

Caring in Crises: Spatializing Infrastructures of Care through Tenant Protections

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**Abstract**

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Care is the provision of practical or emotional support and is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of our everyday lives and societies. As pervasive housing crises exist in most global North cities today, developing an understanding of how housing too can provide care or be an ‘infrastructure of care’ in unequal housing systems is increasingly urgent. Yet, there remain gaps in our understanding of housing as care, particularly in the structural entanglement of housing inequalities with settler colonial racial capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy. Accounting for the impacts of these intersecting power structures, this dissertation explores how tenants’ experiences of housing crises are shaped by local state care infrastructures. The dissertation focuses on municipal tenant protections as an impactful form of local state care infrastructure. Engaging data gathered through feminist digital ethnography, including participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, and archival methods, the dissertation conducts a relational comparison of Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC in 1969-1990 and 2019-2023. A relational comparison of two urban empirical sites allows for a developed understanding of the

ways that a place is shaped by, and connected to, its relationship to another. The dissertation begins with an examination of the forms and capacities of local state care infrastructure, in order to assess housing as an infrastructure of care. It then considers how care gaps left by local state infrastructure are addressed through the care work of tenants. It argues that local state care infrastructure plays an important role in tenants' experiences of housing crises, but the care capacity of the infrastructure is limited by the state's embeddedness in racial capitalism and settler colonialism. The care that is available to tenants through local state infrastructure relies on the care labour of tenants in order to function. The nature of this labour is shaped by cisheteropatriarchal structures that exacerbate the violence tenants' experience in housing crises. The attention to tenants' practices and politics of care is then turned to contemporary contexts, where tenants rely on self-care and collective tenant care in order to navigate their survival in housing crises, as a result of the failure of local state housing care infrastructure. To move beyond this cycle, tenants develop housing care imaginaries that illustrate possibilities for housing futures where a range of care needs are met. The dissertation argues that employing a radical care framework, which recognizes necessary care work that enables survival in precarious worlds, helps us to account for a range of housing futures that move beyond the normalization of liberal economic logics which limit what solutions to housing crises are currently understood as possible. The dissertation is structured to offer considerations of urban tenants' experiences of care and housing in crises through historical, contemporary, and futures contexts.

*For my fellow tenants:*

*May we one day have the housing futures of our dreams.*

# **Caring in Crises: Spatializing Infrastructures of Care through Tenant Protections**

Samantha P Thompson

## **Supervisory Committee:**

Sarah Elwood-Faustino, Chair

Kim England

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Eugene McCann

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## **Land acknowledgment**

The research conducted in this project occurred on unceded territories in the settler colonial cities of Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC. In Vancouver, my research took place on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. In Seattle, my research took place on the territories of the tribes and bands within the Duwamish, Puyallup, Suquamish, Tulalip, and Muckleshoot nations.

While there is a lot of important discussion around land acknowledgments and their role in what Tuck and Yang (2012) describe as ‘settler moves to innocence’, I make this acknowledgment as a settler to situate this research within the ongoing effects of settler colonial systems that operate in both Canada and the United States and to emphasize that this is not a thing of the past, but rather a structure that continues to operate in the present day. Further, it is crucial in housing research to recognize the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, including in the disproportionate number of Indigenous people who experience housing precarity and homelessness on their own land (Peters and Christensen, 2016).

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## List of Acronyms

CMHC	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
DCLU	Department of Construction and Land Use
HPO	Housing Preservation Ordinance
RAGB	Rental Accommodation Grievance Board
RTA	Residential Tenancy Act
RTB	Residential Tenancy Board
SDCI	Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections
STU	Seattle Tenants' Union
VTC	Vancouver Tenants' Council
VTU	Vancouver Tenants Union

## Chapter 1. Introduction

In June 2023, the *Seattle Times* published an article that provided advice for property owners who were considering renting out their properties, or what the article referred to as “accidental landlords.” Accidental landlords are people who become a landlord when “the financial incentive to rent outweighs the risks of putting the property on the market with the present economic conditions,” according to one real estate agent. The article laments the “lukewarm” rental market, where the median asking rent fell 3.2 percent year over year (Cunningham, 2023). The article offers insights based on a landlord workshop facilitated by the Rental Housing Association of Washington (RHAWA), a landlord membership organization in the state. The executive director of RHAWA stated, “You’ve got to treat your property with care. If you don’t, the people renting it won’t treat it with care.”

In the workshop, landlords discussed issues they had experienced with tenants, including those with pets. One landlord suggested that pets could cause thousands of dollars in damage and another recommended that you could run DNA tests on dog feces to find out which tenant is not cleaning up after their pet. The article recommends hiring a property manager “if you can’t stomach midnight phone calls about a leaking dishwasher or that funny gas smell in the basement.” Another landlord said that “offering safe, affordable housing is a vital community service.” The article also describes the importance of learning about the “dizzying” landlord-tenant laws in Seattle that “may be having unintended consequences” of landlords taking 11,000 rental homes off the market between 2018 and 2022 (Cunningham, 2023). “Since more than

2,400 of those registered rentals were one-unit properties,” the article states, “the good news is that if you decide to rent your single-family home in Seattle, there will be plenty of demand.”

A couple hundred kilometres north in Vancouver, British Columbia, organizers with the Vancouver Tenants’ Union (VTU) interrupted a June press conference by the province’s housing minister. The housing minister was making an announcement of a new building that was part of a broader redevelopment project set to replace older apartments with new rental towers. The speaker for the VTU said, “These are luxury homes that you want to replace their buildings with... Your plan is for your developer friends to drive us out of our neighbourhoods and out of our cities. Tenants understand that this provincial government will not protect us or stand up for our human right to housing.” Following the VTU’s speech, the housing minister said, “I hear from thousands of people who are looking for housing. They can’t find it. This project, here, that they [the VTU] decided they were going to protest, is a project that was a Denny’s before and now is 258 rental units available, 58 units for families making less than \$80,000, 200 units for families making \$170,000 or less” (Holliday & Jung, 2023). Earlier that year, B.C.’s Housing Research Collaborative published a report which stated the province had the highest eviction rate in the country and contrary to other provinces, 85 percent of those evictions were not the fault of the tenant—but rather were due to events like property demolition or development, property sale, or landlords needing to use the property themselves (Xuereb et al., 2023; Fumano & Culbert, 2023).

These two housing events in Vancouver and Seattle hone in on some of the tensions that operate in housing crises between landlords as property-owning subjects relying on rentals as a

form of profit-generation and non-propertied tenants<sup>1</sup> seeking housing as shelter and as a potential site of home. In particular, what the moments illustrate is how prominent the role of government—via landlord-tenant laws, oversight, policy, or funding—is in the landlord-tenant relationship, particularly in the context of a commodified urban housing system. When housing is treated as a commodity—as an investment and source of profit—this function as a commodity is overwhelmingly prioritized over housing’s function as shelter. The hegemonic discourse about commodified housing follows liberal economic logics. For example, the normalization of these logics allows for a reduction in median asking rents to be framed as a loss of profit for landlords, as opposed to the possibility of shelter becoming more affordable for tenants.

Despite their diverse national contexts, tenants in Vancouver and Seattle are currently facing housing crises and have been for some time. While housing crises are typically framed as ‘new’ or ‘unusual,’ in actuality they are central to the racial capitalist, settler colonial housing systems that operate in Canada and the United States. Housing has been commodified since the second half of the twentieth century, following the marriage of homeownership and the American dream (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Yet, when we trace housing dynamics throughout history, it can begin to feel that crisis has been there more often than not—whether it is a crisis following a world war, or an economic crash, or issues of supply and demand, it is never only one crisis and solutions seem to evade us.

Madden and Marcuse (2016) suggest that the term ‘housing crisis’ has been with us for over a hundred years. The pervasive nature of liberal economic logics to explain housing crises as unusual necessitates a nuanced understanding of how we are defining and responding to crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘tenant’ throughout the dissertation (as opposed to ‘renter’) to signal the ways the housing relationship between landlords and tenants is rooted conceptions of property and property ownership. This term also aligns with the term used by many study participants and organizations that support this group (i.e., tenants’ unions).

These logics also serve to reproduce housing precarity that is disproportionality experienced by low-income, Black, Indigenous, people of colour, women, queer, trans, non-binary, and gender-non-conforming urban residents. Questions of housing are therefore also questions of power and how power structures operate at the urban scale, specifically those undergirded by racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and cis-heteropatriarchy. In order to consider these questions, through this dissertation I aim to contribute understandings of how tenants experience housing crises and the ways that these experiences are shaped by local state responses to crises in the form of care infrastructure. I am interested in the tensions between housing as a commodity and housing as a potential site of home: specifically, how these tensions define tenants' relationships to, and experiences of, housing crises and how these tensions have shifted over time.

## **1.1. Sustaining life in housing crises**

In order to consider such tensions, we need to expand how we approach understandings of housing and account for its value as shelter and potentially home. For this, I turn to feminist geographies of care, which help us to apprehend the capacities of housing to be an “infrastructure of care,” (Power & Mee, 2020). Fisher and Tronto (1990: 40) helpfully define care as: “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” The focus on the “life-sustaining” nature of care is crucial as we consider how tenants navigate urban housing crises in the face of violent power structures that threaten their survival.

The language of care now appears to be on the rise in many spaces, particularly following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhattacharya and Jaffe, 2020). This holds true in housing: from notions of caring for property to tenants caring for each other. Many of my

interlocutors in this project used ‘care’ in different ways to describe their own experiences, and identified the many different sites of support they accessed as they worked to retain housing security during their city’s housing crisis. As a theoretical framework, care thus allows us to use language and concepts that are legible and relevant to urban residents who have shared their experiences and perspectives with this research (Raghuram & Madge, 2008). Emergent work on housing and care is exciting but has a number of gaps which I aim to begin addressing with this dissertation. Overall, there is more work to be done that takes seriously the role of race, gender, and sexuality in experiences of housing and care. For this reason, theoretically I continue to draw on work that develops understandings of cis-heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism, as well as importantly how we might consider different, radical, caring housing futures.

In order to consider the role of care in housing alongside the pervasive nature of housing crises at different moments in time, in this dissertation I focus on two time periods: 1969-1990 and 2019-2023. The first timeframe is a period marked by shifts in urban politics and urban governance. Urban housing in the Global North has been shaped by neoliberal urban policies enacted at the scale of the nation since the 1970s and increasingly at the urban scale since the 1990s (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hall & Hubbard, 1996). Neoliberal ideology promotes individualism, competition, entrepreneurialism, privatization, and a reduced role of the state’s responsibilities for individuals (McDowell, 2004: 146). Proto-neoliberalization in the 1970s focused on shifting political thinking towards free market policies. In the 1980s, roll-back neoliberalization implemented deregulation and dismantlement of the welfare state. Roll-out neoliberalization of the 1990s saw the creation of institutions that aligned with neoliberal

ideology—that would discipline, regulate, and contain those targeted by the deregulation of the welfare state (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

More recently, roll-with-it neoliberalism, or the normalization of neoliberal crises and social structures, arose in the 2000s (Keil, 2009). Evolutions of urban politics parallel these neoliberal shifts: from urban governments that were managerial in nature to a transition to urban governance, that centres on decentralization, a decrease in public services, and an increase in public-private partnerships (McCann, 2017). Theorizations of neoliberal urbanism demonstrate ways that cities are governed to create a “good business climate” to attract capital and maximize economic growth, which translates to interurban competitiveness, an increase in public-private partnerships, marketization, and increasingly extrospective cities focused beyond their borders (Harvey, 1989: 11; McCann, 2013). This climate intimately shaped how local states responded to housing crises: as they navigated withdrawal of federal housing support, while also becoming extrospective and in search of capital.

In the second, contemporary time period from 2019-2023, tenants’ experiences of housing are shaped by elevated housing crises following the 2008 financial crisis, as well the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Following 2008 there has been an increase in the financialization of housing, which describes “the increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements and narratives, at various scales, resulting in a structural transformation of economies, firms ... states and households” (Aalbers, 2017: 214, cited in Byrne & Norris, 2019). Financialization demands an ever-increasing speed to the rate of housing transactions in order to maximize profit at multiple scales (Fields, 2017; August & Walks, 2018). Financialization is gradually having a greater impact on rental markets, with urgent calls in recent scholarship to develop our understanding of this “new frontier” of financialization as it

grabs hold of rentals and social housing (Fields & Uffer, 2016). For example, increasingly affordable social housing is increasingly privatized and embedded within a commodified housing market (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Fields & Uffer, 2016).

In this dissertation, I trace throughlines of crisis and care between these time periods, within and across the cities of Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA to develop a relational comparison of these two urban sites. I consider how tenants' experiences of care in housing crises shifts and is shaped by broader urban political contexts. A relational comparison allows for a nuanced exploration of the ways that a place is shaped by, and connected to, its relationship to another—rather than analyzing the ways that two places are simply similar or different (Elwood et al., 2017). In the case of Vancouver and Seattle, though their markedly poor housing scenarios are distinct from each other, community organizers, government officials, and policymakers in Vancouver actively learn, receive mentorship, and implement ideas from their counterparts in Seattle, and vice versa, which has intimately linked the cities in unique ways throughout history (McCann, 2011).

Approaching via relational comparison accounts for the difficulties of direct empirical comparisons in these cases, due to the uniqueness of urban housing systems shaped differently by policies, governments, budgets, and environmental factors. A relational comparative analysis addresses these concerns by recognizing that cities are often connected in ways that are not immediately apparent. The dissertation relies on data gathered through a mixed-methods research project, via what I conceptualize as 'feminist digital ethnography.' Specifically, I analyze data gathered in Seattle and Vancouver through online and in-person participant observation and autoethnography, archival materials, and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted

with tenants in the two cities who had lived there for more than six months. Fieldwork occurred between 2019-2023.

## **1.2. Empirical sites: Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA**

This study relies on a relational comparison of two empirical sites: Vancouver, BC and Seattle WA. These sites were selected because their longstanding and markedly poor housing scenarios, combined with their unique relationship to one another, render them ideal locations in which to study impacts of housing crises on tenants. The cities are located in different national contexts but both in the Pacific Northwest region of North America. Vancouver is a settler-colonial city that occupies the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish First Nations. Seattle is also a settler-colonial city that occupies the unceded lands of the Muckleshoot, Suquamish, Duwamish, Snoqualmie, and Tulalip nations.

### **1.2.1. Empirical context: 1969-1990**

In the historical period of focus in the study's archival data, state actors in Seattle and Vancouver identified each city as being in a housing crisis. The nature of those crises were shaped by broader urban political contexts.

In a housing crisis, Vancouver headed into the 1970s facing notable shifts in the housing market, property relations, and development. In 1966, the provincial government passed the Strata Titles Act which meant that many apartment buildings were converted into condominiums, as a pathway to property ownership and as a means for developers to increase their profits. The pace of condo conversions rapidly increased in the early 1970s, resulting in widespread displacement of tenants, many of whom were seniors (Donaldson, 2019). Meanwhile, housing prices increased, rental vacancy rates were low, there were no restrictions

on tenant evictions, no rent control, and tenants often struggled to get their security deposits back. Capital in Vancouver's housing market became increasingly global.

Urban residents continued to organize against the displacement threatened by condo conversions and a number of large-scale development projects. One of the most notorious was the Freeway Plan, set to construct a freeway through Vancouver's downtown neighbourhoods, with specific impact on low-income neighbourhoods and neighbourhoods home to many people of colour and immigrants, including the Downtown Eastside, Strathcona, and Chinatown (Francis, 2022). While the plan was abandoned before it was completed, the early stages of the project resulted in the displacement of many Black residents and communities who lived in Hogan's Alley (Compton, 2014). Another project involved the massive redevelopment of Gastown, that displaced low-income single men, many of whom were seniors or Indigenous, while the newly developed apartments were exclusionary to gay men, women, and people who used drugs and alcohol (Donaldson, 2019). In 1968, the Vancouver Tenants' Union was established and their organizing work eventually led to the creation of a short-lived committee to discuss rent control, as well as the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board. Through the labour of tenant organizing, some level of tenant protections were enacted and in 1970 the B.C. Landlord and Tenant Act was amended (Donaldson, 2019).

