, the aim of this study, attuned to such contradictions, is to demystify *the housing crisis* and “wake up sleeping metaphors” (Martin, 1991: 501) used to make sense of it. To do so, I conduct a close reading of an archive of policy documents that address *the housing crisis* in Oakland, California. I first offer a theory and practice for reading the myths and metaphors that shape media and policy understandings of *the housing crisis*. I go on to trace the politics that are authorized and obscured through the myths and metaphors deployed in affordable housing policy research texts.

In the first reading, I find that reductive binary representations of prosperity as unquestionably good and crisis as necessarily evil structure the claims and representations of *the housing crisis* in ways that obscure the relationship between them. In other words, we lose sight of how prosperity, as defined in these texts, is precisely what produces the symptoms that we recognize as crisis. And critically, the disavowal of this relationship between prosperity and crisis severely limits explanations for why housing is so dire for so many. Further, following Aalbers and Christophers (2014), I find that housing research tends to represent housing as a policy object largely isolated from its political and economic conditions of existence. Keeping with the narratives of these research texts, as housing issues are rhetorically separated from the concerns of political economy, housing interventions remain limited to a narrowly construed domain of housing policy; broader political interventions into the economic structures at the root of the costs and burdens of housing, then, are scarcely suggested as policy solutions.

Ending the first section, I find that the metaphor of *collision*, wherein two objects hit or collide with each other, plays a central role in understandings of *the housing crisis*. An implication of the collision metaphor, or a familiar feature that is unwittingly smuggled

into redescriptions of *the housing crisis*, is that the two colliding objects are separate, bounded, and preexist their collision. I study two instances of *the housing crisis* narrated as a menacing object force colliding into people, places, and other conceptual objects. In the first, as *the housing crisis* collides with the economy (Treuhart et al., 2018) and wealthy suburbs (Dougherty, 2020), it is represented as an external force that attacks our economy and invades our cities rather than an internal force structured through political decisions and produced through the actions of economic interests. In the second instance, I study the frequently used policy construction *those hit hardest* or *those most impacted*; for example, “Though the housing crisis is far-reaching, it has *hit* low-income communities of color the hardest (Treuhart et al., 2018: 5, emphasis mine). The issue I take with this construction is that it rhetorically separates communities as objects separate from housing when they are, in fact, produced and maintained through each other. In other words, *low-income communities of color* is not a natural category or inevitable combination of categories, but one reproduced through the uneven impacts of racist housing policies and the historical practices of housing under capitalism. The collision metaphor, then, obscures the history, geography, and politics at play in the construction of these objects, and reading policy as mythology is a way to historicize, spatialize, and politicize its socio-spatial categories.

Next, I offer a critique of *affordable housing* as a myth that naturalizes the commodification of housing and housing markets. The concept of *affordable housing* is a myth, not because it is fake or does not actually exist, but because it is an accomplice of the political economy that makes shelter is unaffordable; *affordable housing*, in other words, supports representations that the burdens of housing are the unfortunate yet

inevitable outcomes of a seemingly natural economic order rather than the politics and policies that unevenly value people and places.

To work through the myth of affordable housing and the discursive naturalization of housing markets, I read an exemplary instance of policy mythmaking in the form of NOAH, or *naturally occurring affordable housing*. I find that the value of these homes, which have come to be known as NOAH, is, in fact, not naturally affordable, as its mythic construction would suggest; rather, the value of these homes is the product of decades of devaluation and disinvestment that have now, according to rent gap theory (Smith, 1996), primed these working-class areas adjacent to gentrifying areas for a new phase of speculative investment and its attendant displacements. Finally, within the context of NOAH research, with its mythic representations of the uneven value of people and places and housing markets not as political but as perfectly natural, *the housing crisis* is not framed as a political or economic challenge but as a moral one: the structures of development remain unquestioned; instead, the policy solutions to the protracted burdens that define housing conditions in US cities involve supporting the well-intentioned developers who are committed to the morally good forms of development.

To end on the question that guides this study of *the housing crisis*, how is housing described in terms of crisis? Or as John Clarke (2010) asks, “how does the word crisis manage to suspend many of the ways of thinking and analysing social formations?” (338). The myths and metaphors of the reductive and economistic frame of *the housing crisis* rhetorically isolate, objectify, and reify *housing*; they reduce the dense field of social, historical, and geographical conditions and relations to the neoclassical calculus of supply and demand. As I aim to show, it is the political potential of *housing*—the ability to think

and enact new forms, terms, dispositions, and values of housing, new architectures, new socio-spatial relations, new configurations of people and place—that is diminished and domesticated in the name of *crisis*.

CHAPTER 3
APPROPRIATING MOMS 4 HOUSING⁵

⁵ Harris, M. Submitted to *City*, 07/26/24, accepted for review, 09/24/24.

Abstract

If, as David Madden (2023) suggests, the study of 21st-century urbanization involves “the constant generation of new perspectives on... crisis (271),” then as we challenge the violences and vulnerabilities that we unevenly endure, I suggest we also critique *crisis* as the prevailing discourse used to understand such conditions. To that end, I advance a critique of *the housing crisis* as an objectifying discourse that rests upon the capitalist logics of supply and demand, de-regulation, private development, and the commodification of housing. To do so, I study local media coverage of Moms 4 Housing, a group of previously homeless Black mothers who reclaimed a vacant house in Oakland, California and called it their own. Through their writings and public statements, I read Moms 4 Housing as theorists of “the urban commons” at odds with the logics of *the housing crisis*; instead, they fight to reclaim the system of housing from speculative finance and real estate interests to bring it under community control. With the political potential of housing at stake; it is critical that we theorize housing beyond the limitations of the reductive and objectifying discourse of *crisis*.

Keywords: the housing crisis; urban commons; violence; Moms 4 Housing

Oakland doesn't have a housing crisis, it's a moral crisis, it's a profiteering crisis, it's a speculators in my hood crisis – Dominique Walker of Moms 4 Housing (NBC, 2021)

Introduction

Policymakers, scholars, journalists, activists, and renters alike agree that housing is *in crisis*. With costs on the rise, housing has become inaccessible to poor and working people everywhere. According to Jacqueline Simone (2021), housing advocate and Policy Director with the Coalition for the Homeless, “a full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom rental in any state, county, or city in the country.” Or, to put it plainly, “the rent is too damn high!” (Kim, 2020). When these dire conditions are framed in terms of *the housing crisis*, the problem is articulated, without fail, as a *lack* of affordable housing: supply, it is argued, simply does not meet demand. Thus, we arrive at the dogmatic refrain of *the housing crisis*: build more houses (New York Times Editorial Board, 2019; Dougherty, 2020; Sisson et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Burn-Murdoch, 2023).

However, if, as David Madden (2023) suggests, the study of 21st-century urbanization involves “the constant generation of new perspectives on... crisis” (271), then as we challenge the violences and vulnerabilities that we unevenly endure, I suggest we also critique *crisis* as the discourse used to understand such conditions (Koselleck, 2006; Berlant, 2011; Roitman, 2014). To that end, I advance a critique of *the housing crisis* as a reductive and objectifying discourse, wherein the complex social, political, economic, and

environmental contradictions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter are reduced to a problem of supply.

The problem is that all the attention paid to solving *the housing crisis*—all the time, money, and resources dedicated to building more houses—has done little to improve housing conditions for working people (Christopher, 2023). In Oakland, California, where this study is located, the median home price now exceeds \$800,000 (Asperin, 2023), and homelessness increased 131% from 2015 to 2022 (City of Oakland, 2022). Housing problems are getting worse, homes are less affordable, more people are displaced, and buildings remain underutilized!

Nevertheless, we have taken *the housing crisis* as a given; every day, well-meaning academics, politicians, and others draw on the discourse of *crisis* to explain and lend urgency to the dire conditions that burden communities everywhere—but this comes at a cost. Thus, I cautiously approach *the housing crisis* as a political discourse that is easily enrolled in the authorization of a reactionary real estate agenda of deregulating land use zoning, deregulating building safety code, deregulating labor standards, lowering wages, subsidizing private development, and otherwise supporting the commodification and financialization of land and housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Brill and Raco, 2021).

The logics and assumptions of *the housing crisis*, then, are at odds with what many consider housing justice. For this study, I put forth a vision of housing justice that corresponds with “the urban commons” (Eidelman and Safransky, 2011; Borch and Kornberger, 2015), wherein *housing*—the production and maintenance of shelter—no longer operates to satisfy the demands of private development but is managed collectively

to meet the needs of its users. Following Amanda Huron (2015), I argue for a reclamation of the urban commons—the collective value of the city—from the imperatives of what Stein (2019) refers to as “the real estate state” to bring the system of housing under collective control and keep shelter accessible for all its users.

To see the practices and values of the urban commons at work, I read local media coverage of Moms 4 Housing, a group of previously homeless⁶ Black mothers in Oakland, California who reclaimed a vacant investor-owned house and called it their own (Moms 4 Housing, 2024). Although Moms 4 Housing do not articulate their movement in terms of “urban commoning” (Chatterton, 2010: 626; Harvey, 2012: 73), I read the words and actions of their movement to shelter people and reclaim the systems of housing for their community as closely aligned with this social practice and its values.

Urban geographers situate Moms 4 Housing within the study of social movements (McElroy, 2020; Summers and Fields, 2022), particularly as a form of resistance to “the violence of the housing crisis in Oakland” (Ramírez, 2020b: 683). In support of this scholarship, my intervention is to read Moms 4 Housing, through their essays (Fife, 2020) and public interviews (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020; NoiseCat, 2020; Wang, 2020), as critical theorists in their own right. However, while Moms 4 Housing’s actions are a response to the dire housing conditions in Oakland, they are not necessarily a response to *the housing crisis*; instead, I suggest, they offer powerful critiques not only of the materiality of housing but also the discourse of *crisis*. In other words, Moms 4 Housing,

⁶ I use the term *homeless* instead of the increasingly common term *unhoused* to maintain the language used by Moms 4 Housing. For instance, they use the terms *vacancy* rather than *empty*, *reclamation* rather than *occupation*, and they refer to themselves as *homeless* rather than *unhoused*.

through their thought and practice, show us the inadequacies of *the housing crisis* as a framework for understanding contemporary housing conditions.

I want to be clear that the object of my study is not Moms 4 Housing, this is not a study of social movements or the lives of homeless people. Also, this is not a critique of the specific journalists who write about Moms 4 Housing; I recognize historical events must be organized within a framework to become legible, they require established cultural narratives and discourses to make any sense at all (Butler, 2009). The object of my study, then, is *the housing crisis*, the predominant discourse available to frame housing issues. I aim to show how it is more than a response to housing issues; it is a discourse that produces and manages such issues, it actively shapes how we understand the problems, solutions, and symptoms of housing *in crisis*. My reading of *the housing crisis*, in short, is a critique of how its assumptions and logics function to objectify, reduce, and appropriate the actions and politics of Moms 4 Housing's reclamation of a vacant investor-owned house for themselves, their families, and their community.

The outline of this article is as follows. After a brief introduction to Moms 4 Housing, I read, Moms 4 Housing organizer, Carroll Fife's (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020; Fife, 2020) articulation of housing as a system of violence in relation to Judith Butler's (2007) concept of "normative violence" as elaborated by Samuel Chambers (2007). On the one hand, the violence of housing finds expression through the uneven movements and confinements of community, such as segregation, eviction, gentrification, and incarceration (Fife, 2020). The normative violence of housing, on the other hand, names the process through which the cultural constructions of people and places condition us to accept such violence as normal. In other words, through the devaluation of places and the

dehumanization of people (Butler, 2004b; Gibbons, 2016; Harris and Arney, 2024), the *violence* of housing remains unrecognizable *as violent* due to *who* suffers such violence.

Next, I situate “the urban commons” (Harvey, 2012; Borch and Kornberger, 2015; Eidelman and Safransky, 2011) in relation to the (normative) violence of housing. The urban commons offer a set of social practices and relations committed to building the value of urban space as a collective resource; the aim, then, is to manage the value of the city such that it remains available for use by all who produce it. As it pertains to housing, the urban commons present a model for “collective forms of property ownership... distribution, and management” (Eidelman and Safransky, 2021: 797) that are explicitly at odds with market logics and the exchange value of real estate (Harvey, 2012).

Lastly, I show how local media coverage of Moms 4 Housing framed in terms of *the housing crisis* shapes understandings of their thoughts and actions in ways that perpetuate the violence of housing and depoliticize their movement. *The housing crisis* is a discourse that organizes urban space to meet the demands of capital; in contrast, these Black mothers organize each other to meet the needs of their community. “No one should be homeless when homes are sitting empty,” they write on their website, “Moms 4 Housing are uniting mothers, neighbors, and friends to reclaim housing for the Oakland community from the big banks and real estate speculators” (Moms 4 Housing, 2024). I read their struggle to reclaim housing as a system under community control as a practice of urban commoning.

My main argument, then, is that *the housing crisis*, as the primary discourse that the media draws on to narrate the Moms 4 Housing movement, is unable to recognize or account for these Black mother’s collective housing politics. As I go on to show, media

accounts that are structured by the logics and assumptions of *the housing crisis* truncate, domesticate, ignore, or outright deny their politics at the same time as they objectify their movement and appropriates their radically redistributive actions as evidence to support arguments to build more houses. Finally, the counterintuitive outcome is that the common-sense solution of building more houses might actually make matters worse.

Moms 4 Housing

On November 18, 2019, Dominique Walker, and Sameerah Karim, two previously homeless Black mothers entered a vacant house at 2928 Magnolia Street in Oakland, California to shelter their families and call attention to housing injustices. Walker and Karim were soon joined by Misty Cross and Tolani King; they named themselves *Moms 4 Housing* and the building *Mom's House*. With the help of community members, the moms cleaned and repaired the building, they brought in appliances, paid utilities, and began to build a home for themselves and their children. Two weeks later, Wedgewood LLC, a property investment firm that owned 2928 Magnolia, served the mothers an eviction notice (Solomon and Wolffe, 2019). Local and national attention grew as Moms 4 Housing issued press releases, held demonstrations, and took to social media.

On January 14, 2020, sheriffs evicted the mothers, arresting Cross, King, and two supporters (Swan, Serrano, and Cabanatuan, 2020), but the District Attorney did not file charges against those arrested during the eviction (Ravani, 2020). Wedgewood LLC later agreed to sell the house to Moms 4 Housing through the Oakland Community Land Trust for \$587,500 (Cohen, 2020). Mom's House is now completely renovated and operates as a nonprofit organization that offers transitional housing services for women as they prepare

to secure permanent housing (Ravani, 2022). Moms 4 Housing's action is largely considered a success (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020; Clark-Riddel, 2020; Holder and Mock, 2020) and has been cited as an inspiration for similar housing reclamation efforts (Dillon and Nelson, 2020).

The violence of housing

Carroll Fife is an Oakland city councilmember, Moms 4 Housing organizer, and urban theorist with important critiques of housing that, I suggest, point to the inadequacies of *the housing crisis* as a framework for understanding contemporary housing conditions. In an interview with KQED, a local public media outlet in San Francisco, Fife describes the reclamation of Mom's House as an effort to "highlight the inequity, the violence, and the terror of this system of housing" (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020). Her emphasis on the violence of housing, I argue, usefully opens up the system of housing as a sphere of action and field of meaning to study its issues beyond the limits of *the housing crisis* discourse.

Fife further articulates her theory in an essay titled *The Great Migration never ended* (2020), wherein she begins with a question: "where is home for Black people born in America?" Although she was born in America, Fife expresses never truly feeling at home, for she is continuously reminded that America is not her home. America rests upon the *unreconciled* theft of indigenous land and Black labor, as she explains, and these foundational injustices remain entangled in its social order and continue to reproduce socio-spatial injustices. Thus, "we are constant outsiders," she writes, "moving through spaces where we never really belong." And if a lack of safety and security *in place* is a

manifestation of not belonging, then, the argument, as her title suggests, is that non-belonging is a condition of contemporary Blackness.

Fife goes on to describe how non-belonging functions through the system of housing:

Because of gentrification and displacement [as violent forces that maintain Black migration], we are constantly moving to find decent lives for our families... The places where Black families can afford to live are few. They are the same places where lack of access to quality education, healthcare, fair wages, and other resources manifests in community violence and then reactionary police terrorism.

Fife's systemic approach to the violence of housing prompts us to look beyond housing as the objects of supply and demand charts, and to instead see a complex of discourses, social practices, architectures, and institutions that constitute the production and maintenance of shelter. It is not that housing is necessarily violent in itself, but that it functions as a constituent part of a series of violence making institutions, which include the family, education, finance, healthcare, urban planning, real estate, and policing.

While economic inequality, eviction, and gentrification are forces of displacement that uphold non-belonging, Amanda Hammar's (2020) relational conception of displacement as "*enforced* spatial, social, symbolic, and material disruption" (67), with its emphasis on *disruption* rather than *relocation*, shows how displacement can happen *in place*. Fife (2020) expresses such relational displacement: "Many Black people in America," she writes, "don't often get the luxury of staying in one place for too long, unless someone else wants to keep us there." If the institutions of governance, private industry, insurance, urban planning, and real estate that constitute housing in America have

“conspired to *move* or *confine* Black bodies since the abolition of slavery” (emphasis mine), then housing is a system that reflects these violence making institutions and reinforces their geographies of movement and confinement.

Fife’s conception of housing emphasizes that *how* one lives is shaped by *where* one lives; housing, for this reason, is far more than houses, it is a social process that constitutes the conditions of living. The problem, then, is an assault on the “condition[s] for sheltering and maintaining life” (Butler, 2004a: 4) through the movement and confinement of community (Fife, 2020). Dominique Walker, also of Moms 4 Housing, expresses a similar sentiment; the problem, for her, is about “how *unlivable* conditions are for so many people” (Wang, 2020; emphasis mine). Thus, the mantra of *the housing crisis*—build more houses—comes to appear wholly inadequate, for the violence of housing—its unlivability—is not a problem of which we can simply build our way out.

However, the violence of housing is never universally recognized and condemned as such, *as violent*; it has come to appear natural and normal because it constitutes the socio-material realities that we experience through our everyday lives. Dispossession and elimination inaugurated the American landscape (Blomley, 2003; Wolfe, 2006) and the uneven outcomes of these forces are continuously reconstructed into the architecture of American cities (Massey and Denton, 1990; Taylor, 2019). As a result, the loss of land, shelter, community, and self-determination often remain unrecognized or they are regarded as socially acceptable losses, among the unfortunate costs of doing business. Violence, then, is always subject to interpretation (Butler, 2021: 14).

I turn now to the concept of “normative violence” as a way to understand the uneven social interpretation of violence (Butler, 2007: xxi; Chambers, 2007). Normative violence

is not a description of violence as normative but a description of norms as violent for their role in the constitution of a reality wherein some lives are unevenly valued, desired, and protected at the expense of others. Normative violence, in other words, names the reproduction of race, sex, gender, ability, and religious norms in ways that reproduce some lives as less real or less human than others. Normative violence, then, is conceptually prior to what we recognize as physical violence, it is what renders physical violence unrecognizable *as violent*. As communities are socially categorized as less deserving of value, desire, and protection—as not fully human—the violence perpetrated against them goes unrecognized, becomes justified, or is explained away (Harris and Arney, 2024).

To expand this idea to housing, the normative violence of housing is the complex of social and cultural norms that construct what counts as housing and who counts as residents. Or, in the language of non-belonging, the normative violence of housing structures *who* belongs *where*. And while the physical violence of housing is disproportionately wielded against women and people of color, it is normative violence that produces women of color as unevenly vulnerable to the physical violence of relational displacement (the forced movement and confinement of community) (Fife, 2020).

Following Butler's (2015) claim, then, that we "cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of [our] living" (65), the force of my critique of *the housing crisis* remains outside of the home and prior to the object of the house, my critique is directed not at the quantity of a region's housing supply but at the conditions that make those houses possible—the social, political, and economic organization of how we produce and maintain shelter. For if we require a truly supportive infrastructure of housing, then the existence of even a single homeless person signals that

we lack an infrastructure of housing that supports and sustains livability. The normative violence of housing, in summary, is that it conditions us to its uneven support and unlivability for so many.

The urban commons

As a response, in part, to the violence of housing, scholars and activists are turning to the idea of the urban commons.⁷ No longer confident that markets and the state are institutions capable of the equitable production, distribution, and management of housing (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015), we might look to the urban commons as a model for “collective forms of property ownership, resource distribution, and management” (Eidelman and Safransky, 2021: 797). The commons, then, is not simply a historical feature of the English countryside prior to capitalism, but an active contemporary process; or, as Amanda Huron (2015) writes, the commons is “a way to envision new worlds” (963) and new forms of social life.

The *urban commons*, as an idea and set of practices, is distinct from both the private and public spheres, as well as the broader idea of the *commons* as it is often construed. First, the practice of the urban commons is unequivocally at odds with the private sphere. The defining characteristic of the commons is that it is “off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations” (Harvey, 2012: 73). Instead, commons are shared, used, and managed collectively to satisfy the wants and needs of its users. Second, the spaces of

⁷ A key relevant expression of the urban commons that I do not address in this study is “the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996), which has been variously taken up as a rallying cry for many social movements around the globe. The core tenet of *the right to the city* is one shared by the urban commons: urban space should not be determined by market forces but produced and managed by its inhabitants (Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2008; Merrifield, 2011; Bodirsky, 2017).

the urban commons are not to be confused with the public sphere. Common spaces share similarities with public spaces such as city parks, but they are different because “their use is not determined or controlled by an authority” (Eidelman and Safransky, 2021: 795). The commons, again, is managed collectively by its users, not by public agencies such as municipal, county, or state governments.

Finally, the urban commons rely on urban space, which makes them related yet distinct from forms of the commons reliant on a “common-pool resource” (Borch and Kornberger, 2015: 5). Common-pool resources such as fields of grass for grazing cattle, lakes of fish, or forests of trees are resources with some degree of scarcity or abundance. Users collectively manage these resources because those common pools can diminish through their use. The urban commons, on the other hand, does not diminish with use; instead, it is precisely through the use of the city—inhabiting it, laboring within it, participating in its activities and cultural practices—that residents produce its value and expand its resourcefulness as a commons (Borch and Kornberger, 2015). The urban commons, then, is “constituted by the collective work of strangers” (Huron, 2015: 963) who build the value of the city as a common resource; thus, value remains collective and available for use by all who produce it.

The urban commons, however, is not the default mode of urban life, it requires effort to imagine and enact (Bodirsky, 2017). Although the collective value of the urban commons is continuously reproduced through the use of urban space, that value is continuously appropriated by processes of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2012), it is captured by the structure of private property rights and appropriated through the extraction of land and property rents (Borch and Kornberger, 2015). Further, the appropriation or

enclosure of the urban commons is not limited to the privatization of urban space. According to Hodkinson's (2012) "new urban enclosures," we are undergoing a privatization of urban sociality more broadly, i.e., "the *encapturing* of people, place, space, and culture within the commodifying and alienating logic of capital accumulation" (509). This wider appropriation of urban socio-spatial relations, then, produces new capitalist spaces, markets, subjectivities, and modes of governance.