Tom Campbell of the conservative political party, the NPA (Non-Partisan Association), served as mayor in Vancouver from 1966 to 1972 and in that time became known for, among other things, aggressive development projects that were typically enacted without public consultation and fiercely protested by urban residents (Francis, 2022). The election in 1972 of TEAM's (The Electors Action Movement) Art Phillips as mayor, at the same time that Dave Barrett of the New Democratic Party, who had included rent control in his election platform, was

elected provincially, resulted in changes in the city's governance. For example, TEAM set out with goals of more transparency and public consultation in the planning process (Donaldson, 2019). Though, as Francis (2022: 191) cautions, "members of TEAM were not revolutionaries. They were moderate, middle-class reformers, many of them Liberal Party members, who gained most of their support from the more affluent west side of the city." While TEAM ran as a centrist party, over time they moved further right and many of their decisions about development were seen as similar to the NPA's (Donaldson, 2019). The real estate industry continued to grow in power and profit: real estate, insurance, and finance industries grew by a total of 207 percent between 1961 and 1981 (Donaldson, 2019). In 1975 W.A.C. Bennett and the Social Credit Party were elected provincially and attempted to remove a number of tenant protections. They were successful in removing rent control, which would not be re-established until 2003 under Gordon Campbell of the B.C. Liberals and made stricter under John Horgan of the B.C. NDP in 2018 (Lazzarin, 1990; Donaldson, 2019).

The archival data for the Vancouver site in this project focuses primarily on 1969-1975, as a period of development and displacement in the city. The changes I describe here, which occurred in this timeframe, notably impacted low-income tenants in particular, as developers gained new avenues to increase profits, provincial and municipal landlord-tenant laws changed, and urban residents organized on a number of social issues during what is colloquially referred to as Vancouver's "decade of dissent" (Friedman, 2016; Francis, 2022).

Meanwhile in Seattle, the period from 1969-1990 was one with many changes to city tenant protections in Seattle, as well as a recession residents experienced from the late 1960s into the early 1970s. In the late 1960s, Seattle experienced what is referred to as the 'Boeing Bust' where the aerospace company Boeing reduced its workforce by tens of thousands within a few

short years. The impacts of the recession were so widespread that two real estate developers put up a billboard that read “Will the last person leaving Seattle – Turn out the lights” (Lange, 1999).

Along with the recession, legally enshrined racial segregation, restrictive covenants, and other racist laws continued to limit where and under what contexts Black, Indigenous, and people of colour could own property and reside in Seattle. This lasted until the late 1960s, when in 1968 Seattle’s municipal government made racial discrimination in housing illegal through an open housing ordinance (Berger, 2018). Redlining was not illegal until 1977 (Gregory, 2004). While the laws changed, the impacts of racism continued to shape the housing system in the city. In 1975, the opening housing ordinance was expanded to ban discrimination based on sex, marital status, sexual orientation, and political ideology.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of additional landlord-tenant laws enacted in the city of Seattle, as well as voter-passed bond issues to support affordable housing for seniors and disabled people, while many federally funded urban aid programs were rolled back under U.S. President Ronald Reagan (Spelman, 2014). The Seattle Tenants’ Union (STU) was established in 1975, around the same time that rents begin to rise noticeably. There was limited construction of new rental units and many existing rentals converted into condos. The vacancy rate in many neighbourhoods was below one percent and the federal government was reducing its financial support for housing. The impact was significant enough that, following tenant organizing, the city enacted a six-month moratorium on condo conversions in 1978.

Heading into the 1980s, organizing for rent control was on the rise, before it was defeated in 1981. The development of Seattle’s new convention centre resulted in displacement and increased homelessness. Ordinances for just cause evictions, additional protection against displacement caused by development, and maintenance standards for rental properties were

passed by city council. In 1990, city council also passed ordinances that offered relocation assistance to some displaced tenants and protections for tenants impacted by condo conversions.

This confluence of events and prevalence of enacted and rescinded landlord-tenant laws, shaped by the broader context of housing crisis in Vancouver and Seattle, make this time period a useful one through which to examine tenants' experiences of housing crises in both cities.

### **1.2.2. Empirical context: 2019-2023**

Vancouver and Seattle's housing systems are shaped by racial capitalism and settler colonialism which situate housing relations within ongoing projects of displacement, dispossession, and violence. Increasingly since the 2008 financial crisis, the nature of real estate in these cities are shaped by processes of financialization. Financialization exacerbates the 'hyper-commodification' of housing where its potential for profit (exchange value) is privileged over its function as shelter or as a potential site of home (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Further, scholars have identified an increased focus by real estate actors on urban scales as a focus for capital (Tretter & Heyman, 2022). Following Rolnik (2019: 280), "The colonisation of urban land and housing by finance is a powerful global process that, even after a crisis such as that in 2008, survives and recreates itself as hegemonic movement, putting down roots and penetrating into different environments." This in turn shapes the possibilities of housing policy and landlord-tenant laws in each city.

Vancouver is a majority-renter city, with 55 percent of households renting (Statistics Canada, 2021; MetroVancouver, 2022). It is the third largest city in Canada and largest in British Columbia. In 2022, the vacancy rate was reported at 0.9% for purpose built rentals (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2023). According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (2023), asking rents in 2022 were 43 percent higher than the rent paid for

occupied units, with new renters paying an average of 24 percent more than the tenant previously occupying their unit. Hegemonic discourse about the causes of Vancouver’s housing crisis can be complex. In media, popular reasons for the crisis include land speculation, foreign investment, inadequate supply, and in 2019, money laundering (St. Denis, 2019; Pearson, 2022). While a recent public inquiry report disputed earlier government reports that the crisis was caused by “money laundering” from Asia, the prevalence of earlier discourse contributed to increased rates of anti-Asian racism in the city and province (Pearson, 2022).

Tenants’ rights in Vancouver are predominantly determined at the provincial scale under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA). However, the City of Vancouver has a few additional landlord-tenant bylaws, including one that requires relocation assistance for some tenants who are displaced due to renovations or redevelopment and one that governs single room accommodations (such as single-room occupancy hotels). In order to address an issue pertaining to landlord-tenant laws, usually the matter is taken to the province’s Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) where tenants and landlords can state their case and the RTB makes a ruling on the matter.

Seattle also has more renter households than homeowners, at 54 percent (Balk, 2021). In 2022, the vacancy rate for King County, the region Seattle is in, was reported at 4.2 percent (Washington Center for Real Estate Research, 2022). Commonly cited causes for Seattle’s housing crisis include a boom in the tech industry, anti-density policy, high construction costs, and inadequate housing supply (Bernstein et al., 2020). The rights of tenants in Seattle are determined through a combination of federal, state, and municipal law, with an emphasis on the latter two. Under municipal law, Seattle tenants have a greater level of protection than tenants in other municipalities, particularly for the amount of notice required for rent increases, a just cause

eviction ordinance, and “economic displacement” laws that require relocation assistance to low-income households who are displaced due to a rent increase above a certain percentage. Seattle has passed a number of new landlord-tenant laws in the last five years following advocacy by tenants. However, rent control is illegal in the state of Washington and has been since 1981. When a landlord-tenant law is broken, typically the recourse is to take the matter to small claims court, though tenants can also report issues like repairs and pests to the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI).

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 adds another level of urban political context to housing policy and landlord-tenant laws in Seattle and Vancouver. In 2020, the imaginaries about what types of laws were deemed possible in state responses to crises temporarily expanded, as each city momentarily had additional ‘emergency’ landlord-tenant laws, such as rent freezes (a form of rent control) and eviction moratoria. Recent studies have begun to critically analyze the impacts of laws: for example, a study in Seattle demonstrated that there was an increase in the number of informal evictions that occurred, in violation of the law (Fowle et al., 2021). The full impacts of the ongoing pandemic on experiences of housing remain in the beginning stages of being explored (see Chapter 7).

I will now turn to an overview of the structure of the dissertation, which illustrates how the relational comparison was employed to explore the study’s guiding research questions.

### **1.3. Structure of the Dissertation**

Housing crises in systems where housing is commodified operate in spaces of tension between profit and survival. Consequently, the nexus of care surrounding tenants in housing crises is complex. In the following chapters I will explore these complexities through a relational comparison of diverse caring actors and their interactions with landlord-tenant laws, in Seattle,

WA and Vancouver, BC. I am guided by the following question: What and where are the forms of care that arise in response to housing crises? At its core, this dissertation is concerned with how tenants' experiences of housing crises are shaped by local state care infrastructures. I explore this through an examination of the practices and politics of care that tenants experience in housing crises and how this in turn shapes imaginaries for more caring housing futures. Specifically, to theorize the care geographies of housing crises I consider: the forms of care that arise in response to housing crises; the ways local state actors conceive of and enact care through state infrastructure; tenants' conceptions and experiences of care; and the relationship between historical and contemporary housing care infrastructure and how we imagine radically caring housing futures.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that tenants' experiences of housing crises are intimately shaped by their interactions with local state care infrastructure, yet this state care is only accessible through the addition of care labour from tenants themselves. The resulting care gap therefore necessitates a reimagining of care relations through radical care, which offers a pathway through which we can imagine a broad range of housing futures that exist beyond the limitations of hegemonic housing discourses that privilege liberal economic logics. In addition to this introduction, the dissertation is comprised of seven additional chapters that consist of a methodologies chapter, methods chapter, four discrete papers, and a conclusion.

In chapter two, I provide a discussion of the methodological framings that guide this project and offer a conceptualization of 'feminist digital ethnography' for geography. I suggest that in geography, a feminist digital ethnography can offer a means through which we can take up the epistemological and methodological commitments that arose through the pandemic and bring them with us into research projects both during the pandemic and beyond. I provide an

overview of theorizations of the digital, digital methods, and feminist methodologies and suggest that a feminist digital ethnography is situated at the intersection of these discussions. I propose that a feminist digital ethnography is guided by three principles: considerations of the role of digital spaces, the necessity of intersectional power analyses, and the benefits of embedding care into research processes.

In chapter three, I detail the methods used in the research project. This data for this project comes from three phases of data collection: participant observation and autoethnography, archival work, and semi-structured interviews. I detail the approach undertaken for each of these methods, guided by the overarching framework of feminist digital ethnography and informed by feminist and digital methodologies. I also describe the data collected through each of these methods, the analytical process, and the demographics of interview participants. I outline the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on fieldwork and discuss the resulting limitations to the data. Finally, I reflect on my positionality in the project and some of the ways this shapes the research design and fieldwork.

Chapter four comprises the paper entitled, “The State Care Paradox: spatializing historical infrastructures of intimacy and violence in landlord-tenant laws of Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC.” In this paper, I explore the complex and conflicting ways that practices and politics of care are navigated in response to housing crises. I consider the role of the local state in providing infrastructures of care for tenants navigating housing crises. I focus specifically on local state care infrastructure due to the felt intimacy often experienced by urban residents to their local governments. Given the state’s embeddedness in racial capitalism and settler colonialism, I examine to what extent state care is possible and in what ways it is limited. I draw on archival data to illustrate the paradoxical nature of state care through two state infrastructures

in Vancouver and Seattle: the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board and the Housing Preservation Ordinance, respectively. I argue that the local state presents a care paradox, as an intimate and reactionary regulator of harm that decides who is deserving of care, when, and how much, through a violent housing system.

Chapter five contains the paper, “‘I hope you can help me’: Tenant careworkers and the accessibility of local state care infrastructure.” In this paper, I examine the function of landlord-tenant laws as state care infrastructure for tenants. I show that tenants are only able to access state care in housing crises when they position themselves as deserving of state care or provide significant additional labour to help the infrastructure function. I argue that this labour requirement renders all tenants as care workers: for themselves, each other, the state, and for landlords. I engage Vancouver archival data to analyze letters that tenants wrote to the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board and through this material find that state care demands to tenants exacerbate the violent conditions that tenants experiencing housing precarity are left to navigate.

Chapter six consists of the paper entitled, “Beyond Crisis: Tenants’ housing care imaginaries for urban futures.” In this paper, I draw on data from semi-structured interviews with participants in Vancouver and Seattle to centre tenants’ experiences and knowledge in considerations of housing crises responses. I argue that ‘housing care imaginaries’ conceptually helps us to understand the circumstances that tenants are facing alongside their imaginaries for housing futures that would meet their care needs, within the current housing system and beyond. I begin with a discussion of the conditions of crisis that tenants in Seattle and Vancouver are navigating to analyze the everyday care work that facilitates tenants’ survival in housing crises. Tenants experienced discrimination and often feared looming displacement. One of the key

findings of this paper is that tenants are constantly navigating a ‘making do’ in their housing: a series of negotiations of what living conditions, often created by the violation of landlord-tenant laws, they could manage without seeking a new place to live, even if the current conditions were unsafe or caused health risks. The ‘making do’ is often made possible through tenants’ care work for themselves and each other. I then turn to tenants’ housing care imaginaries for futures within this system and what solutions participants’ felt would make a difference in their crises experiences: additional landlord-tenant laws and enforcement. The chapter ends with an exploration of tenants’ housing care imaginaries for futures beyond the current system. In the second key finding of this paper, when tenants were asked to ‘dream’, their housing care imaginaries where care needs would be met were comprised of ideas of collectivity, power re-balancing, and abolition.

Chapter seven contains the paper, “Caring Housing Futures: A Radical Care Framework for Understanding Rent Control Politics in Seattle, USA.” In this chapter, I detail the impact of liberal economic logics in possible responses to housing crises. I propose a radical care framework as a means of intervening in these logics and instead analyzing responses to housing crises through relationality, a troubling of housing commodification, and broadening the range of possible housing futures. I draw on historical and contemporary rent control debates in Seattle, relying on archival data and participant observation, to argue that an analyses of housing politics through radical care creates possibilities for desire-centred approaches to housing politics rather than one which reproduces housing crises that continue to reproduce and uphold racial capitalism, the settler state, and white property ownership.

Finally, in chapter eight I offer a conclusion to the dissertation. I return to a discussion of the role of care in housing crises and debates about who is responsible for caring for and with

tenants. I discuss the balance of needing to meet tenants' current survival and housing needs while also reflecting on how we can imagine housing futures beyond the current system that is destined to replicate the same harmful power structures. Revisiting participants' imaginaries for housing futures, I suggest that more 'caring' and expansive housing futures can only come through an uplifting and centring of tenants' experiences and knowledge. Finally, I provide an overview of the limitations of the project and offer suggestions for future areas of study, with particular focus on how we can continue to develop our understanding of tenants' experiences of housing crises through ongoing exploration of the relationship between housing and care.

## Chapter 2. Feminist digital ethnographic methodologies

The arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 fundamentally restructured everyday lives. Logically, that restructuring also impacted how urban research was conducted. For many geographers, research came to a full stop as a result of institutional requirements that permitted only research related to COVID-19 to continue. As COVID-19 impacts extended from weeks, to months, to years and beyond, research restarted, but with consideration of the ongoing unique and difficult circumstances shaped by the pandemic. Reflexivity about new circumstances was of paramount importance: ensuring that neither researcher nor participants increased their risk of contracting the virus. Interviews that might have otherwise been in-person moved to Zoom.

Zoom interviews are difficult in perhaps expected ways: internet connectivity issues, difficulties establishing rapport, ears facing cameras instead of faces, privacy and trust concerns, sound issues, and interviews being cut short because a device's battery died. While Zoom interviews present barriers, they can also increase accessibility in research: through live captions, or not requiring travel to a location. This illustrative example of the Zoom interview points to some of the ways that digital methods were adapted to research designs where going digital was not the original intention. While digital methods are not new, the turn to this approach as a means of adapting to a 'field' shaped by a pandemic, are. For this reason, we need to spend time conceptualizing what these methods could look like and how COVID-19 opens new possibilities for how we conceptualize ways for 'doing' research—while simultaneously engaging with longer discussions about digital methods and digital geographies broadly. What types of

epistemological openings are enabled through these circumstances and how have such openings changed, deepened, and been challenged through the pandemic and its afterlives?

This conversation is especially important for urban geographers who collect data via ethnography, as so much of ethnography involves in-person interactions and relationship-building through interviews and participant observation. Further, recent work in urban geography has emphasized the intimate relationship between the digital and urban governance, illustrated through technological infrastructures, smart city trends, automated landlords and many others. These trends point to the importance of considering the digital in urban research (Jefferson, 2020; Safransky, 2019; Fields, 2019). While digital ethnography has been an approach to ethnography in its own right since the early days of the internet, the unprecedented impacts of COVID-19 require further conceptual development about what digital ethnography can be, particularly within geography.

Existing literature on digital ethnography does not adequately account for the intersection of digital ethnography with other methodological approaches and does not deeply engage with structural inequalities that unavoidably shape the lives of researchers and participants. In this paper, I offer pathways for conceptualizing a ‘feminist digital ethnography,’ that brings together work on feminist methodologies, digital geographies, and digital ethnography, as one way these gaps can begin to be addressed. I suggest that a feminist digital ethnographic approach is valuable for geographers due to the explicit and increasing ways the spaces geographers are interested in are shaped by digital technologies. I draw on the contexts created by the COVID-19 pandemic to consider the methodological and epistemological pathways made visible through how research pivoted in this period. I suggest that a feminist digital ethnographic framework is one way that we might take up approaches and principles necessarily developed in the context of

COVID-19 to shape our methodological commitments into the future. Early conceptualizations of ‘feminist digital ethnography’ are burgeoning, primarily in communication and information studies shaped through the ongoing prominence of the internet and initial reflections on conducting research through the pandemic (Osborne, 2023; Hussen, 2018; Hurley & Johnston, 2022). Yet, there remains a need for an expanded engagement with spatialities and power analyses as we develop conceptualizations of feminist digital ethnography. In this chapter, I aim to contribute to this growing methodological discussion through an emphasis on the value of engaging with digital spaces, care geographies, and power analyses as we develop pathways for approaching feminist digital ethnographies.

I begin with a brief overview of feminist digital geographies and the ‘digital turn’ in geography. I then discuss existing approaches to digital ethnography. I follow by detailing the tenets of feminist digital ethnography as a methodological and epistemological framework, before illustrating this approach in practice through a series of reflections from the ‘field’ during a global health pandemic.

## **2.1. Geography’s ‘Digital Turn’**

As a discipline, geography is going through a ‘digital turn,’ where the digital is increasingly an object and the subject of geographical research (Ash et al., 2018). This is, in large part, due to the embeddedness of digital technologies and devices in our everyday lives that blur the boundaries between spaces public and private; consumptive and productive; of work and home. As Ash and colleagues (2018) identify, this embeddedness has notable impacts on the relationships and processes that geographers are drawn to understanding, including: economic relations, governance, the production of space and spatialities, mapping, and spatial knowledge

and imaginaries. The ‘digital turn’ means that across geography and its many sub-disciplines, questions of the digital are increasingly being taken up and explored.

Importantly, ‘the digital’ encapsulates more than technologies. I draw on Ash et al.’s (2018: 26) understanding of the digital, which references: “material technologies characterized by binary computing architectures; the genre of socio-techno-cultural productions, artefacts, and orderings of everyday life that result from our spatial engagement with digital mediums; and the logics that both structure these ordering practices as well as their effects,” as well as digital discourses. Theorizing the digital also accounts for the ways that digital technologies, processes, and discourses reproduce social power structures upheld by ideologies of empire, white supremacy, cis-heteronormativity, and colonialism. For example, extensive work has been done to illustrate the uneven impacts of algorithms, from anticipatory algorithms that contribute to urban land speculation (Leszczynski, 2016), to algorithmic violence that racialize space (Safransky, 2019), to the very obfuscation of the work of algorithms (Crawford, 2016; Cottom, 2020). Further, Cowen’s (2019) tracing of the historical legacies of the Canadian Pacific Railroad into the TransMountain Pipeline demonstrate how logics of empire and settler colonialism are reinscribed in the development of settler urban infrastructure.

Broadly, digital geographies literature interrogates the ways that geographical knowledges are produced through digital practices, as well as the digital and sociospatial relations in everyday life, the ways the digital shapes the structuring of everyday life, and the (re)production of digitality through discourse and knowledge (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018). While digital geographers often do consider the digital in relation to analyses of power and inequalities, recent interventions in the field have again highlighted the longstanding demands for in-depth intersectional analysis and engagements with critical race, queer and trans,

decolonial and postcolonial, and feminist theory in digital geographies, pointing to the overwhelming whiteness and straightness of the field (McKittrick, 2014; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Derickson, 2017).

## **2.2. Understanding digital methods and digital ethnography**

Calls for expanded epistemologies and ontologies for understanding the digital also extends into how we approach and design research. Alongside the disciplinary ‘digital turn,’ geographers are increasingly looking to digital and visual methods to gather and analyze research (Leszczynski, 2019). This aligns with a broader shift within qualitative research in particular to extend the range of methods to transform the possibilities of what constitutes data and knowledge more broadly. Dowling et al. (2018) theorize this shift through non-representational theory, that encompasses assemblage thinking, reflexivity on the role of research and researchers in witnessing life’s relations, and multisensory approaches to account for diverse elements in the spatial environment. They argue that these expanded approaches result “in methods and methodologies that enable researchers to grasp and grapple with that which has, at times, been invisible, denigrated, and unimaginable” (Dowling et al., 2018: 780; Cifor & Wood, 2017). I suggest that considering non-representational theory in conversation with epistemologies guided by work in Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans geographies demand research approaches that allow for the unexpected, for diverse socio-spatial relations and processes not found in hegemonic geographic theorizations. This stands true too for considerations of digital methods in geography.

Leszczynski (2018: 473) describes digital methods as “heuristics and techniques for identifying, capturing, managing, analyzing, and theorizing materialities, social praxes, and

implications of sociotechnical shifts associated with the proliferation of digital computing technologies.” Digital methods can be used to analyze technologies themselves, but they can also help us understand sociospatial processes and relationships (Rogers, 2013). There are a range of digital methods, but one in particular that is often taken up in human geography is the use of social media, because it is “inherently geographical” (Leszczynski, 2018). In some ways, social media as method is representative of forms of research concerned with the “digital mundane” which considers the role of everyday, mundane digital practices, productions, sites, and objects, shaping and shaped by everyday lives (Leszczynski, 2020). While digital methods are increasing in popularity, within geography digital ethnography remains largely underexplored.

Digital ethnography as method has been well theorized in sociology and anthropology, among other disciplines, but has not yet been taken up in meaningful ways by geographers (Duggan, 2017). Early theorizations of digital ethnography come from Christine Hine’s book, *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), then developed further in Pink et al.’s (2016) book, *Digital ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Pink et al. (2016) emphasize that ethnography is nothing without a theory of the world, which is why there is value in considering digital ethnography in disciplinary conversations while also drawing on interdisciplinary conceptualizations of this method. Though, discussions of digital ethnography reflect on the dilemmas and difficulties of the method: particularly in the ways its validity and legitimacy as method is questioned; the ‘location’ of the ‘field’; negotiations of online-offline borders; and the nature of participant observation (de Seta, 2020; Hjorth et al., 2017; Varis, 2015).

There are three broad approaches that digital ethnographies typically fall into (Duggan, 2017). The first are ethnographies that use digital technologies in order to understand social phenomena, which likely includes most ethnographers because so much of contemporary

research involves digital technologies in some way. For example, an ethnographer could use social media to recruit participants, or they could have participants make videos or take digital photos as part of a photo-voice approach. The second approach are online ethnographies, where the focus is on studying a digital or visual environment and focusing on relationships, behaviours, and practices in these spaces. This could include an analysis of participants' behaviour in a Buy Nothing Facebook group, or discussions on Twitter under a particular hashtag. The third approach is a digital ethnography that is nonmedia centric, meaning that the focus is on digital culture and practices (Duggan, 2017). This could include an analysis of Zoom norms and protocols and how this shapes everyday life.

Within these three approaches, Pink et al. (2016) offer five principles of digital ethnography: multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodox. The principle of multiplicity emphasizes that there is not a singular way to engage with the digital and in this way each digital ethnography will be unique. Non-digital-centric-ness speaks to a decentring of media in media research to recognize that media are inseparable from other parts of everyday life. Openness speaks to digital ethnography as processual and collaborative, not as a method with rigid boundaries. Reflexivity demands that digital ethnography ask questions of how ideas about knowledge and being are produced. Finally, the digital ethnography is unorthodox because it facilitates understandings of worlds that might otherwise be invisible or unanticipated. Pink and colleagues consider these principles as a means through which to interpret “how digital environments, methods, and methodologies are redefining ethnographic practice ... [to] go beyond simply translating traditional concepts and methods into digital research environments” (2016: 2). Rather than solely applying digital methods to ‘traditional’

ethnography, they encourage consideration of the everyday-ness of the digital and how this might transform or expand ethnographic approaches.

Because geographical literatures on feminist fieldwork and methodologies have so long emphasized the multi-faceted significance of being in-place for research relations, interpretive practice, and reciprocities, considering these relations must continue to be taken up in digital ethnography as well (Domosh, 2003; Goerisch, 2015). Though, creating a distinction between digital ethnography and “normal” ethnography risks a reproduction of real/virtual and online/offline binaries, which are incredibly complicated to parse out and require careful consideration of positionality, ethics, and power (Duggan, 2017; Morrow et al., 2015). Duggan demands that we wrestle with these complexities, pushing for more specific conceptualizations of geographical digital ethnography, because “it is not enough to say that digital ethnography simply refers to the study of digital practices or even a combination of analogue and digital practices” (Duggan, 2017: 2). One pathway that can bring more specificity to geographical digital ethnography is by bringing this method into conversation with feminist methodologies. Feminist methodologies bring critical analysis of reflexivity, power, and positionality to how we approach digital ethnographies.

### **2.3. Situating feminist digital geographies and methodologies**

A feminist digital ethnography brings together feminist methodologies, digital methods, and feminist digital geographies, where theorizations of the digital emphasize that the digital is inseparable from intersecting social power structures. Feminist methodologies emphasize the importance of reflexivity, positionality, identity, and power in conducting research (Nagar & Geiger, 2007). Research is a relationship between the researcher and participants, and knowledge

is co-produced while recognizing that participants have knowledge of their own everyday lives—research is “produced in a world already interpreted by people, including ourselves, who live their lives in it” (England, 2006: 287). Following Jaggar (2007), feminist research is not defined by any particular topics or objects of study, but rather through a set of social commitments. One component of this is a recognition of the role of power, particularly in that the role of power dynamics in research can never be fully known (Staeheli & Lawson, 1994; Mountz et al., 2003; England, 1994). Moss (2002) emphasizes a need for “close scrutiny and (re)politicization of all aspects of the research process.” Further, recent work in feminist digital geographies illustrate how digital spaces shape everyday lives, which are impacted by power structures producing inequalities and violence at the intersections of race, gender, class, colonialism, sexuality, and ability (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Elwood, 2020).

For example, literature in Black geographies have demonstrated the integrality of the digital to the technology of racial capitalism (Melamed, 2015). The logics of racial capitalism are supported by global networks of the digital and capital, which uphold and legitimize the state, intensified through strategies of secrecy and exclusion (Cottom, 2020). Conceptualizations of the “New Jim Code” point to digital innovations and ‘technocorrections’ that facilitate expansions of the prison industrial complex while seeming fairer than prior discriminatory practices (Benjamin, 2019). Moreover, postcolonial and decolonial geographies have illustrated how dispossession and the reproduction of settler colonialism are facilitated through digital practices of enclosure and capture: whether through non-consensual data collection, expansions of the carceral state, or algorithmic redlining (Rivera, 2019; Jefferson, 2020; Safransky, 2019). McKittrick (2014) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging “violence both mundane and spectacular” while

simultaneously endeavouring to undo it, rather than repeating it. Together, what scholars of these geographies emphasize is that the violence of these technologies are not new.

In addition to Black and Indigenous geographies, feminist, queer, and trans theory offer many pathways through which to strengthen digital geographies and analyses of the digital. Elwood and Leszczynski (2018) argue that critical digital geographies often gloss over the centrality of feminist theory and praxis to these literatures. Feminist theory critiques the production and sources of knowledge, the objectivity of Science and research broadly, and representations of different groups in research and as producers of legitimate, rigorous knowledge themselves (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Dignazio, 2020). Queer and trans theory have analyzed the banality and mundaneness of technology, as well as the intersections of sexuality and technology that conceptualize difference and social agency through technology (Cockayne & Richardson, 2017). Calls for feminist digital geographies also emphasize that this work must also be intersectional, building on Crenshaw's conceptualizations of intersectionality in the ways that social power structures intersect and are thus experienced differently and together (Crenshaw, 1991). The work of feminist digital geographies is an engagement with Black and Indigenous geographies, and queer and trans theory (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018).

Together, this work points to the many ways that understandings of the digital must expand beyond obsessions with dystopic presents and futures, instead highlighting how digital technologies are used to uphold a range of epistemologies and ontologies that much of hegemonic digital geographies cannot yet apprehend (Elwood, 2020). As Elwood (2020: 4) argues, "Much Black, queer/trans and feminist code studies start from the proposition that in spite of structural conditions aligned to ensure exclusion and death, these subjects are always also surviving and creatively intervening to catalyze possibilities for life and liberation." This

manifests in a variety of ways. For example, Jefferson asserts that abolitionist tools and political solutions are needed to address the violence of criminal justice technologies. Lucchesi (2020) points to the possibilities of Indigenous data sovereignty through the significance of relationships and thinking differently about the role of ethics and protocols in research. Lewis et al. (2018) offer pathways via Indigenous epistemologies for considering how machines and AI fit into a kin-network that includes human and non-human kin. As Benjamin (2019) argues, “Abolitionist and decolonial technologies tell a different story: emancipatory designs are not only possible, they already exist.” In-depth engagement with theorizations of the digital grounded in decolonization, abolition, Black, queer, and trans futures is integral for the future of digital geographies.

Bringing this in conversation with digital methods, we can understand the significance of spectacular and mundane digital spaces, which are co-constituted with everyday lives (Leszczynski, 2020). Importantly, while we may use digital methods, these methods are inseparable from the digital spaces: the digital can be the subject of research and can also be central to the ‘doing’ of research. Discussions of digital methods must therefore also be grounded in theorizations of the digital through Black and Indigenous geographies and queer, trans, and feminist work.

Engaging discussions on digital ethnography and methods alongside feminist digital geographies and methodologies offer necessary scaffolding within which to situate a framework for feminist digital ethnography. Returning to Duggan’s (2017) conceptualization, digital ethnographies typically consists of a combination of three approaches: the use of digital tools, online ethnographies that study digital environments, and studying digital culture and practice with a nonmedia-centric approach. What do these approaches mean in the unusual context of

COVID-19, when digital tools are necessary, where digital environments are adapting to unexpected conditions, and digital culture and practices are also shifting in ways that are still to be determined? I suggest that theorizing feminist digital ethnography illustrates potential pathways that can help us to think through approaches to research in the changing geographies of COVID-19.

There are many questions that are worth considering with a feminist digital ethnography, as well as doing research within the context of COVID-19. How do we approach digital methods when this approach is necessitated by stay-at-home orders and border closures? What does consent look like in digital spaces? What does it mean when university ethics boards prohibit in-person research while differently positioned participants experience higher risks of COVID-19 exposure in their everyday lives? Who are the participants in digital research, particularly when the digital spaces produced by COVID-19 are being navigated by researchers and participants simultaneously for the first time?