If "cities are already-commodified spaces" (Huron, 2015: 969)—always subject to new rounds of enclosure—then *urban commoning* is a social practice of challenging "ownership, access to resources, and social relations in the city" (Eidelman and Safransky, 2021: 792), a social process of "reclaiming the commons from the processes of capital accumulation" (Parr, 2015: 86), and a social relation of "collectively managing the resources needed to sustain life" (Huron, 2015: 963). There is a direct conflict, then, between the practices of collective use and governance that drive a commitment to the urban commons, and the practices of privatization and appropriation that are the structural features of capital accumulation that reproduce the violence of housing.

The conflict between the urban commons and the violence of housing reveals a contradiction in *the housing crisis* discourse. On the one hand, *the housing crisis* signals a desire for housing justice; its use calls attention to the injustices of displacement, eviction, and other socio-economic burdens of housing. On the other hand, it authorizes the commodifying and financializing practices of real estate; its use normalizes the violence structured into the system through which we produce and maintain shelter. To see this contradiction at work, I now turn to local media coverage of Moms 4 Housing framed in terms of *the housing crisis* to trace the limits of this contradictory discourse, those moments

when the language of housing justice gives way to justifications for the violence of housing.

Representing Moms 4 Housing

Crisis is an invaluable resource for the media, it is an instantly recognizable term that makes any contemporary housing event or issue understandable. Nearly every account of Moms 4 Housing is immediately contextualized in terms of *the housing crisis*. For instance, a characteristic media representation titled “Moms 4 Housing make a point in Oakland” (Chronicle Editorial Board, 2020) begins with the assertion that the point made by Moms 4 Housing was the severity of *the housing crisis*: “The two-month occupation of a vacant West Oakland house by a group of homeless mothers illustrated the desperation, desolation, and depth of the region’s *housing crisis*” (emphasis mine). From the first sentence, the board establishes that *the housing crisis* is the frame through which the reader is to understand the details that follow. Further into the editorial, the authors attempt to objectively balance the nuances of how they believe the reader ought to understand Moms 4 Housing. They argue that while we must show compassion for these Black mothers, given “desperation, desolation, and depth” of the situation, we must also remember that their reclamation was against the law and could never present a viable solution to widespread housing insecurity.

I read this uneasy relationship between the compassion for humanity and the legality of property as a contradiction of liberalism articulated through *the housing crisis*. On the one hand, housing *problems* are concerned with the burdens of *maintaining shelter*; the social and economic costs of housing are expressed in the progressive language of

housing justice, racial justice, and social justice. On the other hand, *solutions* to these problems are concerned with the burdens of *producing more houses*, an agenda defined through the neoclassical logic of supply and demand, which supports a technocratic and neoliberal politics of deregulation, commodification, and private development.

The contradictory politics of *the housing crisis* always underpin media coverage of Moms 4 Housing, at least implicitly, until its assumptions are explicitly revealed. For instance, while sympathetic to their struggle, the editorial board inevitably points to Moms 4 Housing's actions as evidence in support of a deregulatory pro-development agenda. The assumption that *the housing crisis* is necessarily a product of a housing shortage, then, becomes explicit as they go on to make the predictable call to build more houses: “[t]here is no escaping the reality that a dearth of housing production is at the core of the affordability crisis... Breaking down political and regulatory barriers to housing construction must be a high priority for the governor and Legislature” (Chronicle Editorial Board, 2020). The editorial is an instance of a broader effort to appropriate Moms 4 Housing, or reconstruct their movement to channel its energy into the capitalist imperatives that structure *the housing crisis*. A key process that enables the appropriation of Moms 4 Housing is the objectification of housing.

Objectification

The housing crisis objectifies housing; it reduces the *system of housing*—the activities and institutions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter—to the concerns of *houses as objects* or units of private property. Such discursive objectification of housing shapes both progressive and conservative representations of Moms 4 Housing. A narrowly

quantified conception of housing as mere objects of private property enables more reductive, traditional, conservative, and reactionary portrayals of Moms 4 Housing as squatters, trespassers, and criminals (Har, 2020; Kendall, 2020; as well as Wedgewood LLC representative Sam Singer as cited in Hagerty, 2020; Hahn, 2020; Solomon and Wolffe, 2019). If these mothers are seen as simply trespassing on private property, then the legal actions that Wedgewood LLC took to protect their property are easily justifiable.

However, the objectification of housing also enables ostensibly progressive depictions of Moms 4 Housing that unwittingly individualize households and their struggles to remain sheltered. For instance, in the following headline, “Homeless moms solve housing crisis—temporarily” (Millner, 2019), the crisis these moms temporarily solved is entirely their own. Such a framing reproduces a dire political imagination of housing, one in which shelter is completely disarticulated from its conditions of possibility, housing is no longer a socio-political process but an aggregate of atomized households who face their individualized issues fragmented and isolated across an uneven landscape of shelter.

The housing crisis, then, as an objectifying discourse, reproduces narratives around housing that fail to recognize the violence at work within the practices and institutions involved in the production and maintenance of shelter. However, if we approach *housing* not simply as houses but as a system that makes those houses possible, then alternate representations become possible. For instance, as Alvarez (2020) suggests, we might interpret Moms 4 Housing’s action as “a loving act of good mothering.” Because these Black women could not depend upon support from the violence making institutions of modern socio-political life designed to work against them, they collectively supported each

other and their children as a “community of care” that “made life more manageable” for themselves and their families (Alvarez, 2020). Or we might interpret Moms 4 Housing, following Summers and Fields (2024), as an instance of “black collective mothering,” wherein they centered themselves and their children in narratives about the violences that homeless Black families endure in order to garner support for their fight against the commodification of their community (11).

Depoliticization

Another process that enables the appropriation of Moms 4 Housing is the depoliticization of their movement. The liberal contradiction of *crisis*—the relationship between progressive language and reactionary politics—produces aesthetically politicized representations of Moms 4 Housing that paradoxically depoliticize their thought and practice. In such depictions, Moms 4 Housing not only appear to “illustrate” the severity of the crisis (Chronicle Editorial Board, 2020), but they stand in as symbols and icons of *the housing crisis*. For instance, these “women—all Black, working mothers—became a *symbol* of the Bay Area’s housing crisis” (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020), they “occupied a vacant house and became *icons* of the homelessness crisis” (Paulas, 2020) (emphases mine). The result is courageous yet one-dimensional depictions of Moms 4 Housing that could never represent the ideas and actions of these women, let alone stand in for the rich historical and geographical field of contemporary housing burdens. I take issue with these depoliticized representations, then, because they are offered at the expense of any meaningful examination or explanation of the violence at work in the system of housing.

In another instance, a local news article declared Moms 4 Housing “the next civil rights movement” (Ho, 2020). Dominique Walker also invoked the civil rights movement as well when she announced the Oakland Community Land Trust purchase of Mom’s House, “Today we honor Dr. King’s radical legacy by taking Oakland back from banks and corporations” (Roth and Fernandez, 2020). The history of the Black civil rights movement is, of course, indispensable, it is both significant in itself and a relevant context for understanding Moms 4 Housing; however, these media accounts run the risk of romanticizing the past at the expense of substantive explanations of the violence these women struggle against in their political project to reclaim housing for their community.

Carroll Fife also locates Moms 4 Housing within the civil rights tradition, she says their actions “were bold and courageous like the lunch counters in the South, like the marches in Selma” (Baldassari and Solomon, 2020). However, Fife compares Moms 4 Housing to the marches in Selma not to suggest that they represent the *next* civil rights movement but to suggest that struggles over dire housing conditions are nothing new for Black communities. She refers to the civil rights era to signal a continuity in the Black struggle for adequate housing, to insist that “the fight to house our most vulnerable residents is the same now as it was then [in the civil rights era]” (Walker in Kim, 2020), to insist that nothing has changed.

Implicit in Mom 4 Housing’s political claims and radical efforts to house their community is their theory of change, which we might interpret as incompatible with the numerical change of *the housing crisis*, wherein each new house represents change as another step in the path towards a solution to the crisis. Instead, as Walker declares, “[w]e’re not going to stop organizing until we all have shelter” (Schneider, 2019).

According to Moms 4 Housing, then, nothing has changed until everyone is sheltered, and it is precisely the transformative potential of this conviction that everyone must be sheltered that is lost, denied, or appropriated when their movement is narrated through the depoliticized aesthetics and the objectified logic of supply and demand that underpin representations of *the housing crisis*.

Appropriation

I turn now to a close reading of a seemingly objective description of Moms 4 Housing, wherein I show the assumptions of *the housing crisis* at work in shaping media narratives of their movement.

Her decision [Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley's decision to not file charges against the four people arrested during Moms 4 Housing's January 2020 eviction from 2928 Magnolia Street] concluded a dramatic chapter in the region's acute housing crisis that gained national attention when sheriff's deputies in riot gear and armored vehicles evicted a rotating group of four homeless mothers who took up residence in the empty house in November to highlight the shortage of affordable housing (Ravani, 2020).

First, in terms of the basic narrative of the sentence, the metaphor of a "chapter" is used to position Moms 4 Housing's reclamation and eviction as "dramatic" plot points within the ongoing story of "the region's acute housing crisis." This book metaphor or storytelling device confines these events within the prevailing array of problems and solutions established through *the housing crisis*. To that end, if Moms 4 Housing are positioned within the framework of *the housing crisis*, then it appears that their political goal is

synonymous with its logic and assumptions, i.e., “to highlight the shortage of affordable housing.”

Second, the article domesticates the radicality of Moms 4 Housing’s politics through a description of them as “a rotating group of four homeless mothers who took up residence in the empty house” (Ravani, 2020). My issue with this depiction is not that it is necessarily false or incorrect, but that it obscures how Moms 4 Housing are *a particular group of organized Black mothers* struggling to reclaim housing for their community in a historically Black city undergoing the rapid displacement of its Black residents. “Everything was done,” according to Walker, “with a specific strategy to bring awareness to corporations hoarding homes” (NoiseCat, 2020).

Moms 4 Housing, then, call attention not to a “shortage of affordable housing,” but to a heightened moment of Black displacement due to corporate housing speculation, or what Summers and Fields (2024) refer to as “financial violence in Oakland.” Following the mass dispossession of the 2007/8 global financial collapse—a result of the 2000’s subprime mortgage bubble (Aalbers, 2012), of which there were 10,508 mortgage foreclosures in Oakland alone between 2007 and 2011 (King, 2012: 15)—corporate “investors seized the opportunity to take advantage of distressed real estate... acquiring hundreds of properties in short periods of time” (Summers and Fields, 2024: 5), leading to the corporate control of housing as a speculative financial tool (see also: Fields and Raymond, 2021).

Finally, the seemingly objective phrase, “taking up residence in an empty house,” is anything but objective; the appearance of neutrality in this instance reveals the depoliticization of Moms 4 Housing’s effort to *reclaim a vacant investor-owned house* as

a strategy to take back community control of their city. The language of *emptiness* used in the text connotes a sense of abandonment or *terra nullius*, uninhabited space. However, a house emptied of residents is never empty, it always contains the structure of private property, investment, meaning, strategic significance, and its capacity to shelter. 2928 Magnolia, then, was never passively empty or abandoned, it was actively put to work producing value through its vacancy.

Following theorists of the urban commons (Harvey, 2012; Eidelman and Safransky, 2021), urban space is appropriated from the community through foreclosure (as a form of enclosure); buildings are held vacant as a strategy to increase their speculative value through the production of scarcity. There is a contradiction, then, between the exchange value of urban space as sections of private property and the use value of urban space as a collective resource. Urban commoning, in contrast, is a practice of resisting such capitalist capture or appropriation of the collective value of urban space (Borch and Kornberger, 2015; Parr, 2015). The logics and assumptions that structure *the housing crisis*, however, are unable to account for the specific materiality of Moms 4 Housing's struggle for a system of community housing; as a result, their political project is also captured and appropriated to fit the narrative of *crisis*.

Disavowing the housing crisis

Through close readings of media accounts of Moms 4 Housing, I have shown how the logics and assumptions of *the housing crisis* depoliticize their actions and objectify their movement. I turn now to Moms 4 Housing's own descriptions of housing in Oakland to

show how these radical Black mothers might be read productively as theorists of the urban commons.

Members of Moms 4 Housing articulate the problems and solutions of housing in stark contrast to those perpetuated through media accounts of *the housing crisis*. In fact, Dominique Walker plainly disavows *the housing crisis*, “Oakland doesn’t have a housing crisis,” she says, “it’s a moral crisis, it’s a profiteering crisis, it’s a speculators in my hood crisis” (NBC, 2021). Elsewhere, she attacks the logics of supply and demand, the presumption of exchange value, and the calls to build more houses altogether, “[t]here is not a scarcity of housing,” she argues, “I don’t think housing needs to be built to be affordable. There’s housing here. So we just got to figure out how to get folks into these homes that are sitting vacant” (Wang, 2020). For these mothers, the problem is not a lack of houses, the problem is that people are unsheltered or face undue burdens to remain sheltered while buildings are held vacant as speculative assets for corporate investors.

To support their argument, Moms 4 Housing recast a statistic produced by their local county assessor’s office into a rallying cry: “There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are people without homes” (Moms 4 Housing, 2024; see also: Schatz, 2018; Castañeda and Kendall, 2020). The high vacancy rate in Oakland directly contradicts the logic of supply and demand that structures understandings of the problems and solutions of *the housing crisis*. Therefore, if the problem in Oakland is not a scarcity of houses, but an abundance of houses *held vacant* by corporate real estate investors, then perhaps instead of a housing crisis, Walker argues, we should refer to a “moral crisis that lets this [homelessness] happen in a city with four vacant houses for every one homeless person” (Whitmer, 2020). Walker’s politics explicitly undermine the logics and

assumptions of *the housing crisis* that function to delegitimize Moms 4 Housing's reclamation of vacant investor-owned houses, even as their radical efforts to shelter people are appropriated as evidence in support of arguments to build more houses.

The goal for Moms 4 Housing, then, is unequivocally not to build new houses. But what is wrong with building more houses? If the problem is not a scarcity of houses, but the appropriation of houses into a system of real estate speculation, then the prevailing solution to build more may not only be ineffective but may likely exacerbate housing burdens and community harms as the scope of speculation compounds, expands, and intensifies with the construction of new houses as yet more speculative commodities. The logic of *the housing crisis*, in other words, is not only wrong, but it makes matters worse. To that end, the goal for Moms 4 Housing is what they call *Homes 4 All*; "We are coming together," they write, "with the ultimate goal of reclaiming housing for the community from speculators and profiteers" (Moms 4 Housing, 2024). According to Moms 4 Housing, the solution to housing burdens and instabilities is to take back the houses that already exist, reclaim investor-owned commodities *as homes* for those who need them. They present a vision of housing justice that I read as closely aligned with the practices and social relations of the urban commons.

Moms 4 Housing's politics, then, are a response to the violence of housing—the uneven movement and confinement of community that results from the enclosure of the urban commons, i.e., the appropriation of the collective value of the city at the direct expense of its residents and communities (Borch and Kornberger, 2015). Moms 4 Housing's reclamation of an investor-owned house was "a rejection of the capitalist notion that the housing market should determine whether children have a place to sleep at night"

(Fife, 2020). That is, it was a practice of urban commoning—they enacted their vision of housing premised not on private property and rent seeking but on placing the production and management of value in the hands of the community—their reclamation was, in their words, an effort to “return the house to community control” (Moms 4 Housing, 2019). However, the primary discourse available to make sense of their movement is entirely unable to account for their political project. As a result, the logics and assumptions that underpin *the housing crisis* shape media narratives in ways that depoliticize their actions, domesticate their critique, and appropriate their movement in service of private development.

Conclusion

Houses are embodiments of the socio-spatial relations of their production and maintenance. At the same time, the physicality of houses—the apparent concreteness of architecture—works to objectify, naturalize, and reproduce the prevailing socio-spatial relations. Within such relations, few of us can achieve what we deserve, or even act in ways that fully reflect our values, desires, or abilities. We work to pay the rent or mortgage, we buy groceries to prepare meals, we care for each other in a thousand different ways that also require us to maintain the social and economic order that forces us, albeit unevenly, to wear ourselves thin simply to remain sheltered (Fraser, 2017; Russell and Vinsel, 2018; Brill, 2022).

Yet, following Blomley (1998), we can narrate the socio-spatial relations of housing in new ways that “draw on alternative claims to possession and entitlement” (569). We can narrate housing to include claims to community and urban space through shared histories of labor, investment, use, and habitation. 2928 Magnolia was simply a building

until Moms 4 Housing reclaimed it and made it a home. How might we narrate and enact a new geography of housing, wherein the production and maintenance of the urban commons constitutes value for its residents?

Moms 4 Housing never called for everyone without houses to reclaim them from everyone with houses; rather, through the reclamation of *Mom's House*, they exposed a break in the prevailing order by questioning its seemingly unquestionable foundation of private property. Their struggle was never for private ownership or wealth, it was for community. The injustice of displacement, then, is not the loss of individual private property; the injustice, for them, is the loss of community, the dispersion of family, the erosion of local participation, the disconnection from the memories of a place.

While invocations of *the housing crisis* may intend to call attention to the urgency of housing injustice, the conceptual elasticity of *crisis* enables its appropriation in the name of contradictory political claims and actions (Koselleck, 2006). Thus, deployments of *the housing crisis* might offer progressive descriptions of our housing burdens in the language of justice, but I am wary of solutions that reproduce housing without questioning the presumptions that maintain its injustices. In contrast, as Moms 4 Housing sought to “disrup[t] corporate ownership of the community itself” (Everett, 2020), they opened our political imagination to new ways of housing ourselves and each other that do not take private property as an unquestionable given.

When Moms 4 Housing, driven by the moral conviction that everyone deserves a home, reclaimed 2928 Magnolia from corporate investors, they demonstrated the performativity of power (Butler, 2015: 58). By this I mean, they did not already possess the power to act within the prevailing socio-spatial relations and legal framework, it was

precisely by walking through the door that they claimed the power to walk through the door. The transformative force of passing through that door can be found in the discursive shift from accusations of property theft to conversations about how property and theft work together. Through the insistence that everyone deserves a home, these Black mothers revealed the theft of humanity and community taking place through the private ownership of something as necessary to human survival and vital to community power as shelter.

Following David Madden (2024), who finds it “a mistake... to adopt mainstream understandings of crisis” (272), I conclude with a call to seek out new ways to theorize contemporary housing problems beyond the prevailing discourse of *crisis*. The political potential of housing is at stake; it is critical, then, that our frameworks for understanding housing issues are able to recognize the violence of housing as well as account for political struggles against such violence. As I have shown, the logic and assumptions of *the housing crisis* make it incapable of recognizing the violence of housing or accounting for Moms 4 Housing’s politics. To that end, I draw on the urban commons as a more useful framework to narrate housing problems and enact a vision of the city where value is shared and everyone is sheltered.

CHAPTER 4
HAUNTED HOUSING⁸

⁸ Harris, M. Submitted to *Theory & Event*, 07/22/24.

Abstract

With the help of the ghost, I put forth a hauntology of *the housing crisis*: a critique of how the discourse of crisis objectifies, reifies, and commodifies housing burdens and injustices. To do so, I move, metaphorically, from the haunted house, with its emphasis on the spectral presence inhabiting one's home, towards *haunted housing*, a name for the seemingly absent yet never-not-with-us spectral presences that haunt the everyday production and maintenance of shelter. Therefore, I ask, how is housing haunted by its exclusions? And how do these exclusions—the ghosts of housing—persist and threaten the prevailing order? To explore this question, I read news accounts of the 2016 Ghost Ship warehouse fire that took the lives of 36 people for how two of its predominant narratives—first, that the fire was inevitable due to the flammability of the Ghost Ship's construction and design, and second, that the fire was a product of a protracted *housing crisis*—each, in its own way, represents the Ghost Ship as a space *outside of housing*. Although condemned as uninhabitable, I argue the Ghost Ship is materially and conceptually inseparable from the social, political, and economic systems through which we house ourselves and each other.

Keywords: housing, crisis, post-foundationalism, hauntology, the constitutive outside, the uninhabitable

Introduction

We face uncertain futures prompted by persistent and entangled social injustices, economic contradictions, climate disasters, public health emergencies, geopolitical conflicts, and a breakdown in the legitimacy of the institutions needed to address these concerns. As artists, activists, journalists, policymakers, and scholars attempt to make sense of our contemporary moment, their efforts have become saturated with the discourse of crisis. In harmony with a chorus of scholars who critique such pervasive invocations of crisis (O’Conner, 1987; Koselleck, 1988, 2006; Klein, 2007; Berlant, 2011; Hall et al., 2013; Roitman, 2014; Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Madden, 2023; Perkowski et al., 2023), I advance a critique of *the housing crisis*—italicized here to “serve as a precaution” (Derrida, 200: 351). If the meaning of crisis depends upon the theoretical framework and political conditions in which it operates (O’Conner, 1987; Madden, 2023), then however dire housing conditions become, I must affirm from the outset, without ever minimizing the consequences of its burdens and injustices, that I do not approach *crisis* as an objective condition or neutral description but as a discourse that constructs and reconstructs housing.

The commonsense refrain of *the housing crisis* is that all housing burdens stem from a lack of affordable housing (Rose and Lin, 2015; Bellisario et al., 2016; Treuhaft et al., 2018; Sisson et al., 2019; Dougherty, 2020; California Forward, 2021; Karlinsky and Wang, 2021). Articulated as such, the discourse of *lack* enables a framing of all housing injustices within the reductive neoclassical logic of supply and demand. Within this strictly

quantified framework, *housing* becomes a *gerund*, a verb that functions as a noun. The noun form of *housing* refers to a quantity or supply of houses, an accumulation of commodities, an assemblage of objects *in crisis*. The physicality and seeming objectivity of houses conceals the active relationality of the verb form of *housing*: to house, to provide space for someone or something, and the definition to which I most often return, *the processes through which we produce and maintain shelter*. *Housing*, then, as emphasized here, names the set of conditions that makes houses possible.

This disambiguation of *housing* insists on its relationality as a challenge to the ways in which *the housing crisis* reproduces an objectified, quantified, and commodified ontology that obscures the economic contradictions and oppressive social relations built into the systems we use to house ourselves and each other. Invocations of *the housing crisis*, then, may intend to call attention to the urgency of housing injustices, but the conceptual elasticity of *crisis* enables its appropriation in the name of contradictory political claims and actions (Koselleck, 2006). Thus, we have arrived at the paradox of *the housing crisis*: while *housing problems*, concerned with the burdens of maintaining shelter, are expressed in the progressive language of social justice, the proposed *solutions*, concerned, alternatively, with the burdens of producing housing units, pursue the technocratic and neoliberal politics of deregulation, commodification, and private development, which fail to ensure that even the most basic housing needs are met (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Madden, 2023)

Conceptual elasticity, of course, is not limited to *crisis*. Language never simply or accurately represents an objective reality; instead, it is through our words that we continuously reproduce our social reality by reproducing its meanings. The “permanent

open-endedness of meaning,” however, precludes our ability to ever fully apprehend the world through words (Brown, 2001: 152). If meaning always already exceeds what could be contained within words, then “language,” as Derrida (2001) insists, “bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (358). For this reason, the names we assign to our systems and social relations—e.g., race, gender, sexuality, capitalism, housing—can never fully capture how these forces structure our lives (Gordon, 2008: 3–5).