## **2.4. Reflections from a ‘field’ shaped by COVID-19**

Drawing on my experiences conducting fieldwork for this dissertation, I offer a framework for a feminist digital ethnography that centres discussions in digital geographies and demands intersectional analyses of power when engaging with the digital as the subject and object of research. I suggest that a feminist digital ethnography is helpfully guided by three key principles, building on the work of Pink et al. (2016): reflexivity on digital spaces; embedding care in research; and intersectional power analyses. I detail each of these below. These are not meant to be prescriptive. I am not convinced that there need to be strict boundaries around what

is and is not feminist digital ethnography, but there is utility in thinking deeply about what this approach means or could look like within geography.

One of the research conditions shaped by the pandemic was navigating the boundaries of in-person versus online fieldwork. It was not necessarily a case of which data was better collected in-person instead of online, but rather what data I necessarily had to collect in digital spaces because of COVID-19. This shaped many aspects of the research project, including a pivot from what had initially been proposed, which was a fully in-person ethnographic study. This research project relies on three methods of data collection: participant observation/autoethnography, archival, and semi-structured interviews. As I reflect on each of the three principles guiding feminist digital ethnography, I am drawing on fieldnotes taken during data collection and analysis for each of these three methods.

#### **2.4.1. Considering digital spaces**

New digital spaces are always forming and the relationship that people have with these spaces (and with others in these spaces) is also always changing. This is especially true in the context of COVID-19. A feminist digital ethnography engages with reflexive practice on the digital spaces where research occurs, as well as the impacts that these spaces have on the data itself. For example, in the case of Zoom interviews, normally intimate or private spaces for participants or researchers might suddenly be the more public interview site. This could help build relationships between the researcher and participant, but it could also introduce new or different vulnerabilities. For example, as I wrote in my field notes, reflecting on an early Zoom interview:

At first things were a little stilted but eventually I think we got to a good place. My buzzer went in the middle of this interview and [my dog] was barking. I weirdly think it helped. But it makes me reflect on doing interviews at home and how that shapes things. (Field Note, June 2022).

Though, digitally conducted interviews could shape the uneven power dynamic in an interview further, particularly if the researcher has space in their home or office that allows for more privacy or boundaries than the participant has access to. In addition to the space itself, other things occurring in the space at the same time—such as children, pets, family members—might demand the attention of the researcher or participant at unexpected moments. None of these examples are unique to digital spaces (that are, really, also physical spaces) and could be experienced with phone interviews as well. However, the addition of video, which offers interviewer and participant to see into each other's homes, adds new grounds to reflect on. Conversely, conducting interviews online offered a different level of safety for myself as researcher: for example, when a participant I had not pre-screened obtained the scheduling link elsewhere and booked an interview, I was able to go ahead with the interview knowing that if I did not feel safe at any time, I could simply end the call.

Considering the impact of digital spaces is applicable to other ethnographic methods as well, such as archival data collection, which is increasingly recognized as a valuable component of ethnography (Decker & McKinlay, 2021). The impacts of a shift to a primarily digital 'field' will never be fully accounted for, but I will offer some initial insights as examples here. For archival data collection, I was not able to physically visit archives until the late stages of fieldwork, so initially I relied on archival databases to consider possible landlord-tenant laws of focus in each city. By reading file metadata, as well as analyzing digitized sources that might not initially seem relevant (such as oral histories of local politicians), I was able to develop a better understanding of what might be physically in the archives.

When I was able to visit the archives in-person, I had a predeveloped list of what documents I wanted to spend time with. While in Seattle I had the benefit of time to follow recommendations from archivists of additional files to look at, in Vancouver I had to rely mostly on what I had pre-selected because the difficulties of border crossings, even when they re-opened in later stages of the pandemic, restricted the number of research trips I was able to make to Canada. The archival material for this project would have been very limited if I had to rely solely on what had been digitized, but the forced time in digital spaces of histories meant that by the time I was able to go in-person I had spent a lot of time in these time periods already. Worthy of reflection beyond the limits of this dissertation though, are the barriers that archives often face when developing their digital collections: for example, there were recordings of public hearings in the Seattle Municipal Archives that were of interest to me, but they existed only on tapes that needed to be restored and digitized before they could be accessed. The cost was prohibitive to me on my limited research funds and consequently that data was necessarily excluded from the research.

While there are limits to digital archival work, there are also ways that digital methods and tools can be used to strengthen our understanding of archival materials. For example, sometimes as a tenant described their apartment building in a letter written to city council, I used Google StreetView to look at the building now. As they described traipsing back to their apartment after using the pool, or a busy alley that ran alongside their window, I became curious: what did that look like then? What did it look like now? I would type in the cross streets and there was the pool, decades later, still there. Other times a low-rise apartment building described in a letter would have been replaced by a glass condominium tower reaching for the skies. This process brought the letters into a new dimension for me: providing a visual glimpse into

imagining these moments already lived. It brought the past into the present for a strange collision of time and space, that simultaneously illuminated the conflicting permanence and transient nature of urban life. The depth added by digital tools to analog archival records speaks to another dimension of feminist digital ethnography. Feminist digital ethnography is not only a set of tools, but also an approach to add multifaceted dimension and understanding to other data collection methods.

#### **2.4.2. Embedding care**

The second principle for a feminist digital ethnography centres on embedding care in research. Feminist care approaches are increasingly understood as playing an important role in the research process: through the handling of data, to building relationships in the field, to caring for yourself as researcher (Lopez & Gillespie, 2016; Gillespie & Lopez, 2019; Wideman, 2022). Considering the role of care in digital methods offers new windows for further consideration and interrogation. This could include reflections on the labour of digital data collection, navigating intimacy and privacy, and addressing accessibility.

There are practical aspects of approaching feminist digital ethnography with care for participants, such as recognizing the energy required for extended Zoom conversations that might result in shorter interviews or many breaks. Another component is to reflect on the different types and roles of participants in digital ethnography. If your participant observation is of events or social media posts online, what does consent look like? How do you effectively communicate with potential participants when digital communication is difficult for different groups of people? How do you ensure your research is accessible for participants, both during and after? Approaches to these questions are supported by caring with and about participants.

There are forms of proactive care, some of which is standard procedure in interviews: such as reminding participants they can skip any question or take a break at any time. In my field notes, I reflected that I often found myself sharing my own experiences as a tenant in interviews that were on the phone, in order to try to build trust since the participant could not see me. Yet, in other fieldnotes I reflected the difficulties of trying to read the emotions of interview participants through a phone or screen and being uncertain what kinds of responses or support might feel helpful to them. The interview ending on Zoom or phone was more finite in many ways than those interviews that occurred in-person: as we left a space together, the ending of the interaction was gradual and it felt easier to check-in if it was needed.

Another aspect of care in feminist digital ethnography involves the ways the researcher themselves receives care. Care for the researcher might occur through the implementation of a ‘buddy system,’ where a colleague supports you in your fieldwork by attending events and taking notes, debriefing with you afterwards, and other similar actions (Lopez & Gillespie, 2016). It might also come through ‘self-care’ where actions are taken to place boundaries around the research project in some capacity.

I experienced a lot of frustration, overwhelm, and grief during interviews and used fieldnotes to process the emotional aspects of fieldwork after the conclusion of interviews. For example, one participant described that when they had told their employer they were experiencing issues with mice in their apartment, it was suggested that they could sleep in their office as a solution and other employees would greet them in the hallway by mimicking mice and squeaking at them. After that interview I wrote in my notes:

After this interview I was really tired again ... It’s honestly really hard to hear about the issues with renting and in particular with landlords ... But how do so many

landlords get to make so much profit and be so bad at their jobs/inflct violence/not do anything, not even do repairs, etc. Also why are so many places having leaking ceiling and rats? It's exhausting. Where do we go from here? (Field Note, June 2022).

Further, most of my interviews occurred on Zoom or on the phone as a result of COVID-19. Because so many of the interviews were in this format, I began to implement a “forced commute” following interviews. While in previous research I have found commutes back from interviews to be a valuable time to draft field notes and initially process the content of the interview, digital interviews occurred with myself and the participant in our respective homes. Going on a walk following interviews allowed me to replicate this process within the limits of the pandemic and was an attempt to place some boundaries around the presence of the research in my life. Often, the project felt all-encompassing because so much of it was taking place in my own home while I too was navigating different challenges related to my positionality as a tenant (e.g., floods, pest infestations, broken fridges/stoves/toilets, increasing rents, and so on). This would later structure my approach to analysis: for example, I found myself delaying coding interviews where I knew participants described their experiences with an issue I was dealing with in that moment, hoping I could code that data when it was further removed from what I was experiencing myself. In many ways my embeddedness as an ‘insider’ (as a tenant) in this project was useful in recruitment and during the interviews themselves, but consequently there was an emotional complexity and intimacy to fieldwork as well.

Eventually, COVID-19 had a very explicit impact on interviews: towards the end of conducting interviews in Seattle, I contracted the virus. I was able to reschedule some of the interviews, but was sick for long enough that I ended up needing to do a few interviews while I was still ill, on Zoom. In my notes for an interview I wrote: “Did this interview while I have Covid. It was a bit of a struggle. There was brain fog and slowness” (Field Note, July 2022).

While in ideal circumstances we would not choose to do an interview in these conditions, of course this is not always possible. I needed to quickly make a decision between losing an interview participant and focusing on recovery. Whether it was the right choice is something I still wrestle with. We might dream of ideal circumstances for fieldwork that often end up being far from reality. Utilizing care in feminist digital geography is a response to how we navigate the fieldwork conditions we have and consequently relations and politics of care must be core guiding principles in fieldwork.

### **2.4.3. Intersectional power analyses**

Finally, a feminist digital ethnography requires in-depth engagement with intersectional power analyses and the ways power shapes digital spaces and relationships. Here, a feminist digital ethnography should draw from recent work in digital geographies that builds on theorizations in Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans geographies to point to glitch politics and grounded spatialities of surviving and thriving through refusal of cis-heteronormative, settler colonial, racial capitalism. These theorizations should provide the guiding framework for a feminist digital ethnography, as the theory through which the world of the ethnography is understood. Further, the ethnographer should engage with these power analyses to consider their own positionalities and identities, as well as the positionalities and identities of participants.

To do so I consider the questions posited by Gökariksel and colleagues (2021: 9): “What does it mean to be intimate in the field? What are the ethical obligations of feminists? How is it related to the author’s positionality?” Although I was a tenant during fieldwork, it is unlikely that we are ever fully ‘insiders’, because we are never only one identity. There are many complex and nuanced ways that this occurred during this project. In Seattle, I was an outsider as an

international student and someone who had only lived in the city for five years, whereas in Vancouver I had become an outsider as someone living in Seattle or who had not lived in Vancouver for that same duration. In the archives in each city, both positionings had their benefits: in Seattle I often felt I could understand things with an outsider perspective that helped me to draw new connections in analysis. Yet, there was an intimacy to my archival work in Vancouver where I immediately understood the neighbourhood contexts that people were writing about in their archival letters. This felt jarring when doing interviews in Vancouver, where I was less familiar with policy changes or programs that had been implemented since I left. Conversely in Seattle I had followed those changes closely because they also impacted me directly as a tenant. Vancouver participants did not always know that I had ties to Vancouver, and this perceived outsider status was exacerbated by those interviews occurring on Zoom or on the phone. It is possible to be simultaneously insider and outsider in our work, and we often are (Mullings, 1999).

I consider the reflections offered by Smith (2016) on the fraught ways we navigate “intimacy and angst” in the field and the ways these are shaped by structures of power. This happened particularly during interviews: tenants would disclose details of their lives to me and then immediately double-check that I would not tell their family or friends. In other cases they would share their housing needs or desires and then seek confirmation that what they had said was not unusual. I was left wondering what I had done to earn this level of trust and felt a desperate need to take deep care of this information entrusted to me. Feminist geographers have written about the careful navigation required in what data makes it into analysis and into eventual publication, particularly in the ways that sometimes what is shared with us by participants is never meant to be reproduced on the page (Smith, 2016).

Reckoning with intimacies in the field does not require a finite answer or conclusion, but rather perhaps a consideration of the ways that brief moments of discomfort, uncertainty, emotion, and overwhelm stay with us well beyond the phase of “data collection” and the ways these moments are always shaped by our own identities, positionalities, and relations to power (Chennault, 2021). The (re)production of power is different (and yet in many ways, similar) in digital spaces and this requires in-depth consideration in order for a feminist digital ethnography to be able to effectively analyze the sociospatial processes in play.

## **2.5. Moving with the times**

I offer these limited reflections here while attempting to be cautious of the perils of ‘navel-gazing,’ though I heed Moss and Besio’s reminders that relying on our own experiences throughout research is a “serious undertaking” (2019: 318). My priority in this project is to centre the experiences and stories of participants, both in interviews and in archival materials. Yet, to ignore the impacts that being a tenant myself had on how I navigated fieldwork would be to do a disservice to the ways that feminist methodologies recognize the intimacy of so much of our research and the importance of reflecting on those intimacies and their impacts (Smith, 2016).

In this chapter, I have offered pathways through which we might conceptualize a feminist digital ethnography. I began with a discussion on approaches to understanding the digital in geography, as well as digital methods and digital ethnography, considering how digital methods had conceptualized specifically in geography. I then turned to a discussion of feminist digital geographies and methodologies, including future directions for feminist digital geographies that engage with Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans geographies. I followed Duggan’s (2017)

argument that digital ethnography remains underutilized and undertheorized in geography, though it has been discussed at length in other disciplines. As a means of addressing this gap, I proposed a feminist digital ethnographic framework that aims to add specificity to understandings of the digital in geographic ethnography, while also offering tools for conducting research within the context of COVID-19. A feminist digital ethnography is guided by three principles: reflexivity on digital spaces; embedding care in research; and intersectional power analyses.

This chapter contributes a methodological approach distinct from existing theorizations of digital methods because I employ feminist methodologies while using digital methods to gather data, while considering the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The methods I bring together for feminist digital ethnography serve to understand the world in different ways that account for the ways that digital spaces are also facilitating distinct responses to housing crises (for example, social media is used to organize tenants and mutual aid, digital platforms are used to share government statements and policies, and organizing and government meetings to respond to housing crises take place on Zoom, in people's homes). While eventually in this project I was able to collect some data in-person, when the project was (re-)designed there was never any certainty that in-person data collection would be able to safely occur within the timeline of the project. Thus, even with in-person data collection, the overarching framework of feminist digital ethnography guided all aspects of this dissertation project.

In reflecting on the principles of feminist digital ethnography and my fieldwork for this research project, I highlighted some of the ways feminist digital ethnography might shape methods beyond the context of a pandemic. While feminist digital geography was borne out of necessity created by the impacts of COVID-19, the tenets embedded within it as a

methodological approach offer worthwhile considerations for fieldwork beyond “pandemic methods.” While the pandemic gave me space to develop the concept of feminist digital ethnography, notably I do not theorize this “only” as a “pandemic method.” Rather, I am interested in considering how different methodological commitments that were made necessary by COVID-19 can inform and shape approaches to fieldwork going forward. In many ways, ethnography is an ideal way through which to engage the digital, because ethnography “is a process that moves with the times, rather than a process fixed in time or to a particular set of technologies” (Duggan, 2017: 2). By this definition, ethnography also serves well to account for a range of ontologies and epistemologies for considering digital processes, spaces, and relationships that account for intersecting systems of power. Digital ethnography is especially well-equipped to do this when placed in conversation with feminist methodologies: for digital geographies during COVID-19 and beyond. Feminist digital ethnography brings together work in digital ethnography and feminist digital geographies in ways that are addressing methodological gaps that must be addressed as we continue to conduct research in these constantly shifting digital worlds.