It is my intent, then, to explode *housing*, to unravel its objectified state and show its elements in motion; to do so, I enlist the metaphor of the ghost. That is, I move from the *haunted house*, with its emphasis on the spectral presence that inhabits one’s home, towards *haunted housing*, a name for the seemingly absent yet never-not-with-us spectral presences that inhabit the everyday production and maintenance of shelter. As it is not the house itself that is *in crisis*, it is not the house that is haunted—buildings do not feel the presence of ghosts—rather, “it is the complexities of its social relations [i.e., housing] that the ghostly figures” (Gordon, 2008: 179). The ghosts that interest me, in other words, do not haunt individual houses, *they haunt housing*. This conceptual leap from the house to housing reveals the specter to be a “social figure” (25), one that emerges from the material and discursive systems through which we house ourselves and each other.

My goal is not to identify any truths about supernatural phenomena—I could never accurately represent a spirit of the dead or how it goes about its haunting. Indeed, the ghost itself is not my object of inquiry at all, it is my silent partner, it signals that haunting is afoot. Through hauntings, ghosts reveal inadequacies in the concepts that structure our lives, they make visible the contradictions and ambiguities between a conceptual logic and the geographies it fails to describe. Housing, as a concept, enables a study of “haunting [as]

a constituent element of modern social life,” an inquiry into why our ghostly reality refuses to conform to our conceptual organization of it (Gordon, 2008: 7). Such contradictions, ambiguities, and refusals, however, are not necessarily injurious and unwelcome; in fact, we need them—they initiate our thoughts and actions. To that end, haunting drives the ongoing differentiation of the world, it “makes things happen” (Holloway and Kneale, as cited in Roberts, 2013: 393).

If ghosts are everywhere and constitutive of everything, then it is “necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of [every] concept” (Derrida, 1994: 202). Accordingly, I ask, *how is housing haunted by its exclusions?* If the prevailing housing order is haunted by the disorder from which it emerges, then what must be continually excluded to maintain it; and how does the persistence of these exclusions, what Gordon (2008) refers to as their “seething presence” (8), haunt such a construction? The kernel of this question formed for me in 2016, when I realized the ghosts of housing make themselves known in unpredictable and sometimes devastating ways, as I read, with grief and frustration, local news reports of a fire that killed 36 people at a music performance in a warehouse called the Ghost Ship in Oakland, California.⁹

The appearance of ghosts, according to Gordon (2011), presents an opportunity for critique (3). Therefore, I read media representations of the tragic Ghost Ship fire as a rich

⁹ To be clear, these 36 people, some of whom I had the pleasure of meeting briefly over the years, none with whom I shared a personal friendship, yet many were close friends of close friends, one I recognized as a clerk at a local shop, another was a co-worker’s younger brother, all of them should still be with us, their loss stormed through many communities and rippled through many more; while their lives, memories, and art continue to haunt and inspire us in their own ways, these 36 people who lost their lives in the fire are *not* the ghosts that I address in this article: Cash Askew, Jonathan Bernbaum, Em Bohlka, Barrett Clark, David Cline, Micah Danemayer, William Dixon, Chelsea Dolan, Feral Pines, Alex Ghassan, Michela Gregory, Nicholas Hall, Sara Hoda, Travis Hough, John Igaz, Ara Jo, Donna Kellogg, Amanda Kershaw, Edmond Lapine II, Griffin Madden, Joseph Matlock, Jason McCarty, Draven McGill, Jennifer Mendiola, Jennifer Morris, Vanessa Plotkin, Wolfgang Renner, Hanna Ruax, Benjamin Runnels, Nicole Siegrist, Michele Sylvan, Jennifer Tanouye, Alex Vega, Peter Wadsworth, Nicholas Walrath, and Brandon Wittenauer.

site for understanding who and what we exclude from social reality. If a representation of something *in crisis* functions as an implicit political argument for its inverse—how it ought to be when it is *not in crisis* (Roitman, 2014)—then media reports that address *the housing crisis* can be read for their implicit arguments for how housing ought to be; in other words, they contain an immanent debate over what is and is not considered appropriate housing. It is in these moments of exclusion that our ghosts appear.

I open with a review of Jacques Derrida’s (1994) concept of “hauntology” with an emphasis on Judith Butler’s (1993) articulation of the “constitutive outside.” Following Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (2023), and Franklin-Phipps (2024), I approach hauntology as a mode of “post-foundational critique” (Butler, 1992; Marchart, 2007; Landau, Pohl, and Roskamm, 2021). Then, I prepare the ground, so to speak, to introduce a *post-foundational hauntology of housing* by laying out the ontological distinction between the physicality of buildings (houses) and the materiality of the discourses and socio-spatial relations through which we produce and maintain shelter (housing). Such a disambiguation enables a conceptual shift from *the haunted house*, where a ghost haunts someone’s home, to *haunted housing*, where ghosts inhabit the foundations that authorize and perpetuate the injustices of our modern housing system. I, then, review the concept of “the uninhabitable” (McKittrick, 2006, 2013; Simone, 2016) as a spatialization of the constitutive outside.

Next, I introduce the Ghost Ship fire and read media representations of this tragic event in two categories. In the first instance, news accounts made sense of the fire through descriptions of the flammability of the Ghost Ship’s construction and design. In the second, media accounts positioned the fire as a product of *the housing crisis*, in which the lack of affordable housing, it is argued, forces people into dangerous spaces such as the Ghost

Ship. Each instance, in its own way, represents the Ghost Ship as an uninhabitable space *outside of housing*. Both narratives fail to meaningfully question the systems of housing; they, instead, naturalize its conditions, objectify its injustices, and contain them within the figure of the house. The Ghost Ship, as I go on to argue, is the constitutive outside of housing; while it is condemned as uninhabitable, it is materially and conceptually inseparable from the systems through which we produce and maintain shelter. I conclude with a review of post-foundational hauntology with an emphasis on the need to pay attention to our ghosts in order to create livable spaces for ourselves and each other, including those who are no longer, or not yet, with us.

Learning to live with ghosts

Our prevailing ontological order—the social categorization and material classification of our world that we experience as real—reproduces us as individual thinking subjects who exist within an external world of objects positioned in *space* as a physical container and *time* along a progressive linear sequence (Massey, 2005). Yet such “individuation,” as Butler (2004b) contends, “is an accomplishment, not a presupposition” (27). *Hauntology*, a portmanteau that names ontology *as haunted* by the exclusions necessary for its apparent unity and coherence, enables a critique of such an accomplishment. If we know, then, as Derrida (1994) asserts, that “ontology is a conjuration” (202), we are better equipped to question its perceived coherence and challenge what is presumed to be essential about the relations that reproduce it.

The appearance of a ghost, if only as a metaphor, “meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (Gordon, 2008: 8), reveals that time is never linear and space is never simply a

physical container. Hauntings, then, prompt critique; they are occasions to historicize and spatialize what constitutes subjects and objects, their formations, where their boundaries lie; they present the occasion—the obligation—to question reality rather than assume ontology is reality itself (Joronen and Hakli, 2017). Hauntology, however, is not an attempt to do away with these terms of our existence—e.g., space, time, the subject, physical or conceptual objects—instead, it is an opportunity to reveal their presumptions and shake them free of their certainties in order to show how different ways of being in the world contradict how we currently know and live it.

The constitutive outside

No logic, object, order, or social reality can contain everything; some entities and elements, then, necessarily remain “out of place, constitutively outside” (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, 2023: 6). The *constitutive outside* names how categories are defined by what they exclude and articulated in relation to what they are not. According to Judith Butler (1993), “certain constructions appear constitutive” (x), it is, therefore, difficult to imagine thinking without them. She writes about how bodies appear to exist only within the constructions of sex and gender through which they are socially constituted. The features and gestures recognizable, for instance, as feminine within one’s time, place, and culture add up to the constitutive outside of the desperately masculine modern subject. Thus, if “we are,” as Butler contends (2004a), “outside ourselves,” if we are constituted by phantom elements that “precede and exceed us” (33), then despite his vigorous refusal to embody the feminine, the geographical and historical construction of gender to which the masculine figure is subjected remains a constitutive force—disappearing, reappearing, haunting him throughout his life.

We are all haunted, in our own ways, by what we attempt to exclude for our identities to make sense, for them to appear stable and coherent. The ghost, as always already absent *and* present, for its absence *is* its presence, is a figure of such exclusion; its hauntings reveal that categories do not possess an inherent inside, they structure our lives, then, without a *fixed* conceptual center (Derrida, 2001), but a center continuously reproduced at once *within* the category and *outside* of it (352). The outside, therefore, is constitutive of a category if it is both “incommensurable with the inside” *and* “the condition of [its] emergence” (Mouffe, 2000: 12). In other words, as illustrated by the masculine refusal of the feminine, the *inside* of a category “always requires precisely that which it cannot abide” (Butler, 1993: 140). Although an element or entity may appear outside of a category, it necessarily constitutes the system of difference that enables the legibility of that category in the first place (Derrida, 1982: 11–27).

Katherine McKittrick (2006), in another instance, uses the term “absented presence” to describe how encounters with Black Canadians prompt “surprise” and “wonder” because “black people *in* Canada are geographically un-Canadian” (99). While there is no necessary opposition between the concepts of Blackness and Canadianness, Black people, whose contributions are in fact integral to the history of Canadian life, are constructed as its constitutive outside, their presence is excluded from the cultural imagination of Canada. The constitutive outside, then, is a conceptual or material embodiment of the supposedly opposite dimensions of a category that are not necessarily opposed but constructed as such, albeit unevenly and incompletely, through the historicity of norms and socio-spatial relations. The boundaries, then, between the inside and outside of a concept are tenuous and porous at best; each contaminates and reconstitutes the other.

The appearance of any categorical purity or independence is the effect of how we, within particular historical and geographical contexts, obscure the inherently contingent and contradictory nature of social life.

Post-foundational hauntology

Following Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (2023), and Franklin-Phipps (2023), I approach hauntology as a mode of post-foundational critique. Post-foundationalism is certainly a critique of foundations, but it is neither against foundations nor does it deny their existence *per se*. Instead, it is guided by an assumption that nothing is determined with certainty; there are no ultimate foundations to which we can appeal in order to conclusively ground ourselves, our thoughts, actions, or social reality. Post-foundational critique, then, is not an attempt to locate an original or more authentic foundation for reality; rather, its adherents trace the ways in which the categories of reality were never foundational, originary, or natural to begin with, but reproduced or represented as such, *as seemingly foundational*, through practices of knowledge, power, and discourse (Derrida, 2016; Foucault, 2002).

The necessary impossibility of any decisive foundation is the condition of possibility for what Butler (1992) refers to as “contingent foundations,” a multiplicity of competing yet ultimately unsuccessful attempts to ground a social order (see also: Marchart, 2007; Landau, Pohl, and Roskamm, 2021; Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, 2023). Thus, the multiplicity of contingent foundations upon which we build and justify our thoughts and actions, are necessarily “constituted through exclusions” (Butler, 1992: 7). What it means, for instance, to be a subject or object in time and space is neither timeless nor universal but necessarily constituted through its historical and geographical exclusions.

For this reason, ghosts are invaluable partners in the work of post-foundational critique: *they haunt foundations*. The persistence of excluded entities or elements enables a mode of critique that seeks to reveal previously unquestionable categories and structures as “contingent and contestable” (Butler, 1992: 7). *Post-foundational hauntology*, then, attends to the instability of categories, the exclusions necessary for them to make sense, and the politics that justify their exclusion.