## Chapter 3. Data collection and analysis in Vancouver and Seattle

*Feminist scholarship aspiring to antiracism and decolonization emphasizes reflexivity in research, a disarmingly simple and necessary intervention: if power shapes knowledge production, then as scholars we must interrogate how who we are impacts how we work and what knowledge we produce.*

*(Vasudevan, 2021: 29, emphasis in original).*

### 3.1. The flood

The pipes above me lurch and fill with water. This is always a bit jarring when they first come on, but eventually I tune them out. It is commonplace in older apartment buildings to hear these sounds when your neighbour turns on the water to start to take a shower. It is also unfortunately normal for there to be an absence of soundproofing altogether—so while you would like to have some separation from your neighbours, in actuality you can hear many of their sneezes and conversations word for word. An unspoken agreement exists between you both where you never mention the intimate conversation you could not tune out as it crept through the walls. Unfortunately, this forced intimacy also results in difficulties with building tenant solidarities—the sound creep from other apartments can create animosity among tenants even though the issues are structural, both in terms of the physical building and the landlord’s ambivalence to tenants’ experiences of their housing.

I realize the pipe noises have not lulled into the background and instead are joined by the sound of running water. This is unusual. I turn my light on, and realize with alarm that water has started pouring down my walls, creating an undesirable indoor water feature. I rush into the bathroom and see that water is an inch deep across the linoleum and has started to seep into the

carpet in the hall. I pull my stuff away from the walls and grab some towels. My dog stares at me in confusion; he was ready for bed. I head upstairs and knock on my neighbour's door to let them know about the flood. No answer. I go back downstairs and call the landlord's emergency line. No answer. At this point I am not sure what to do. Eventually the landlord's emergency line calls me back and I explain that there is a flood. They tell me that all I can do is go back upstairs and get my neighbour to turn off their water. I eventually get them to answer the door and they say that they do not know where the water has come from but they will stop using their shower. I notice there is water sitting in the ceiling light so I switch off the breaker. The emergency line says there is nothing else they can do.

I call back the next day asking how this is going to be fixed: my carpets are soggy with water, the ceiling light is still submerged, and water leaked out of the thermostat dial. The emergency line says it is the weekend so they do not really want to call anyone unless they have to. I suggest that they may want to call a plumber. The plumber arrives and, after cutting a hole in my ceiling, resolves the issue. The plumber leaves and the landlord tells me that they will not bring in the restoration workers until Monday, three days after the initial flood. In the meantime, my friend helps me remove the water from the submerged ceiling light. We go to Home Depot and rent a carpet fan to try to dry things out. I ask on my local Buy Nothing group if anyone has a second fan I can borrow. Surprisingly, someone says yes.

I call the landlord on Monday and ask if they plan to send the restoration team at any point that day. Eventually they come but the fans are so loud that I cannot stay in my apartment. I find a dog-friendly Airbnb, noting that this is yet another unexpected expense. My friends help me and my dog get to the Airbnb. When I return and the restoration crew removes their equipment, I call the landlord and ask if there is any chance of reimbursement for the fan I rented

from Home Depot and the Airbnb. They reimburse me for the fan but ask me to claim the Airbnb from my renter's insurance.

Unfortunately, dealing with these types of events are not unusual for lower income tenants. Similar issues were regularly happening to my friends and others in my communities in Seattle. In my Buy Nothing group and similar groups on Facebook, tenants were frequently asking for supplies that would help them cover their immediate care needs until the landlord fixed an issue: mini fridges so they could refrigerate food until theirs was fixed, freezer space, help with mold, asks for advice about their tenants' rights. Time and time again, I witnessed the ways that community groups stepped in to provide for tenants' needs where the landlord did not. The reliance on these informal care networks are not unique to the sphere of housing, but the urgency of these care relationships, both in the digital world of Facebook and the in-person world of friendships, are crucial to supporting tenants in a financialized and unequal housing system. While sometimes I was able to get support from my apartment building neighbours, more typically I was relying on friends or people I had never met in-person but felt a connection to as a result of neighbourhood Facebook groups.

I open with this reflection on my own experience as a tenant renting in Seattle as a brief illustration about how being a tenant myself shaped the theoretical framing for this project and the methods I selected for data collection. I am cautious of centring myself in this work, but following Vasudevan (2021) there is a deep, nuanced reflexivity required in feminist research to consider how we as researchers show up in our research. In this chapter I will discuss the methods used in this research project, that together make up components of a feminist digital ethnography, as outlined in Chapter Two.

I want to begin with a concise overview of how I am situated in this project. I come to this work with a number of intersecting identities that have shaped my study design and analysis, including my recruitment strategies and my research questions. First, I have been a tenant in my two research sites, Vancouver and Seattle: Vancouver from 2017-2018 and Seattle from 2018-2023. Prior to renting independently in Vancouver, I lived in a subsidized housing co-op for most of the decade before. I have always lived in rental housing and once I began renting as an adult I have been a tenant with a fixed graduate student income. This housing history means that I came to this research with empathy for the housing precarity and uncertainty experienced by lower-income tenants. In Seattle in particular, much of my world was occupied by housing issues. From 2018-2023, I lived in four different places, living in every apartment for less than two years. The frequency with which I was moving was not isolated: it often felt like at any given time, multiple people in my communities were moving or looking to leave an undesirable housing situation. It got to the point where we were helping each other navigate our rights as tenants: as I will discuss in a later paper, for landlord-tenant laws in Seattle, the onus is on the tenant to both navigate and enforce their rights. We helped each other with pet care, packing, finding apartment postings, viewing postings, and doing ‘gut checks’ for each other—does this place seem legitimate? Does it have any clear legal violations? Does the landlord seem reliable and present? Often times these forms of tenant-to-tenant care were informal among friends, though eventually we developed some of these practices into formal infrastructure through our organizing work with our graduate student union.

This is a dissertation about the experiences and possibilities of care in response to urban housing crises and notably, my own experiences of housing have always been shaped by my care networks where I have lived. Through my own housing histories, the significance of care in

addressing housing precarity has always felt clear, necessary, and urgent. As I recruited tenants to participate in interviews for this study, my experiences as a tenant helped me to understand their own housing histories and to ask follow-up questions. In addition to my housing status, I am also positioned in this work as a white, cis-gender woman and settler, and in Seattle, an international student without U.S. citizenship. These intersecting identities shape this project in complex ways which are never fully knowable.

### **3.2. Approaching through feminist digital ethnography**

In Chapter 2, I proposed feminist digital ethnographies as a methodological approach that might offer potential pathways for future fieldwork approaches, through principles of reflexivity of digital spaces, embedding care into research projects, and conducting intersectional power analyses. In this chapter, I turn to a review of how these methodological commitments practically shaped data collection and analysis in this dissertation. As I describe data collection and analysis, undergirding all of this work were the guiding values of feminist and digital methodologies: that is, a reckoning with the impacts of power in research projects, critical analysis of my own positionality and the limits of the project; and necessary reflections on the capacities, limits, and fluid boundaries of what ‘the digital’ constitutes in a contemporary context.

As I navigate my way through pieces of feminist digital ethnography, I begin with Babbie and Benaquisto’s (2002: 308) concise suggestion that: “In summary, the techniques of ethnography and participant observation are terms that refer to multi-method modes of data gathering in a natural setting (the field) and are employed by researchers with differing orientations to qualitative social scientific puzzle solving.” While conceptualizations of ethnography, particularly those with feminist commitments, are often topics of important

methodological reflection, I use this definition as a starting point through which to engage each of the distinct qualitative methods of this project. In particular, I consider the implications of a “field” that occurs in both physical and digital spaces, that is continuously shifting as the broader context of a global health crisis remains unpredictable.

The overarching question guiding this research project is: what and where are the forms of care that arise in response to housing crises? I explore this through four specific points of entry: 1) How does the state conceive of and enact care in its responses to housing crises?; 2) How do tenants conceive, experience, and enact care in housing crises?; 3) What forms of care geographies are produced in response to housing crises?; and 4) How does understanding historical and contemporary policy responses to housing crises through a framework of care inform possible housing futures? To answer these questions, I employed a relational comparison of Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA, through the utilization of a mixed-methods approach consisting of participant observation and autoethnography, archival methods, and semi-structured interviews with tenants.

### **3.3. Relational comparison of Vancouver and Seattle**

In employing a relational comparative analysis of these two sites, I do not aim to simply examine the similarities or differences between two sites. Instead, this approach explores how a place is impacted by and linked to its relationship to another. Through this, we are able to consider the ways that power shapes experiences of housing crises across and within settler colonial cities (Ward, 2010; Elwood et al., 2017; Robinson, 2016). Due to their distinct national contexts, we might expect the nature of housing crises to be different in Seattle and Vancouver. While each has its own unique components, the nature of a racial capitalist, settler colonial

housing system means that they are also intimately connected. Further, Vancouver and Seattle share a special relationship due in part to their geographical proximity to one another in the Pacific Northwest region of North America.

Though their housing scenarios are distinct from each other, the cities have been intimately linked throughout history (McCann, 2011). The unique relationship between Vancouver and Seattle has been described by Vancouver planners as one of “kindred cities and we have much to learn from one another. We are good neighbours seeking a good life [...] at the same time, we are also different. There are cultural, historic and legislative differences that need to be understood and respected” (Spaxman & Beasley, 2005: 4; cited in McCann, 2011: 115).

At different moments this relationship has reached varying levels of formality. In September 2016, the cities’ mayors signed a Memorandum of Cooperation that stated they were “both deeply committed to becoming the most resilient cities in the world.” The memorandum goes on to explain that:

Vancouver and Seattle share a similar climate and geography, strong economies built on innovation, richly diverse communities and a deep commitment to sustainability across all sectors. Our cities also face similar risks and challenges such as climate change and seismic risk, a lack of affordable housing, aging infrastructure and an inability for all residents to have the same chance to realize their potential. (City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, 2016).

The document emphasizes collaboration and learning from each other. Vancouver’s mayor at the time, Gregor Robertson, said: “Vancouver and Seattle will be stronger for supporting each other as we build healthy, liveable and sustainable cities” (City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, 2016). Activists and political parties have also invited political leaders during elections and social campaigns to build support for their causes, which most recently included

cross-border campaigns for rent control and living wages (Dembicki, 2018; COPE Vancouver, 2022).

The connection between Vancouver and Seattle extends back further, particularly in relation to housing. Vancouver enacted new landlord-tenant protections in the 1970s, before many of Seattle's new housing laws were passed. As a result, a dominant discourse in Seattle at the time was that Canadian investors were to blame for their foreign capital exacerbating Seattle's housing crisis. The idea was that Canadian investors had taken their capital to the south, looking for a more pro-investment environment to protect their profit-generating potential. An archived article clip from the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1975 reads, "A composite of Canadian buyers shows that the majority are from British Columbia where a combination of geographical, economic, and political conditions have made local investment impractical [...] as a result [Marie] Donohue has drafted a rent control ordinance [...] 'There's no rent control here like there is in Canada,' she says. 'There are people here to exploit'" (SMA Comptroller File 283649).

Articles in the *Seattle Times* later described anti-Asian racism as a way to "slow Asian investment" (*The Seattle Times*, Dec. 10 1989). A few months earlier an article titled "Seattle Kong" stated that: "There's some worry that Vancouver, B.C., may be going Chinese with a recent surge in Hong Kong immigration and investments." The article quoted Port of Seattle Commissioner Jack Block, who said: "We may end up with a waterfront that looks as nice of that of Hong Kong. We could bring Hong Kong to Seattle, instead of Vancouver" (*The Seattle Times*, July 17, 1989). The prominence of these articles suggests that the interconnectedness of Vancouver and Seattle has spanned decades and shapes discourses about housing and property in

particular ways. The duration of the relationship between these two cities, particularly on the issue of housing, make them ideal sites through which to conduct a relational comparison.

A relational comparative approach is taken because the uniqueness of urban housing systems, as shaped by policies, governments, budgets, and environmental factors, can make it difficult to conduct direct comparisons or extrapolate data results in housing research. However, a relational comparative analysis addresses these concerns by recognizing that cities are often connected in ways that are not immediately apparent. By teasing out these connections, we are better able to develop conclusions about the role of care in responses to housing crises, in locations with different base characteristics and across time periods of notable changes in tenants' experiences of housing.

### **3.4. Data collection and analysis**

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic predictably shaped the nature of fieldwork for this research project. The result is a mixed-methods approach guided by the principles of feminist methodologies and feminist digital ethnography. Mixed methods approaches “rely upon multiple types of data, modes of analysis, or ways of knowing, but may use these elements in a variety of ways in relationship to one another, for multiple intellectual and analytical purposes” (Elwood, 2010: 3). Specifically, data for analysis was collected via digital and in-person participant observation and autoethnography, archival methods, and semi-structured interviews with tenants. Data collection occurred in Vancouver and Seattle, with archival research focused on 1969-1990 and the other methods focused on 2019-2023. These two time periods were selected because they each are shaped by prominent changes at the urban scale. The years 1969-1990 take us through the rise of neoliberalism and shifts in urban governance to cities that were

increasingly extrospective while simultaneously navigating a withdrawal in federal support for housing. This contrasts 2019-2023, which is rooted in a period of increased housing financialization following the 2008 financial crisis, as well as ongoing impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected between 2019-2023. Table 1 describes the phases of data collection, though there was overlap between phases.

<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>Phase Duration</b>
Participant observation and autoethnography	2019-2023
Archival	2020-2021 (digital); 2022 (in-person)
Semi-structured interviews	2022
Data analysis	2022-2023

*Table 1: Phases of data collection (Source: Author, 2023)*

In what follows, I detail the data collected via each method before then turning to a review of the processes used in data analysis. Through each method, my focus was always on centring tenants’ experiences and prioritizing their own descriptions of events.

### **3.4.1. Participant observation and autoethnography**

Broader empirical context for data collected via semi-structured interviews and archival materials was gathered primarily through participant observation. Participant observation:

Involves researchers moving between participating in a community – by deliberately immersing themselves into its everyday rhythms and routines, developing relationships with people who can show and tell them what is ‘going on’ there, and writing accounts of how these relationships developed and what was learned from them – and observing a community: by sitting back and watching activities which unfold in front of their eyes; recording their impressions of these activities in field notes, tallies, drawings, photographs, and other forms of material evidence. (Cook, 1997: 167-8, emphasis in original).

Whereas participant observation in traditional ethnography occurs so that the researcher as an ‘outsider’ can learn from ‘insiders’, in this project the distinction between categories of ‘insider’

and ‘outsider’ were in constant flux due to my own experiences as a tenant (Mullings, 1999). This messiness is reflected in Decker and McKinlay’s (2020: 19) description of ethnography as method: “Ethnography necessarily collapses the distinct phases of thinking, testing, and writing into a single messy and improvisational process ... The making of meaning, then, is accepted as a shared capacity of researcher and respondents alike.”

With the exception of a few public rallies physically attended in 2019, participant observation for this project occurred in digital spaces. I attended online workshops, watched public announcements from government officials broadcasted online, and reviewed websites of tenant organizations and government officials to note the ways that their responses to housing crises and tenant resources shifted through the pandemic. I also examined publicly-posted email newsletters/bulletins and social media posts, particularly those posted in response to housing announcements from city and state/provincial governments. Following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, increasingly responses to housing crises were occurring in digital spaces, in order to respond to the co-constitutive impacts of housing crisis-health pandemic on people’s physical housing.

While at the beginning of this fieldwork phase I was solely focused on participant observation, further along I began to recognize the ways participant observation had intersected with autoethnographic methods. Autoethnography is “a method that uses personal experience with a culture and/or a cultural identity to make unfamiliar characteristics of the culture and/or identity familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Adams & Jones, 2011: 110). Perhaps the shifting conditions of participant observation created space for a return to my own ‘autoethnographic sensibility’, which “means recognizing that clearcut distinctions among researchers, research subjects and the objects of research are illusory, and that what we call the research field occupies

a space between these overlapping categories” (Butz & Besio, 2009: 1664). Butz and Besio (2009) suggest that there are five categories of autoethnographical approaches: personal experience narratives, reflexive or narrative ethnographies, autoethnography from below, Indigenous ethnography, and insider research. The approaches to autoethnography in this project are best situated within the categories of reflexive/narrative ethnographies, where the researcher’s “experiences are incorporated into the ethnographic description and analysis,” and insider research, where researchers “study a group or social circumstance they are a part of” (Butz & Besio, 2009: 1666, 1669; Butz, 2018). Because of the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to our social lives and experiences as tenants, wholly ‘insider’ research does not occur in this project.

Autoethnography has long been claimed as queer and feminist method. Adams and Jones (2011) suggest that autoethnography serves to challenge hegemonic notions of what ‘counts’ as research and method, in parallel with queer theory which “advocates a similar sensibility in its attempt to disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about what passes as ‘normal’ in a variety of contexts” (2011: 110). There are also lines to be drawn between autoethnographic work and England’s (1994: 82) conceptualization of ‘critical reflexivity’: a “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher.” This sort of reflective work, guided by feminist approaches, serves to identify the inherent subjectivity of all research while recognizing that there is both deep value in reflecting on the role of ourselves in research—from topics studied, questions explored, approaches to fieldwork, and so on—and limits to knowing the full impact of ourselves in fieldwork.

Adams and Jones (2011: 11) further challenge critiques of autoethnography as “self-indulgent” or “simplistic,” emphasizing instead the value of autoethnography in bearing witness:

“sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling.” The emphasis on witnessing is what shifted my initial intentions in research design away from solely participant observation towards the addition of autoethnography. As I signed up to attend tenants’ rights workshops, searched online for how to enforce landlord-tenant laws, and kept tabs on new laws that were proposed by the municipal government, I was as much collecting data for the research project as I was gathering information for myself and my fellow tenants—building an information bank that we could use together as we navigated our diverse experiences of housing crisis.

However, I also heed the warnings of Butz and Besio (2009) as they emphasize that researchers undertaking autoethnography must tread carefully: remaining cautious not to become ‘confessional tales’ that fail to account for what has been learned specifically through fieldwork; self-narratives in autoethnography can be challenging to self-identify; and effectively communicating to multiple intended audiences of autoethnography can be difficult. To navigate these complexities, I rely on autoethnographic data to develop contextual framework for data collected through other methods, including participant observation. In this way, I am able to predominantly rely on data from archives and interviews to formulate responses to the project’s research questions.

Throughout participant observation and autoethnography, I kept textual and photographic field notes that documented my reflections and experiences. The notes included descriptions of things that occurred with dates and times, as well as reflections about what was happening. In some cases, the field notes doubled as “evidence” that I gathered in order to protect myself in cases where attempts to enforce landlord-tenant laws might be needed. Through interviews and

archives, I would see this practice mirrored in the efforts of other tenants as well. I later used these field notes to provide insights about the broader contexts experienced by tenants in both cities and to inform questions for semi-structured interviews. In the field notes I considered my own experiences as a tenant and I specifically reflected on the ways that different forms of care shifted how I was able to navigate issues that were impacting the habitability of where I lived. I used the analysis of these field notes to shape initial codes when beginning analysis of interview transcripts.

### **3.4.2. Archival methods**

Alongside expanding theorizations of archival research as ‘ethnographic,’ in this project I brought the approach of an ethnographer to my time in the archives. Previous discussions of the relationship between archives and ethnography suggest that the sensibilities of ethnographers which focus on minute details, social relationships, connections, and structures, with an emphasis on “social documents” or “nonintentional” historical sources, like meeting minutes and correspondence, can be useful while conducting archival research (Merry, 2002; Decker & McKinlay, 2021). Decker & McKinlay (2021) suggest that archival ethnography offers “deeper understanding of how actors understood events and processes at the time, and what their fears and expectations of the future were.” Guided by this approach, a majority of the archival files used in this project are in the form of letters exchanged between tenants and state actors, as well as audio recordings or notes from meetings and public hearings.

Feminist and geographical approaches to archival materials encourage critical analysis of power in archives, the role of different archival relationships (human and document), and the need to approach archival records ‘with care’ (Ashmore et al., 2012; Van Sant et al., 2020;

Wideman, 2022). Further, Cifor and Wood (2017: 8) argue for a moving beyond ‘representational’ approaches in archival research towards “the critical feminist agenda of dismantling the heteronormative, capitalist, racist patriarchy.” Research conducted in archives must be guided by these key tenets and consider the ways that archives are a process and always in movement. Marshall and Tortorici remind us that, “Archives are places where material gets turned into something else: evidence or loss, history or an inspiration to do history differently” (2022: 1).

The archive describes a physical space, representative of institutions, and the literal documents that are stored within (Mbembe, 2002). Mbembe (2002) argues that there is a paradox in the relationship between the archives and the state: where the state needs archives in order to exist (as a form of legitimization and power), but the archives also threaten the existence of the state (where the violence and “debts” of the state remain documented). We can never know all that is present or absent in an archive, the voices and the silences (Carter, 2006). Materials that are deemed worthy of being archived are always a partial representation and stories told through and with archives are incomplete, imperfect, and shaped by political processes (Arondekar, 2009; Withers, 2002). Feminist approaches are, too, “bound up in global power relations” (Hemmings, 2011: 2).

Mbembe demonstrates that documents’ ‘archivability’ are directly related to their connections to the work of the state. He argues:

It seems clear that the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents,

and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable.’ The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status. (Mbembe, 2002: 20).

Considering the archive in this way, archival methods constitute an assemblage: of documents, narratives, partial stories, and all that is not there (Lorimer, 2010). I approached the archival phase of this project guided by the work of Stoler (2002), who emphasizes the importance of the archive-as-subject rather than an extractive approach of the archive-as-source. This informed my understanding of the city archives as tools of the settler colonial state, as well as efforts to ground archival work in embodied experiences. This included noticing the paper letters were written on, the marginalia of meeting notes, looking up the apartment buildings described by tenants using Google StreetView, and taking time with tenants’ letters, hoping to, in a way, bear witness to what they had experienced even as I read about it decades later. These approaches were necessary as I navigated the drawbacks and benefits created by working in both physical and digital archives (Augst, 2017).

This dissertation relies on city archives and in this way I consider the ways municipal archives are also local state tools in shaping our understanding of housing and crisis. From 2020-2022, I conducted fieldwork in the City of Vancouver Archives and Seattle Municipal Archives ( $n$ =approximately 300 folders). Each of these sites are the primary archives of their respective cities. Conducting fieldwork physically in the archives was not possible when at the beginning of this research phase. Early parameters for archival work were minimal: my period of focus was around the 1970s and 1980s because I knew I was interested in examining how the rise of neoliberal urban governance was shaping state responses to housing at that time. Consequently, I started by reviewing the online databases for each archive, employing search terms such as “housing,” “tenants,” “landlords,” “rent control,” and “crisis.” These terms linked me to more

terms specific to the site, such as, “Rentalsman,” “BC Tenants Organization,” and “Michael Hildt.”

Through this iterative process I developed a structured framework within which I could narrow the parameters of my search. I developed timelines and ‘key players’ guides that highlighted laws that were passed at the urban, provincial/state, or federal level, described the responsibilities of elected officials, and which political parties were in office at the different government levels. Through these early research stages I determined that landlord-tenant laws played a significant role in the lives of tenants and in how state actors were responding to housing crises. Taking this gained insight, I examined different landlord-tenant laws that were passed in this time period and the amount of discussion they were given in archival documents, to develop a focused list of landlord-tenant laws that I would explore in greater detail. Even as I narrowed my focus in the archives, I always remained open to following threads that appeared as I considered different documents. For example, while I began with a focus on individual laws in the Vancouver site, it soon became clear that what needed further exploration was the overarching state infrastructure itself, in the form of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board.

I examined the digitized archival files that were available and developed a spreadsheet that contained the files I needed to analyze in-person. The division between online and in-person archival work meant that most of the ‘exploring’ occurred in the digital phase: when I was finally able to visit archives in-person I had limited time, particularly for Vancouver where fewer research trips were feasible. Archivists in both sites offered great assistance in helping me to understand the organization of the archives and suggesting other materials of relevance. The work of archivists in the Seattle archives were fundamental in helping me to access the public

hearing and meeting audio recordings. Archival materials included records of board and city council decisions, committee minutes, agendas, and meeting notes, audio recordings of government meetings and public hearings, general committee files, and communications sent to local state actors by urban residents and other urban stakeholders. To supplement the data examined in the city archives, I also analyzed articles published in the *Seattle Times*, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Province* newspapers. I used these sources to provide additional empirical context and to develop an understanding about how local state actors were discussing their work, and the ways that tenants were being perceived in the public.

In order to access the Vancouver archives, I had to agree to a list of terms that placed boundaries around how the data in the archival files could be used. This is the norm for archival files that contain sensitive or identifying data: including addresses and names of individuals. The agreement I signed mandated that I could not include any information from the records that could lead to identification of the individuals. Further, archivists previewed any records I requested to ensure that highly sensitive information was not shared without review. In my dataset, this mostly included police reports—where I was still permitted to view the casefile, but only after sensitive information had been censored. This agreement shapes how the archival data from Vancouver has been included in this dissertation. These efforts are examples of how care operates in the archives, where archivists work to ensure that the stories and lives archived in these records still receive some level of protection (Wideman, 2022). Archivists cared for me, as well: for example, in the midst of conducting research in the Seattle archives, the mandatory face mask requirement for government buildings was lifted. The archivist emailed me to let me know the requirements had changed and to let me know that there was someone else scheduled to be in

the archive the next day with me (more typically I was alone). This offer of care helped me to navigate my own comfort and risk level in the context of a global pandemic.

Archival agreements, as with institutional ethics approval, are on their own inadequate to guide my ethical approach to data as a feminist researcher. As I spent time with letters sent by tenants to the local state, I wondered if they really knew that, as they bared their experiences of violence, trauma, and housing to the state, they were also consenting to this being preserved in state archives. In some mediums, the consent was more apparent to someone like me, over 40 years later—in the case of a public hearing recording for example, the hearing chair typically announced at the beginning of the session that the comments made to the committee were being recorded for archiving purposes. In the case of letters though, the consent process is less clear. Further, if a tenant is writing to the local state to ask for help, to demand care, are they fully able to provide consent in this context? How might I attempt to adequately care for their stories, these snippets of their everyday lives archived in this public way? Too often in geography, archival methods are perceived without the same rigidities around consent as methods that interact with participants in the moment, such as interviews or ethnographies. Increasingly, there are demands of archival researchers that archival lives be treated with the same emphasis on consent and care as other methodological approaches.

Practically, archival agreements and my own considerations of ethics in the archives shaped how archival data is presented in this dissertation in a number of key ways. First, direct quotes from individuals are only used when the information within them are generalizable. Any information where someone is describing their specific experience is translated to more abstract terms, in an attempt to add additional layers of de-identification besides an exclusion of someone's name and address. Second, no personal information was looked up about any of the

tenants writing into the city government. Beyond being enshrined in the archival agreement, it was also important to rely on demographic information provided in the letters alone.

Finally, the time spent with tenants' letters became an embodied experience for me. I read each letter as an experience of a life, trying to know more about the person by spending time with their words. Sometimes their letters would be on unique stationery that seemed to represent something of themselves. Other times letters would be handwritten, with edits and postscripts added. Marginalia from state actors would underline aspects of a letter or write some reaction in a different coloured pen. In notes taken by city staff of proceedings and meetings, sometimes the casual doodles of someone taking long notes would occupy the margins—was this a boring meeting? A slow one? In other cases, where tenants had written to state actors multiple times in an effort to resolve their housing issue, their growing frustration was palpable. I took field notes as I examined archival materials in-person. Materials were also scanned and later imported into ATLAS.ti for further analysis and coding.

### **3.4.3. Semi-structured interviews**

While archival methods helped me to understand tenants' experiences of housing crises from 1969-1990, to explore tenants' contemporary experiences I turned to semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because they are “useful for investigating complex behaviours, opinions and emotions, and for collecting a variety of experiences” while also allowing the participant to take control of the topics of conversation (Longhurst, 2010: 112; Cloke et al., 2004). While I went into each interview with a list of prepared questions, the nature of the discussion would shift depending on what the participant themselves wanted to discuss.

The study's focus on tenants' experiences of housing crises specifically places "emphasis on knowledge 'from below', [and] takes lived experience as the starting point for investigation" (Cahill, 2007: 268). During interviews, many tenants discounted their experiences or authority to speak on landlord-tenant laws because they were not "experts" while also later recounting moments where they had not been believed by landlords or those in positions of power (such as when requesting repairs). This increases the importance of continuing to develop our understanding of housing crises "from below," recognizing the vital perspective that tenants bring to housing knowledge that is too often excluded when seeking responses or "solutions" to crises. Further, the study was shaped differently by my intersectional positionality as a white, cisgender woman, graduate student, and tenant experiencing Seattle's housing crisis as a non-U.S. citizen. For example, many repair issues or landlord responses described by tenants were similar to ones I had experienced myself. In some interviews, participants asked me about the landlord-tenant laws and where to go for support, which was information I was prepared to share thanks to my time spent in tenant organizing spaces in Seattle. In other interviews, there seemed to be initial hesitancy from tenants to share their ideas for housing futures, where I was positioned as a 'housing expert' because of my role as researcher.

### **Recruitment & Interview Schedule**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tenant participants in Vancouver and Seattle in 2022 ( $n=24$ , 12 in each city). The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants are renters, have rented in their respective city for a minimum of six months, and are over the age of 21 (to account for the higher age of majority in Washington).



Figure 1: Example of recruitment materials - poster used on social media for Vancouver fieldsite.

Potential participants were recruited via social media posts in neighbourhood groups on Facebook and via public Instagram posts and posts in online organizing spaces such as newsletters and Slack. Recruitment occurred through snowball sampling that began with my own current (Seattle) and past (Vancouver) networks as a tenant. Snowball sampling largely occurred through the re-sharing of these posts: for example, members of neighbourhood groups who were instructors at local post-secondary institutions shared the post to their classes, and other members shared the post with tenant organizations they were connected to. In Vancouver, physical posters were also placed on community boards in places like recreation centres, coffee shops, and libraries.<sup>2</sup> Physical posters were added to the recruitment method for Vancouver when online

<sup>2</sup> However, I experienced considerable difficulty successfully placing the poster in coffee shops and libraries due to bulletin board regulations.

recruiting alone was not resulting in adequate numbers of potential participants. Posters and social media posts directed potential participants to a website where they could learn more about the study prior to contacting me. When potential participants contacted me, I conducted pre-screening to ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria before sharing a link to a scheduling platform so they could choose a date, time, and interview format (in-person, phone, Zoom) that worked for them. All Vancouver interviews occurred on the phone or on Zoom due to pandemic concerns, but some Seattle interviews were able to occur in-person.

There were a number of difficulties experienced during recruitment, largely due to the pandemic, that means the dataset suffers from a lack of diversity among some axes of difference. For example, many participants in the study identified as white. Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate participants' neighbourhoods (aggregated) in relation to mean household income in each city. Many participants were primarily located in neighbourhoods that are locally understood to be more affordable (though this is relative to the fact that housing in Seattle and Vancouver is infamously expensive) which aligns to the percentage of participants who were low-income. The nature of recruitment for this study was shaped by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—both in my limited capacity to travel to Vancouver for multiple research trips, the inability to recruit extensively in-person, and the shift in the number of people visiting public spaces where they might see a poster.