Temporality is central to this ghoulish politics of categorization. The *present* is not a discrete moment or neutral period of time; it is produced through socio-political management of the stories we tell ourselves (Berlant, 2011). For instance, the present moment is narrated as one *in crisis*. We are, according to this narrative, living through a temporary aberration from our normal trajectory of progress (Koselleck, 2006). The abnormality of the present *in crisis*, however, can never stand on its own: the contingent norms of the past and the socio-political expectations of the future are always constitutive of the present. Therefore, the political struggle over crisis entails a struggle over the narrative of *the present*, for it is, according to Roitman (2014) “the place from which to posit a future” (70). Post-foundational hauntology, thus, counters the *present* with its emphasis on temporality as an open and unfolding force of continuously transforming non-discrete pasts, presents, and futures, always already “threaded through one another” (Barad, 2010: 244).

The ghost, then, “marks the present with its absence in advance” (Derrida and Stiegler, 2013: 39); in other words, as a “*revenant*,” according to Derrida (1994), it “*begins by coming back*” (11). However, if “[t]he past,” as Karen Till (2005) writes, “is never settled, sedimented, neatly arranged in horizontal layers” (10), each time the ghost *re-*

appears, it does not alter the past that already occurred, it *re-reveals* the ways in which the past has not occurred, or rather, how the past is never fixed in the way the verb *occurred* might suggest. Hauntings are disruptive occurrences that “cut across history” (Pile, 2005: 139), telling “more than one story at a time” (Gordon, 2008: 25), forcing us, seemingly in the present, to reckon with a past that is “always already open to change” (Barad, 2010: 266), and a future that is “haunted before we make and enter it” (Brown, 2001: 150).

Along with a commitment to the narrative production of *time*, post-foundational hauntology, following Doreen Massey’s (2005) theorizations of space as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far,” and a “meeting up” of histories, geographies, and their co-existing social relations (12), is committed to challenging narrative productions of *space*. If ghosts, as Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (2023) claim, are the “ever-present yet flickering by-product of every production of space” (7), then we cannot help but forget, evade, overlook, misrecognize, or misinterpret the “innumerable pasts” that coexist and compound throughout the continuous production of space (Pile, 2005: 142–3; del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013: 399). Post-foundational hauntology, then, makes space for ghosts, it attends to the constitutive outside necessary to the spatial reproduction of our social reality.

Such an approach to space works against the everyday practices and discourses of architecture, urban planning, real estate, and the media that reproduce space as physical, mappable, parcels of land upon which our actions occur, in other words, as *places* imagined to be coherent, local, and secure. “Through stories about places,” according to de Certeau et al. (1998), “they become inhabitable” (142). Through narratives, space sediments into the appearance of authentic identities “defined by their difference from other places” (Massey, 2005: 64). While their inhabitants might argue otherwise, places too are

constantly reproduced; the stories that constitute them are never final, for our attempts to localize meaning and memory are always incomplete (Till, 2005: 13). Places, therefore, continuously take shape as elements gather and disperse, “still rising, still being worn down... still moving on” (Massey, 2005: 139), still open to new forms of narrativization, interpretation, representation, transformation, and memory.

If *now* is always already *then*, and *here* always already *there*, how are we to meaningfully parse the temporality and spatiality of being in a world haunted by its exclusions? How do we, in other words, learn to recognize the histories and geographies of ghosts? If ghosts are *social*, as Gordon (2008) asserts, then we “learn to talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them” (23), we learn from their hauntings—we “learn to live *with* ghosts” (Derrida, 1994: xvii–iii). “Haunting,” according to Brown (2001), “occurs at the point of uncertainty about the meaning of an event, an utterance, a gesture” (152); learning to live with ghosts, then, might entail learning to live with uncertainty, a thoroughly post-foundational proposition indeed. Not to be confused with the inability to think and act, *living with uncertainty* demands that we continue to think and rethink our reality, that we continue to fight for justice in this uncertain world where the consequences of our actions are necessarily unknowable (145). For if our world were fixed and essential, we would have no use for politics; it is precisely the openness and contingency of our world—its uncertainty—that gives us hope that politics might make a difference (Derrida, 1994; Massey, 2005).

Haunted Housing

A post-foundational hauntology of housing begins with the ontological distinction between houses and housing. *Houses* are architectural objects, buildings narrated as residential commodities structured within a system of private property. *Housing*, conversely, names the social, political, and economic processes through which we produce and maintain shelter. Housing includes the discourses that regulate the legibility of buildings *as houses* within such an order: a series of statements, statistics, and constructions are arranged, repeated, and affirmed through policy, practice, and everyday conversation to materialize certain architectural forms, household compositions, and land use patterns as natural, normal, and unquestionable. Housing, then, is never simply a collection of houses: *housing is the condition that makes houses possible*.

To that end, the house itself cannot stand on its own, it is built upon the many haunted systems that ground the prevailing housing order: e.g., indigenous dispossession, private property, racial segregation, gender norms, secondary mortgage markets, land use zoning. From the constraints and limitations of these haunted systems emerge the people, places, and ways of living that necessarily exceed them: their ghosts. If an injustice is assumed to be *in the past*, such as residential segregation, this “unresolved social violence [makes] itself known” through a haunting of “our shared conditions of living” (Gordon, 2008: xv–xvi). For instance, a racist history of haunted housing in America can be traced from slavery, through Jim Crow segregation, mortgage redlining, predatory subprime mortgages, the 2008 financial collapse, mortgage foreclosures, to the private equity financialization of housing (Hernandez, 2009; Rugh and Massey, 2010; Rothstein, 2017; Fields and Uffer, 2016). As the geographies of injustice repeat each other across these

historical moments, we find ghosts “descending into the labyrinths of housing” (de Certeau et al., 1998: 136). The ghost, as a post-foundational figure, reveals, through its hauntings, what we exclude, thus challenging the grounds upon which we authorize our unjust socio-spatial relations. Ghosts, then, are more social than supernatural. For this reason, we are less likely to find them in the attics of our houses than in the foundational injustices of modern housing.

At the same time, housing requires houses; housing is reproduced within and upon the concrete tangibility of its surfaces. The built environment—i.e., the physicality of buildings and the materiality of their distribution—produces a powerful effect; it becomes difficult to parse individual houses from iterations of housing. For instance, bulldozing modest single-family homes in working-class Black neighborhoods in order to construct luxury apartment towers is an iteration of housing. The concreteness of buildings conceals the material injustices of housing. Buildings embody the structure of value that grounds the destruction and displacement of community; their uneven distribution materializes and reifies what counts as housing and who counts as residents within the prevailing order. Housing, however, is never complete because our ways of knowing and living it always already exceed the limits of its categories.

The modern house, then, as an object reproduced within the prevailing discourse of housing, could never exhaust the possibilities of how we might house ourselves and each other. Thus, when we speak of housing conditions, we should never exhaust our conversations with qualitative descriptions of the shape, age, or adornments of the buildings we live in, or with quantitative accountings of the buildings we buy and sell as commodity objects. *Housing conditions* encompass the social, spatial, historical, political,

economic, and ecological contexts in which we unevenly produce and maintain shelter. Modern housing conditions—always unjust yet increasingly punitive—force far too many people to sleep in their cars, under highway overpasses, in alleyways, storefronts, or city parks. These people might live outside of houses, but they do not live outside of housing. The presence and threat of homelessness pervades the material and conceptual systems through which we produce and maintain shelter. Homelessness, then, is one of the most visible instances of the constitutive outside of housing.

The uninhabitable

The *constitutive outside*, a physical or conceptual embodiment of the supposedly opposite but always necessary dimensions of a category, inhabits the “uninhabitable zones of social life” (Butler, 1993: xiii). Due to the intimate relationship between people and places, those who inhabit the uninhabitable—the unimaginable spaces of the built environment—are positioned as unimaginable within the prevailing geographical order of social life (McKittrick, 2013: 7). The *uninhabitable*, then, is a spatial metaphor that designates housing conditions that are “unlivable and unimaginable” (McKittrick, 2006: 130) and forms of life that are “subject to seemingly endless lists of deprivation” (Simone, 2016: 138). As we tell ourselves ‘*this could never happen to me*,’ the shifting norms of uninhabitability render more spaces unlivable and, thus, more people, albeit unevenly, less than fully human.

Such unjust distributions of habitability and humanity are considered normal, they remain unquestioned as the unfortunate necessity to maintain the prevailing order; however, as with all categories, the uninhabitable cannot stand on its own. According to

Simone (2016), the “collapsed yet still rigid distinctions” between *habitability* and *uninhabitability*, while consequential and persistent, are never fixed or discrete but reproduced and redescribed in relation to each other (135). Habitability is not inherently habitable. The appropriate forms of architecture, residency, domesticity, intimacy, and land use do not inhabit their concepts eternally. What is considered habitable shifts in relation to what is considered uninhabitable, unimaginable, inhuman; and the boundary between these terms is shaped by historical and geographical norms of value, race, gender, and sexuality. The white heterosexual nuclear family that resides in the detached single-family home is the unmarked ideal of housing and habitability to which all other people, places, and ways of living are expected to aspire. Thus, if *housing* is built on the repudiation of uninhabitability, those who are unrecognizable within this household structure are variously deemed outside of humanity.

Sara Ahmed (2000), conversely, refers to *home* as “the space one inhabits as liveable,” the space where one belongs, which renders full humanity a condition of “being at home” (52). While everyone deserves the condition of *being at home*, it is critical to recognize how such a condition is necessarily structured through exclusions—home is the place where others are constructed as *out of place*. If a haunting is “when home becomes unfamiliar” (Gordon, 2008: 197), then what must be excluded for one’s home to feel familiar? Home, in this instance, does not refer to the house itself; rather, it is one’s sense of belonging that shifts when “things are not in their assigned places” (Gordon, 2011: 2). The ghosts of housing, therefore, make themselves known in these places where things are not where they have been assigned, where the boundaries of given categories are transgressed; for example, when artists live in unpermitted industrial warehouse

conversions (discussed below), or when previously homeless Black mothers reclaim vacant investor-owned buildings to house their families (Coleman, 2020). These transgressions haunt housing, they pose a threat to the prevailing order by revealing its contingencies. Through the rearticulation of what counts as housing and who counts as residents, they gesture towards new ways of housing ourselves and each other.

The Ghost Ship

On Friday, December 2, 2016, around 11:15 pm, a fire broke out during an electronic music performance at an industrial warehouse converted into an artist collective and communal housing in Oakland, California known as the Ghost Ship. The extent of the loss remained undetermined for at least three days as fire fighters sifted through the ash and rubble to identify its cause and victims. During this impasse, local media outlets assembled descriptions of the Ghost Ship as the details of the fire unfolded. By Monday, the death toll reached 36 people, making the Ghost Ship fire one of the deadliest fires in the city's history.¹ Media representations of this tragic event categorize it in at least two ways. First, an emphasis on the flammability of the Ghost Ship described the fire as a product of the building's construction and design. Second, an emphasis on *the housing crisis* described the fire as a product of the lack of affordable housing in the region. As both of these narratives apportion blame and position the Ghost Ship as an uninhabitable space *outside of housing*, they fail to meaningfully question the system of housing, and, thus, reckon with its ghosts.

Flammability

The earliest media reports of the Ghost Ship fire recount the event by attendees who survived it. These accounts, as written up by reporters, place emphasis on the flammability of the Ghost Ship. Descriptions of the ornate warehouse interior are framed through an underlying question colored by the tone of recrimination: why would anyone enter this hazardous, “makeshift,” labyrinthian “tinderbox” that was ready to explode and nearly impossible to escape (Miller, 2016a, 2016b; Rosen, 2016)? The question implies that a deadly fire was inevitable under such conditions, which prompts another question: how could the building owner and the City of Oakland allow a construction as dangerous as the Ghost Ship to exist in the first place (BondGraham, 2016; Salonga and Peele, 2016)?