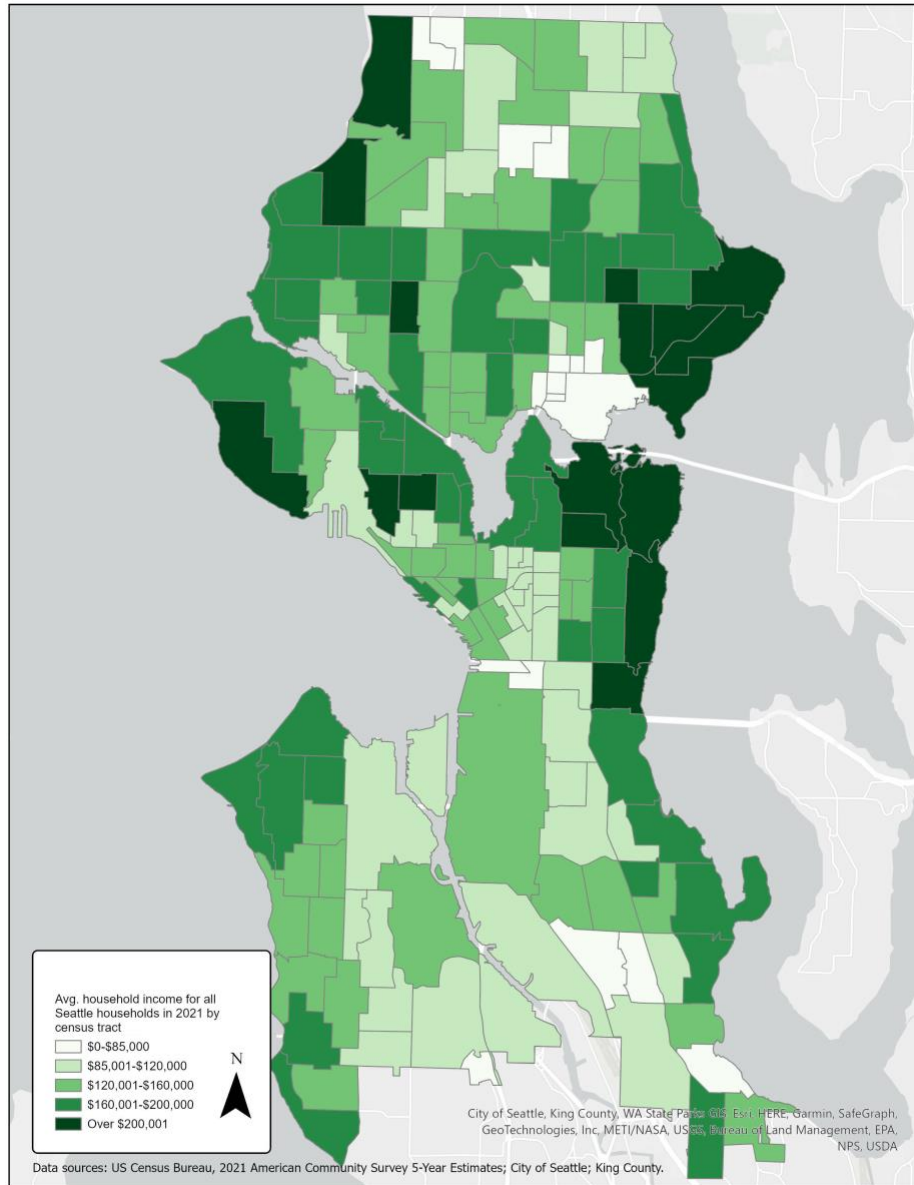


Figure 2: Average household income for all households in Seattle in 2021, by census tract. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Map by author (2023).

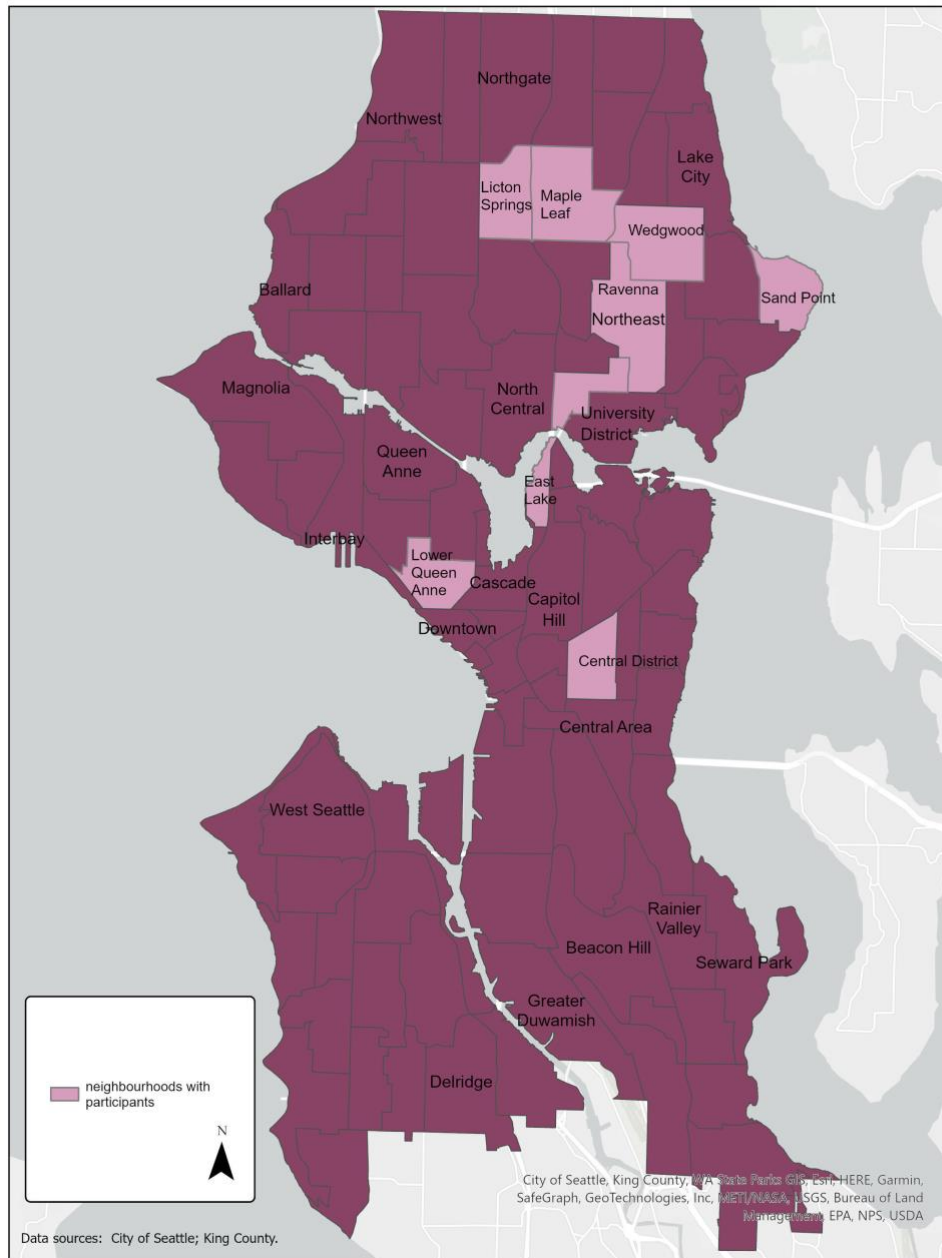


Figure 3: Neighbourhoods with interview participants in the dataset for Seattle. City’s labels for broad neighbourhood areas are used, as well as labels for neighbourhoods identified by participants. Note that city planning neighbourhood boundaries and names do not always align with resident names. Source: City of Seattle. Map by author (2023).

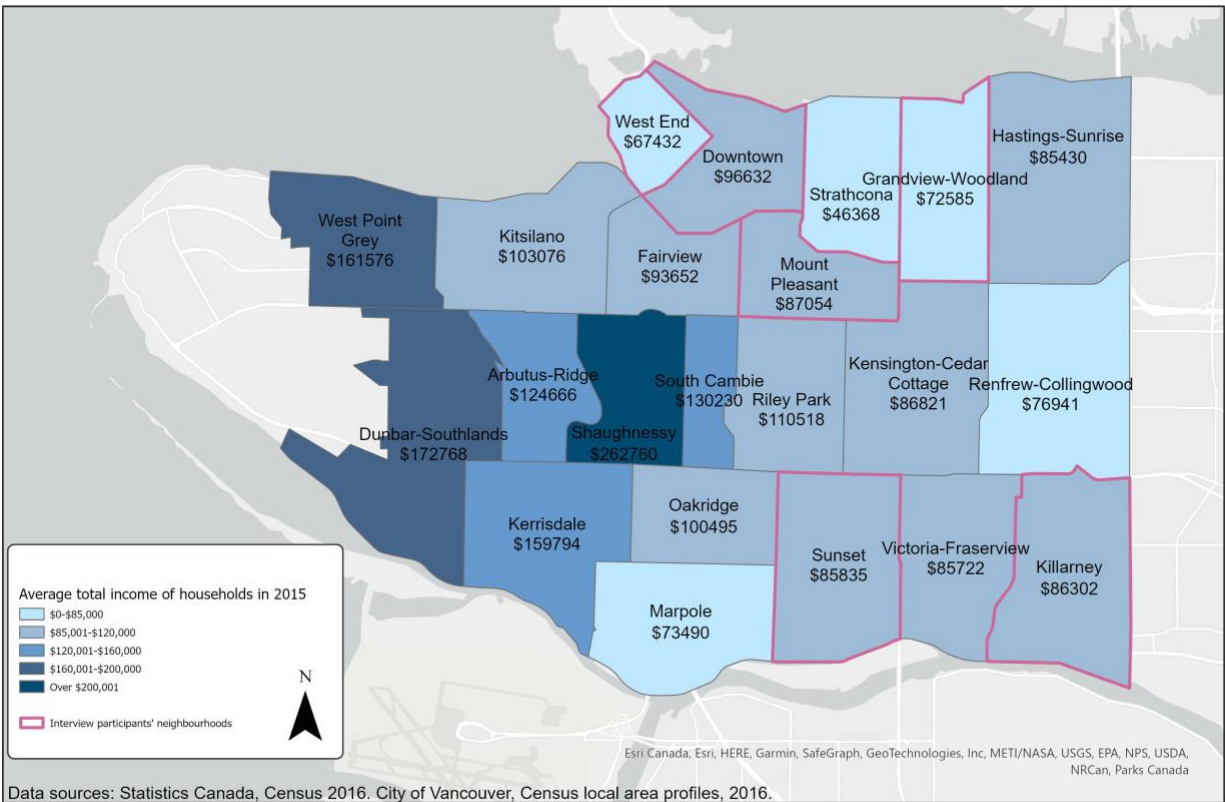


Figure 4: Average total income of households in Vancouver in 2015. Neighbourhoods with interview participants are highlighted. Data from the 2016 Census is the most recent available from the City at local area/neighbourhood scale. Note that city planning neighbourhood names are often different from the neighbourhoods residents identify for themselves. Source: Statistics Canada 2016. Map by author (2023).

Tenants were asked questions around three categories: their experiences of renting in their city; their perspectives on landlord-tenant laws; and their ideas and imaginaries for housing futures for themselves individually and for all tenants. Appendix B lists the full interview schedule. Interview questions were structured to begin with the broad question of “What has your experience been like renting in Seattle/Vancouver?” This was an important question to begin with, because it gave me early insight into some of the participant’s housing history and often provided pathways for follow-up questions. My intention with this question was that it also

offered participants the opportunity to talk about what was most important to them right away which shaped the content of the rest of the interview. Multiple participants told me during the interview that they had a “story to tell” and this question gave them the opportunity to tell that story from the outset. Sometimes at the end of the interview, tenants would ask me questions about my own perspectives, or what my experience had been like in Vancouver versus Seattle, or for support navigating landlord-tenant laws. Being asked about the differences between Vancouver and Seattle in particular suggested to me an interest in what housing experiences were like in cities that share a relationship in their reputation as expensive cities with notable housing crises and within a particular geographic proximity.

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were invited to answer a number of optional demographic questions. Questions asking for gender, race, sexuality, and neighbourhood were open-ended and questions asking for income and age offered defined categories. Demographic categories of interview participants were aggregated where necessary to preserve participant anonymity while still using language of self-identification.

	Vancouver (n=12)		Seattle (n=12)		Total (n=24)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>						
Female or woman	5	42%	9	75%	14	59%
Male or man	5	42%	1	8%	6	25%
Non-binary	2	16%	2	17%	4	16%
<b>Sexual Identity</b>						
Queer, bisexual, demisexual, fluid homosexual	3	25%	8	67%	11	46%

Straight, hetero	6	50%	3	25%	9	38%
Undisclosed	3	25%	1	8%	4	16%
<b>Age</b>						
21-25	1	8%	3	25%	4	16%
26-34	4	34%	4	33%	8	33%
35-44	5	42%	4	33%	9	38%
45-54	1	8%	0	0%	1	4%
55-64	1	8%	1	9%	2	9%
<b>Annual Individual Income (in local currency)</b>						
\$0-\$15,000	0	0%	1	8%	1	4%
\$15,001-\$30,000	7	59%	3	25%	10	42%
\$30,001-\$45,000	1	8%	5	42%	6	25%
\$45,001-\$60,000	1	8%	0	0%	1	4%
Above \$60,000	3	25%	3	25%	6	25%
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>						
<b>Vancouver</b>			<b>Seattle</b>			
Spanish Scottish	East/Central Asian	Indigenous, European, Mexican American		African-American		
Caucasian/white	Caucasian (3)	Black and Indian		White (8)		
White/European	White (5)	Multiracial (Filipina/Latina)				

Table 2: Participant self-reported demographics. Percentages are approximate. Race or ethnicity responses are reported in the language used by participants, with (x) representing when the same language was used more than once. Responses are reported this way to recognize the complexities of how these identities are represented in data, particularly when identities are aggregated or limited (e.g., in national census surveys). Source: Author, 2023.

Interviews in Seattle were completed before the interviews in Vancouver began. Containing the interviews in two distinct phases allowed me to recognize when I had reached data saturation in each city separately, identify initial themes within each site, and to physically place myself in the same city as the tenants I was speaking to. This practice helped me to feel grounded in place for my conversations with tenants, particularly for Zoom or telephone interviews. Because the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing during recruitment, interviews occurred on Zoom, phone, or in-person depending on the personal health and safety precautions of each participant and the interviewer at the time. For most Zoom and phone interviews both participant and interviewer were in their respective homes, whereas in-person interviews primarily occurred in coffeeshops or in public spaces in Seattle. Participants were offered a \$30 gift card in acknowledgment of their time and expertise, were given the option to review their transcript, could choose whether or not to use a pseudonym, and were invited to share their pronouns.<sup>3</sup> Interviews lasted between approximately 20 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

I took notes during and after each interview. Notes during an interview were minimal and were primarily used to highlight prominent aspects of the participant's housing history or encounters with landlord-tenant laws. Notes after the interview reflected on the content of the interview, made reference to key aspects or quotes that I wanted to make sure I reflected on during analysis, and also captured my feelings about the interview. I also used my notes to assess when saturation had been reached in each empirical site.

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<sup>3</sup> Though cash payments are preferred in order to give participants agency over what they use the money for, this was not permitted by university regulations.

#### **3.4.4. Analysis**

After collection, archival and interview data were imported into ATLAS.ti software to support the coding process. Interviews were initially transcribed using Otter.ai and then reviewed for accuracy. Archival audio recordings of public hearings were transcribed as well. Reviewing the transcripts for accuracy allowed me to conduct an initial review of interview data to identify emergent themes. This is largely an inductive project, where analysis was informed by the data collected during my autoethnographic and participant observations (via fieldnotes), interviews, and archival data. However, due to the volume of data, I began with a brief deductive analysis phase before returning to open coding to identify themes and categories.