The building itself, constructed in 1930, was a warehouse zoned for industrial use, but the interior had been repurposed by its inhabitants, without city permits, into an art studio, performance space, and collective housing that accommodated roughly two dozen residents. The Ghost Ship, built *inside* of the nearly 10,000-square-foot warehouse, contained “floors, ceilings, rafters, corridors... all made of wood” (Miller, 2016a), “aged, dried-out” wood (Rosen, 2016). The interior, described as a “giant maze...[with] tons of corridors, that kind of went into little hideaways” (Miller, 2016a), housed a textured arrangement of paintings, pianos, books, rugs, and antique furniture extending from every surface.¹⁰ The 19th-century sensibility of the Ghost Ship feels uncanny—downright out of place—in relation to the smooth and minimal interiors of the 21st-century. Thus, it was condemned in the media as a “labyrinth of rooms and nooks crowded with... highly flammable” objects and artifacts (BondGraham, 2016).

¹⁰ The interior of the Ghost Ship can be seen in collections of images amassed by Fessenden and Singhvi (2016) and NBC (2016).

Compounding its flammability, there were no fire alarms or sprinkler systems in the Ghost Ship (Miller, 2016a; Rosen, 2016); to be sure, there seemed to be few fire safety precautions in place at all. A previous resident of the Ghost Ship describes it as “a filthy firetrap, with frequent power outages, overloaded outlets, sparks and the smell of burning wire. A camping stove with butane tanks served as the kitchen” (Sulek et al., 2016). Although investigators were unable to decisively locate the origin of the fire—the specific device that first caught on fire—given the electricity supply for the entire warehouse was an “an ad hoc network of extension cords... all fed from one line coming through a hole punched in the wall to a neighboring business,” they identified an “electrical overload” as the most likely cause of the fire (Gafni and Peele, 2016).

These portrayals of the Ghost Ship contain rich descriptions of its *uninhabitability*. In fact, a series of “habitability complaints” had been filed against the owner of the building leading up to the fire (BondGraham, 2016; Miller, 2016c). In 2014, the City of Oakland cited the owner for the construction of unpermitted structures inside the warehouse; in 2016, a community member filed a complaint that garbage and possibly hazardous materials were piling up outside of the warehouse; and on November 14, less than three weeks before the fire, city inspectors followed up on a complaint of “illegal structures” in the warehouse though they were unable to access the building during their site visit (Davis, Debolt, and Peele, 2016). Such facts and narratives of uninhabitability are emphasized, in part, because they produce and articulate its supposed opposite, the qualities of habitability that come to define what constitutes housing.

Thus, given its uninhabitability, reporters were reluctant to refer to the Ghost Ship in terms of housing, opting instead to call it a warehouse, venue, or simply a “space”

(Levin, 2016; Rosen, 2016). Indeed, media descriptions of the fire spell out how the Ghost Ship was not housing, how it existed *outside of housing* as an informal space of not-quite-housing from which to survive the problems of housing. However, if what constitutes housing is continuously reproduced through the movement between what is considered *housing* and *not (yet) housing* as the limits of its discourse, then the uninhabitable is never *outside* the category of housing altogether, but exists as its neglected yet necessary *constitutive outside*.

The modern housing order requires the repudiation of the uninhabitable *as unimaginable* for it to appear as the only way we could imagine housing a population. Against the unmarked ideal of the white, middle-class, single-family home, an ever-changing assemblage of working-class artists, queer communities, and people of color variously inhabiting an industrial building for residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, artistic, and social uses appears unimaginable. However, regardless of its repudiation as unimaginable, thus, unlivable, the Ghost Ship is inseparable from housing, if only as a product of its material history: before it burned down, despite its seeming uninhabitability, people did in fact live there—it housed people! The Ghost Ship, then, was an embodiment of the constitutive outside of housing, haunting the modern housing order, threatening to reveal its contradictions.

Therefore, we must expand the notion of *housing conditions* beyond physical descriptions of flammable interiors to consider the social, political, and economic conditions that structure housing injustices if we want to better understand places such as the Ghost Ship, why they might catch fire, and why those in danger might be more likely to inhabit such *incendiary geographies*. Gregory Simon (2017) draws on Mike Davis's

notion of *the incendiary* to describe how media representations of places *as flammable* are produced as such through the logics of capitalist urbanization. Simon, writing in the context of wildfires, points to the economic incentives of suburban sprawl as an incendiary process that constructs houses at the wildland-urban interface more likely to burn.

Media representations of the Ghost Ship as a “tinderbox,” with their emphasis on the building’s physical structure at the expense of the social structures in which it exists, serve the same logics of capitalist urbanization. There is a rich history of living in unpermitted DIY warehouse conversions in Oakland and other cities (Meline, 2016; Balliger, 2021b), but while many of these spaces have been flammable for decades, the insistence on this narrative occurred as market conditions began to place a premium on industrial urban space in Oakland. In the months following the Ghost Ship fire, scores of evictions and venue closures took place across the country on the grounds that these places were fire hazards (Carney, 2021).

The housing crisis

In response to the flammability narrative, another narrative positioned the fire as a “symptom” of the San Francisco Bay Area’s protracted housing crisis (Levin, 2016). The physical condition of the warehouse was used as evidence to support the claim that a lack of affordable housing forces low-income residents into unsafe and dangerous spaces (Drummond, 2016; Grabar, 2016; Lefebvre, 2016a). Such a claim reduces living in the Ghost Ship to an economically rational decision in a ruthless rental market. Thus, when *the housing crisis* is invoked to contextualize an event, despite a progressive intent to call

attention to the urgency of injustice, its neoliberal assumptions shape how the problem, solution, actors, and stakes of the event come to be understood.

For instance, *the housing crisis* traffics in a reductive and objectifying notion of *housing conditions* that emphasizes the physical characteristics of houses at the expense of the social relations that make those houses possible. The problem with adhering to a strictly physical ontology of housing is that it enables a claim such as “rapidly rising rents have forced people... [into] shared and sometimes hazardous spaces” (Levin, 2016) to be taken at face value. Rents do not rise on their own! To report it as an objective fact that needs no explanation—rather than the product of social relations or the decisions of landowners—again, illustrates and perpetuates the paradox of *the housing crisis*: liberal media narratives can lament the “mercenary local housing market” (Lefebvre, 2016a) without questioning the everyday practices that reproduce its injustices.

Whereas the flammability narrative denounces the Ghost Ship as uninhabitable, *the housing crisis* narrative makes room for a valorization of the uninhabitable in the form of Oakland’s many *underground spaces*, i.e., unpermitted shelters and unlicensed venues (Lefebvre, 2016b; Meline, 2016; Taylor and Tucker, 2016; Balliger, 2021b). Underground spaces are purported to be “vital to the fabric of Oakland” (Levin, 2016) as “important incubators for all the beautiful stuff that happens here [in Oakland]” (Debolt and Hill, 2016). As one local artist told *The San Francisco Chronicle* in an interview about the Ghost Ship fire, “there is virtually no option for a truly thriving performance space in this city without occupying these [underground] spaces” (Taylor and Tucker, 2016).

These sentiments recognize the intrinsic value of community and vibrant cultural expression in the midst of acute poverty, alienation, tragedy, and transformation; however,

they also seem to depoliticize the problem, they take for granted the prevailing terms of our existence and the social relations that reproduce them. Spaces to live, work, perform, and build community appear increasingly scarce, but I refuse to accept the myth that art must be the product of precarity, adversity, misfortune, or catastrophe. Historically, some of the most meaningful and enduring cultural expressions of art, music, film, literature, and fashion have tended to flourish in places considered temporarily unattractive to capital. These works speak to us not because of this fact but because they emerged from the conditions that we too endure; they reveal something beautiful, devastating, or mundane about the world we share. It is not the objects themselves, but our profound connections and intimate interpretations that make them meaningful. For this reason, there is nothing inevitable about these works or the conditions in which they were created. Subcultures, then, do not need substandard conditions to express themselves; instead, we need to reject the crisis logic of capitalist urbanism that represents unjust conditions as distressing and unfortunate yet reifies them as necessary nonetheless.

Underground space is a fitting metaphor for a post-foundational hauntology; it is a space perceived not only *outside* of housing but also *below* the foundation of the dominant conception of space in which we unevenly produce and maintain shelter. Another argument in favor of underground spaces is that their “come-as-you-are environments” (Taylor and Tucker, 2016) provide a supportive “refuge” (Lefebvre, 2016b) for women, people of color, and queer communities who feel unsafe in mainstream social venues and housing arrangements “where they may be harassed or assaulted for just trying to live their lives” (Levin, 2016). *Below* is the appropriate spatial metaphor here; while one can accurately critique dominant space as colonial, racist, heterosexist, capitalist, etc., no one can exist

outside of it entirely, even if they experience it as such. *Underground* and *dominant* (*mainstream*) are never distinct categories, they are metaphors—continuously reproduced in relation to each other—used to name particular dimensions of our uneven social conditions. The Ghost Ship had a reputation for being a structurally unsafe building, but, given the “premium on space” in the San Francisco Bay Area (Lefebvre, 2016a), residents and community members overlooked structural safety concerns in favor of social safety concerns because they urgently needed shelter and cultural connection.

Rather than approach underground spaces as a form of prefigurative politics, I see a reverence for underground spaces as a depoliticizing gesture that lets the injustices constitutive of normative space off the hook. The inhospitality to difference—the exclusion and violence that occurs in licensed venues—goes unchecked. The socio-political injustices and economic contradictions that constitute modern housing remain unquestioned. However, as Gordon (2008) reminds us, “the ghost is nothing without you” (179); thus, we must challenge the haunted spaces of our social reality, for we perpetuate their injustices when we simply accept the world as we have inherited it.

As Katherine McKittrick (Hudson, 2014) argues, space is never safe, and the idea that it could be is a “fantasy” that reproduces the unjust systems that create unsafe conditions in the first place. Such a fantasy presumes space is “a priori, *safe*” until it is “tainted *by* dangerous” entities or elements (237–38). McKittrick, writing in response to the discourse and practice of attempting to create the classroom as a *safe space*, insists that the classroom cannot be safe because learning cannot avoid questions that address violence and the struggles of living. Her assertion can be extended beyond the classroom to consider housing as a socio-spatial system that cannot be safe because housing too is, and “always

has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion” (238). The Ghost Ship is but one of many forms taken by the constitutive outside of housing. Ghosts, then, do not already exist, waiting to haunt us for our indiscretions, they are continuously re-constituted and re-emerge unpredictably in response to the inadequate, inequitable, and inevitably incomplete physical and conceptual boundaries we place around our social spaces to demarcate who belongs within or outside of them.

Conclusion

As I sought to show in this post-foundational hauntology of housing, crisis is a reductive and objectifying discourse that contains social, political, and economic injustices within the figure of the house. While crisis is invoked as an explanatory framework to lend urgency to these conditions, its progressive disavowal of undue housing burdens and injustices belies its underlying politics of deregulation and capitalist urban development. Thus, if, as Madden (2023) suggests, the study of 21st century urbanization is the study of “the constant generation of new perspectives on... crisis” (1), then we need critiques of *the housing crisis* that show how housing is not a problem from which we can simply build our way out.

With the help of the ghost, I aimed to unravel housing from its figurative state and show that many problems with housing exist outside of the home. The ghosts of housing—its constitutive outside—are those people, places, and elements rhetorically excluded from housing, omitted from its discourse, that, nevertheless, remain conceptually and materially necessary to it. Such a perspective reveals that it is not enough to include those excluded into the prevailing ontology—they are always included, already constitutive—instead, we

need, as Butler (2004b) puts it, “an insurrection at the level of ontology” (33). Accordingly, I draw on post-foundational critique to advance an ontological distinction between *houses* as objects and *housing* as the conditions that make those houses possible; thus, it is not the figure of the house haunted by a ghost that should concern us as much as the structure of housing haunted by the foundational injustices upon which it is built.

To that end, I read media accounts of the 2016 Ghost Ship warehouse fire that took the lives of 36 people for how two of its predominant narratives—first, that the fire was inevitable due to the flammability of the Ghost Ship’s construction and design, and second, that the fire was a product of a protracted *housing crisis*—each, in its own way, represent the Ghost Ship as a space *outside of housing*. However, if *housing conditions* are not simply the physical descriptions of houses, but the social, political, and economic conditions in which we unevenly produce and maintain shelter, then we must go beyond condemning buildings and the actions of their inhabitants to understand how a place like the Ghost Ship might come to be and how its inhabitants might have always already been more likely to inhabit such a precarious structure. The Ghost Ship was never its resident’s first choice; indeed, few of us experience housing in terms of choice in any meaningful way, the decisions we make to maintain our shelter are structured, in uneven ways, within violent and exclusionary systems of forced displacement and confinement (Fife, 2020; Cuevas, 2012). Our contemporary housing order, however, could never exhaust the possibilities of how we might house ourselves and each other.

We have inherited a beautiful yet deeply flawed world from those who lived before us. Such a recognition obligates us to consider our thoughts and actions, to the extent that we can, not in relation to the unquestioned foundations that currently structure our world,

but, following the Derridean notion of responsibility, in relation to those who will come after us, those *yet to come*, “those others who are not yet *there*... beyond all living present” who will inherit the world that we leave behind (Derrida, 1994: xviii). To adequately address our housing problems, then, we must not be guided by the discourse of crisis, with its short-term development solutions, but by the open-ended concerns of justice and liveability that might transform how we produce space together and provide space for each other.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I began this study with the idea that the language we use is never our own. The words we call upon to describe the people in our lives, the places we call home, the objects that surround us, the ideas, issues, events, systems and relationships that structure our socio-political worlds all have meanings that escape us, they are interpreted before we ever speak them. This idea, variously expressed throughout my dissertation in the forms of discourse, metaphor, representation, and problematization, guides my study of one of the most pressing issues in cities across the world: *the housing crisis*.

The definition of *housing* to which I continuously return—the systems through which we produce and maintain shelter—helps me articulate a key contradiction at play in *the housing crisis*. On the one hand, housing problems are represented as burdens to the access and maintenance of shelter. The images and narratives of *the housing crisis* accommodate the language of social justice in the depiction of homeless people, low-income families, and tireless housing advocates all struggling against the social and economic costs of housing. On the other hand, the solutions to these problems are concerned with the barriers to producing more houses. Therefore, the solutions to *the housing crisis* are often not directly about finding ways to shelter people, but about dismantling regulations, appeasing wealthy homeowners, subsidizing private developers, and incentivizing corporate investors to construct more houses.

The housing crisis, then, is a discursive formation that is employed in attempts to resolve a wide range of socio-political issues through the mechanisms of housing markets. To that end, *the housing crisis* is not an objective diagnosis of housing conditions, but a political discourse that reconstructs the concept of housing through redescription of its contemporary problems and their solutions. Such reconstructions, I argue, are often reductive, economistic, apolitical, ahistorical, and aspatial. I show, for instance, how media narratives of the 2016 Ghost Ship fire and the 2019 Moms 4 Housing movement as symptoms of *the housing crisis* domesticate the politics of these events, making them available as evidence in support of speculative real estate development.

Against this contradictory problematization of housing issues, I argue that we cannot simply build our way out of this problem, nor do we need to. Oakland's vacancy rate, with "nearly four vacant houses for every homeless person" (Schatz, 2018), shows that there are more than enough houses, at least in the city where this study is located. To be clear, my concern is not with building houses *per se*, but with how this narrow focus obscures other conceptualizations of housing issues and redirects more immediate efforts to shelter people. My critique, then, takes aim at media and policy narratives that lament the uneven outcomes of ruthless housing markets yet fail to challenge the systems, assumptions, and everyday practices that reproduce the housing burdens these organizations purport to oppose or seek to mitigate.

In chapter two, I address the language of housing policy research and its role in reproducing the socio-spatial relations that give rise to the harms and burdens we recognize as *the housing crisis*. I show how the mythological (Barthes, 2012) and metaphorical (Barnes and Duncan, 1992) redescription of housing *in crisis* strip housing of its history

and naturalize its uneven geography. For instance, the two main policy solutions to *the housing crisis* involve the construction and preservation of affordable housing. However, this mythical concept, *affordable housing*, depoliticizes housing as it obscures the policies and practices that unevenly value people and places.

The affordability of *affordable housing*, in other words, is taken as given. This ideology of affordability is plainly on the surface in an initiative to preserve what is called “naturally occurring affordable housing,” a name for gentrification-adjacent neighborhoods that are relatively affordable because they have been devalued through segregation or disinvestment, which have primed them to become sites of speculative reinvestment. As these neighborhoods become housing stocks of affordable investments (justified by progressives as investments *in* affordability), the histories and geographies of how these places were created are lost in the scramble for affordable housing.

In chapter three, I show how crisis obscures violence. To do so, I read Moms 4 Housing as critical urban theorists on the violence of housing, which, for them, is the perpetual displacement of their community due to the speculative investment in housing. As a response, these previously homeless Black mothers reclaimed a vacant investor-owned house to shelter their families and call attention to what they see as the most pressing housing problems in Oakland: speculation and displacement.

While historical events must be organized within established narratives and discourses to make any sense at all; these narratives, however, organize events through the foregrounding of some aspects, the backgrounding of others, along with an overall transformation to fit the cultural logics and assumptions of the cultural stories we already tell ourselves. Thus, I show how media narratives of the Moms 4 Housing movement as a

response to *the housing crisis* domesticate these women's politics and appropriate their actions. Specifically, the neoclassical economics of supply and demand at the foundation of *the housing crisis* reshapes their critique of corporate speculation and their collective politics of community control into yet another reason why we should build more houses.

In chapter four, I offer a “hauntology” (Derrida, 1994) or haunted ontology of *the housing crisis* using what I refer to as *haunted housing*, a concept that enables a study of the “absented presence” (McKittrick, 2006: 99) of the ghosts that inhabit the everyday production and maintenance of shelter. The ghost is a metaphor that signals the people, places, events, and oppressions that we attempt to exclude. Critically, the incompleteness of such exclusion, i.e., the haunting return of these ghosts that were never not with us, reveals the failures of the concepts and narratives that structure our socio-political world.¹¹

I show how media narratives of the 2016 Ghost Ship fire as a product of *the housing crisis* work to articulate what is and is not considered housing; in particular, I show how the pervasive representations of the Ghost Ship's uninhabitability—as an “unlivable and unimaginable” (McKittrick, 2006: 130) space outside of housing—also reify its supposed opposite: the qualities that define what constitutes appropriate habitability, households, and forms of housing. To maintain the appearance that commodified and financialized housing is the only imaginable way to house a population, the uninhabitable must be repudiated as *unlivable and unimaginable*. Housing, then, is continuously reproduced through the movement between *housing* and *not housing* as the limits of its discourse.

¹¹ For instance, the settler colonial elimination of Indigenous peoples is a foundational condition of housing in America, it is an exclusion that rendered the land available for settlement. However, the Land Back movement and other forms of indigenous resistance are forms of perpetual return that demonstrate the violent contradiction of settler colonialism.

I address three common themes present across the three studies that comprise this dissertation on *the housing crisis*. First, I approach each study with an eye for the ontological distinction between *houses* as objects and *housing* as the processes through which we produce and maintain shelter. This simple heuristic allows me to show how often narratives of *the housing crisis* focus on houses to the detriment of any sustained critiques of the systems and socio-spatial relations that makes those houses possible.

Second, I read each text for the limits of representation. For instance, if we think and communicate through the assumptions in the metaphors of our time, place, and culture, then we always say more than we intend, and we can never control how others interpret us. While I show *the housing crisis* to be a metaphor itself, I also show how a series of metaphors fit explanations of housing issues in the image of *crisis*. I do not believe this is a conscious effort on the part of journalists and policymakers; it is, instead, an effect of its repetition that *crisis* has engulfed social conceptions of housing issues.

Finally, across these three studies, I track the depoliticization of housing. Depoliticization takes multiple forms throughout this dissertation. First, by limiting policy debates to finding effective ways to build more affordable housing, the focus on the supply and demand of houses themselves obscures the politics inherent in the systems, discourses, and socio-spatial relations that constitute the production and maintenance of shelter. At the more granular level, the depoliticization of housing is supported by policy texts that rhetorically isolate housing as a policy object that exists outside the purview of politics and the economy. The result is that housing policy recommendations rehearse the call to build more houses and fail to suggest structural interventions that might transform the political economy of housing.

As long as *the housing crisis* is taken for granted and reproduced through media, policy, and scholarship, a sustained critique of this discourse is warranted. I see at least three research paths extending from the work laid out in this dissertation. First, as journalists, policymakers, and scholars continue to identify evermore issues, objects, events, people, and places as products or symptoms of *the housing crisis*, there will always be new texts to interpret along the lines of ontology, representation, and politics or deconstruct within the logic of the argument presented in these texts.

Second, there is an interesting yet unexplored psychoanalytical theorization of *the housing crisis*. Beginning from the Lacanian idea of a constitutive *lack* or irreducible gap between the subject and that which it desires, this constitutive *lack* can be read as the key problem articulated within *the housing crisis*: a *lack of affordable housing*. We will never build enough houses, but there are psychic investments in the endless drive to build and accumulate housing under capitalism. Further, a psychoanalytic approach to *the housing crisis* would complement this dissertation focused primarily on the injustices of housing, for it would enable an inquiry into our desires and investments in housing and how it reproduces us as subjects.

Third, there is a need for close readings of the structures and practices that reproduce housing *in crisis*. For instance, following the passage of AB 68,¹² there has been a rapid uptick in San Francisco Bay Area startups working to standardize and streamline the construction and rental of modular houses, prefabricated houses, tiny houses, garage conversions, and most recently, 3D-printed tiny houses. These building types are heralded

¹² On October 9, 2019, Governor Gavin Newsom signed California Assembly Bill 68 relaxing regulations on accessory dwelling units, these are secondary detached houses built on the lots of existing stand-alone single-family houses.

as revolutionary (Cook, 2020), disruptive to the traditional housing construction sector (NAHB, 2021), and a solution to *the housing crisis* (Baron, 2021).

These firms, quite literally, reduce the socio-political problems of housing to the houses themselves and their manufacturing technology. Mighty Buildings, for example, is an Oakland-based 3D-printed tiny house startup that has garnered a lot of attention in online tech and housing media for acquiring \$40 million in venture capital, printing a 350 sq. ft. house in under 24 hours, and developing the first 3D-printed neighborhood (Paul, 2021). Given the histories of tech sector disruption to traditional sectors, do 3D-printed tiny homes have the potential to radically transform housing or will they simply produce new markets and more speculative investment?

To conclude, the critique I put forth of *the housing crisis* is not to dismiss or disparage the urgent social costs and economic burdens of maintaining shelter; indeed, it is the opposite, I challenge this reductive and apolitical formation to signal the limits of its construction as deeply political and always up for debate. The meaning and materiality of housing is continuously in motion throughout time, space, and culture, it can never be ultimately or universally defined. The buildings we call home, and the modern systems we use to produce, distribute, and maintain them do not define the essence of housing or absorb the limits of its potential. Crisis, on the other hand, is a discourse that shapes housing issues as problems that reinforce these systems and reify their attendant injustices. For this reason, I have repudiated the ideological closure of *crisis* in favor of the search for new problematizations of housing that find hope in its indefinability.

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APPENDIX A
AN ARCHIVE OF HOUSING CRISIS TEXTS

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