To begin analysis, I reviewed notes taken during participant observation and autoethnography to develop an initial coding frame that also connected to themes that I was interested in exploring through my research questions. In this brief deductive phase of the project, I relied primarily on etic codes that connected to research questions (Cloke et al., 2004). Examples of codes at this stage included: “landlord law avoidance,” “tenant displacement,” “money/exchange value,” and “tenant care.” I then moved to inductive coding, analyzing the data for emergent themes that were missed during deductive coding. Examples of codes during this phase include: “fair/fairness,” “abandonment,” “community,” “cleaning,” and “good tenant.” I identified the types of landlord-tenant laws with which tenants were interacting (e.g., rent increase notices, repairs/pests, eviction); the relationships of care they discussed (e.g., landlord-tenant, tenant-tenant, tenant-state); and ideas that tenants held for the future. I then identified themes across each of these broader code categories.

While this project is guided by a conceptual framework that draws on care theory, coding for care in my dataset was both etic and emic: while I was in some cases coding for care when participants used other terms (such as support), in other instances tenants were using the language of care themselves to describe encounters or experiences. I conducted this analytical process separately for archival and interview data from each empirical site, before reading across the codes and dataset to identify connections, relationships, and differences as shaped by time and place. Approaching analysis in this way allowed me to remain rooted in the relational comparison nature of the project: instead of comparing the ways the sites were similar or different, I was able to identify themes that connected and shaped them.

Following the manual coding process, I employed analytical tools available in ATLAS.ti on interview data to confirm that I had adequately identified prominent themes discussed by tenants in Vancouver and Seattle. Figure 5 offers an example of how these tools were utilized.



ethnography as I consider the role of digital spaces, power, and care in each phase of data collection and analysis. The data described in this chapter serves as the basis for the arguments and analysis developed in the remainder of this dissertation. In each chapter, the central goal is always to centre the experiences of tenants, past and present, in Vancouver and Seattle. Too often in housing research tenants are not turned to as those with housing expertise or valuable insights and my hope is that the following chapters contribute to addressing this issue.

## **Chapter 4. The State Care Paradox: spatializing historical infrastructures of intimacy and violence in landlord-tenant laws of Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC**

Early in the day on May 20, 1991, about 100 people handed out sandwiches to those experiencing homelessness who were living in a small park. After giving out food, people began a march through the streets of downtown Seattle, Washington. They walked past about a half-dozen abandoned buildings and empty sites that had previously provided affordable housing. In the last decade, Seattle had lost nearly half of the low-income housing units in the downtown neighbourhood, which had also seen the development of a new convention centre, which contributed to an increase in property values in the area. The housing activists finally arrived at their last stop: The Arion, an abandoned 39-unit apartment building previously home to low-income residents, that now sat empty and boarded up. The building had been cited with a number of code violations by the city's Department of Construction and Land Use, including: missing floor, wall, and ceiling coverings, broken plumbing, cockroach and rodent infestations, and missing guardrails on stairwells, which was a safety hazard.

The activists made their way into the building, occupying the space and began to tidy it up. They removed plywood from windows, hung Christmas lights on the walls, and draped banners from the fire escape. Floors were swept, walls were washed, and furniture was brought in. They also painted signs on the boarded up windows, which read: "We Reclaim," "Home Sweet Home," and "It's Alive!" (Haberstroh & Williams, 1991). About two dozen housed and unhoused activists settled into the building, where they slept for several nights. Calling their protest Operation Homestead, activists told *The Seattle Times* that they intended to contact the

property owner and ask them if the activists could fix up the property so that it could be used to house people once more. Members of the movement, including John Fox of the Seattle Displacement Coalition, said Operation Homestead was organized in protest of Seattle city government failing to enforce its own law, the anti-abandonment ordinance (Haberstroh, 1991). A response to a broader affordable housing crisis, the anti-abandonment ordinance was enacted in one of several government attempts to slow the loss of downtown low-income housing, by mandating that property owners could not simply abandon buildings into disrepair as a way of escaping other legal requirements related to zoning and land use. The director of the International District Public Authority met with the building owner about the occupation and reported, “Yes, she is upset. She’s just a business person, and someone is trespassing on her property. On the other side, we do need low-income housing in the city, and there are too many vacant buildings. There are points on both sides” (Haberstroh, 1991).

The housing activists had not expected to stay in the building as long as they did—previous occupations had lasted a few hours before they were forcibly removed by police. In the occupation of the Arion, police were frequently present and at times even engaging with the protestors. *The Seattle Times* reported one police officer saying, “The homeless is one issue – it’s real and it deserves to be addressed. But there’s a second issue for us – enforcement of the trespassing laws” (Haberstroh, 1991). Yet, the police did not evict the housing activists from the building until the owners asked them to, and, “despite sympathy for the protesters’ cause,” Seattle’s mayor Norm Rice directed the police to enforce the law. Operation Homestead’s occupation of the abandoned building was forcibly ended by the state (*The Seattle Times*, 1991).

The responses from the state, the property owner, and the housing activists begin to illustrate the myriad and often conflicting ways that practices and politics of care arise in

responses to housing crises. Care is the provision of emotional or practical support and is multidirectional, relational, and power-laden. Feminist geographic framings of care are typically theorized through Tronto's (2013) elements of care: taking care of, caring about, caregiving, care receiving, and caring with. Practices of care describe care labour and how this work occurs, whereas politics of care describe the ways that care is understood, valued, and imbued in relation to societal structures. In Operation Homestead, housed activists were caring for and with unhoused activists, by materially providing shelter and demanding the state enforce its own laws. The Seattle government temporarily expressed a desire to care through not immediately evicting the occupation, but via police they quickly prioritized the landlord and property over the survival needs of low-income people. While increasingly care is recognized as a critical part of our lives and societies, the experiences and work of care remain unequally distributed, racialized, and gendered (Lawson, 2007).

As the impacts of housing crises continue to shape most global North cities today, feminist geographers have begun to theorize a relationship between care and housing, including how housing can be an 'infrastructure of care'—in terms of how housing is provided, experienced, and understood (Power & Mee, 2020). Notably, contemporary housing crises are hegemonically framed as a temporary emergency that has a solution, rather than a condition inherent to racial capitalism. A crisis is not an exception, but rather evidence that the system is working precisely as it was designed: predicated on inequalities, displacement, and violence (Madden & Marcuse 2016). Thus, when considering state responses to housing crises, we must critically analyze them through a framework that takes seriously the ways that a racial capitalist, settler colonial housing system delimits who has access to housing, capital, and property. As in the case of Operation Homestead, property is held as superior to the lives and housing needs of

urban residents experiencing homelessness or housing precarity. The state, including municipal governments and police institutions, upholds, reproduces, and benefits from this system that is fuelled by violence in, and displacement from, cities.

In order to deepen our understanding of housing as an infrastructure of care at the urban scale, we must consider the role of the local state in developing and upholding care infrastructures. This caring capacity is shaped by the state's role in upholding racial capitalism and settler colonialism. In this paper, I aim to disentangle the local state's care capacity at this nexus of desires for care infrastructure and a racial capitalist, colonial housing system. State care has been examined at the scale of the nation-state (through federal programs and theorizations of the welfare state). Yet, local state care warrants further examination because of the differential intimacy felt at the urban scale between urban residents and their governments. At the urban scale, the state primarily performs care through the law, but its caring capacity is defined as a reaction to a system that it is shaping and reproducing. State care is thus always unequal—borne out of and molded by violent systems. This paper examines how state care is performed through the law, at the urban scale, and how state care for tenants has been shaped by logics of an unequal housing system and shifts towards neoliberal urban governance in the 1970s-1990s. In considering housing as care infrastructure, I argue that the local state is a care paradox: an intimate and reactionary regulator of harm that determines who is deserving of care, when, and how much, under a fundamentally unequal and violent housing system. Through the examination of two state care infrastructures that were implemented in response to urban housing crises in Vancouver, Canada and Seattle, USA between 1969-1990, I theorize the paradoxical nature of state care through these infrastructures. I explore how tenants experience state care and how state

actors perceive their role as providers of care to tenants; the ways that state care in cities is often shaped by multiscalar state responses; and state care for landlords and property.

I begin with a discussion of the theoretical framework that brings together current literature on feminist care geographies of the state and care infrastructure; legal geographies of property and housing; and urban geographies of urban governance and the state. I then provide a brief discussion of the methods used. I follow with an exploration of role of care in state responses to housing crises, with a focus on the impact of infrastructures of care via landlord-tenant laws and an analysis of the impact of a racial capitalist, settler colonial housing system on the capacity and nature of state care for low-income tenants. The paper concludes with a discussion about how the limits of local state care can be understood in the broader context of continuing to rely on care infrastructure to support the needs of tenants navigating housing crises.

#### **4.1. Urban geographies of housing and state care**

Experiences of housing in Vancouver and Seattle are inescapably shaped by settler colonialism. Settler colonialism describes an ongoing process of colonial power whereby the colonizers occupy land and displace and forcibly remove Indigenous people from their territory. Because the settlers never leave, settler colonialism is an ongoing violent process in a permanent “structure of incompleteness”: settler colonialism is always in a state of creating new ways to displace, erase, and maintain power and one of the central ways this is done is through property (Blatman-Thomas & Porter, 2018: 14). Rather than being a demarcated event, settler colonialism is an ongoing effect and series of relationships that uphold existing power hierarchies, including

through property and housing, while constantly dispossessing Indigenous people from their lands and territories (Radcliffe, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Bhandar, 2018).

Racial capitalism intersects with, and strengthens, settler colonial power (Dorries et al., 2022). Racial capitalism describes the ways that capitalism relies on social separateness, structural racism, and white supremacy in order to operate successfully. Drawing on early work from Cedric Robinson (1980) and the Black Radical Tradition, theorizations of racial capitalism emphasize that all capitalism is racial capitalism and that, “Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only be accumulated by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” (Melamed, 2015: 77; Kelley, 2017). This also shapes understandings of property, and in turn, housing. While recognizing the important differences and distinctions in how racial capitalism and settler colonialism operate and oppress (Dorries et al., 2022), under a racial capitalist, settler colonial system, property is tied to whiteness, where whiteness is protected under the law as a property-holding subject (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; McElroy, 2020). Power is allocated to property holders and property rights are upheld. This means that when it comes to housing, the rights of white private property holders, including homeowners and landowners, are privileged over the non-propertied class. Together, racial capitalism and settler colonialism protect the power of property as a form of structural domination as well as “organized abandonment” by the state of racialized peoples (Gilmore, 2007; Pulido, 2016).

From the 1970s to 1990s and beyond, shifts in urban governance models continued to uphold these social orders and contributed to a still-ongoing racial banishment project in cities in the global North (Roy, 2017; Cowen, 2020). This era of urban politics was marked by a shift in the 1970s from managerial urban governments whose focus was on redistributing city revenues

towards decentralized urban governance that decreased public services and increased public-private partnerships, or New Urban Politics (Rossi & Vanolo, 2011; Elwood, 2002; Ward, 2014). The accompanying rise in neoliberal policies contributed to urban entrepreneurialism: where cities were increasingly outward-looking and strategizing to attract capital and investment through boosterism, local growth machines, and public-private partnerships (Harvey, 1989). These political shifts are always shaped by the underlying operations of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, which underscores the importance of theorizations of urban politics through questions of how, why, and for whom decisions about urban life are being made (McCann, 2017).

In these interlocking structures of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, the state is both benefactor and sovereign of these systems. Because these systems also privilege property and whiteness, this means that experiences of housing must always be theorized through this framework. Experiences of housing are shaped through other socio-spatial processes as well, and disproportionately so for low-income tenants who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, as well as those who are queer, trans, gender-non-conforming, or women. In this paper, my focus is on the ways that functions of racial capitalism and settler colonialism limit the state's capacity to care, but these processes and their impacts on marginalized tenants with different intersecting identities are inseparable (Crenshaw, 1991). I engage the work of Blatman-Thomas and Porter (2018: 31), who critique that, "Analyses of settler colonial cities that do not set out to be 'settler colonial analyses' often fail to make visible the underlying and prevailing relations of race, power and space and the settler colonial relations keeping them intact." Instead, they urge urban scholars to "theorize from settler cities ... foregrounding the particular spatial and social expression of settler colonial power dynamics" (2018: 31; Hugill, 2017). Following this urging,

in this paper I theorize state care always through racial capitalism and settler colonialism: these systems are inherent and inseparable from urban care politics and relations.

#### **4.1.1. Local state everyday geographies**

The state describes the intersection of a clearly defined territory with a population impacted by the systems of governance, government institutions and infrastructure, and coercive and symbolic power, like a police force (Smith, 2020; Jessop, 2020). While there has long been a geographic focus on the state as an actor, recent discussion has shifted to conceptualizing the state effect which challenges ideas of the state as ‘one entity’ and instead emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the state to include all the agencies, actors, and people that support and uphold the functioning of the state. There has also been increased focus on statization, which suggests this multifaceted stateness has intensified the presence of the state in our everyday lives. This can make it difficult to separate out the state from other social structures or processes (Smith, 2020). When considering the relationship between the state and care, I am particularly interested in the everyday, mundane practices of the state—the ways that statization shapes experiences of housing crises through tenants’ everyday interactions with the state and state processes. At the urban scale, theorizations of the local state<sup>4</sup> are a useful starting point: with roots in Marxist analysis, the local state describes localized agents of the central state—such as local administration of federal public housing programs in cities (Holcomb, 2006). According to Holcomb (2006: 281), early theorists understood “the role of the central state as maintaining conditions for capital accumulation/capital production, whereas the local state supports capitalist

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<sup>4</sup> While the local state can also refer to state actors and processes at the State level (as in the U.S., for example), in this paper I am focused specifically on the state functions in cities and using local state to understand these urban contexts.

reproduction.” Focusing primarily on a class analysis, Cockburn (1977) asserts that this reproduction is twofold: the ways a capitalist system reproduces itself through, among other things, the state caring for the labour force (i.e., social reproduction: see Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Katz, 2001) including through the welfare state; as well as the reproduction of structured capitalist relations, such as employer-employee and landlord-tenant. The local state thus manages and reproduces these relations and ensure that these social structures that racial capitalism relies on continue to safeguard its power. I use Painter’s (2003: 371) definition of the local state as referring to: “simply any part or agency of the state that operates over part of the national territory with a degree of autonomy from the central state. It includes, but is not limited to, elected local governments.”

As urban governance structures have shifted since the 1970s (McCann, 2017), so too have local state theorizations—including local state as both agent and obstacle to the central state (Duncan & Goodwin, 1988); regulation theory (Goodwin et al., 1993); and local state in urban entrepreneurialism (Leitner, 1990). As cities through their shifting governance politics continue to take on more responsibility and prominence, arguably local state theorizations retain a particular relevance (Derickson, 2018; Leitner & Sheppard, 2016). Yet, our most frequent urban interactions with the state can sometimes pass by unacknowledged as being the work of the state, largely because the reach of the state has become pervasive and inseparable from social reality (Blomley, 1994). Painter’s (2006: 753) work on the ‘prosaic aspects of the state’ is useful here: “this intense involvement of the state in so many of the most ordinary aspects of social life.” A consideration of the prosaic state dispels the notion that the state occupies a distinct aspect of social life and moves between different social spheres; challenges the idea of the state as a bounded, distinct entity; refutes suggestions that the power and influence of the state is in

decline; and shines a light on the key role of state processes on the widespread and uneven geographies of state power (Painter, 2006). Thus, engaging with prosaic aspects of the state helps us to understand the local state as a series of complex and entwined relationships and processes that shape everyday urban lives.

Canaday et al. (2021: 1) argue that the state's "effects, as they are absorbed into ordinary lives, become at times indistinguishable from society itself." Yet, many urban lives are directly, though unequally, shaped and limited by the local state through law. Since the 1980s, legal geographers have long argued for a nuanced attention to the co-constitutive relationship between law, space, and power, considering how "law is (and has always been) embedded in the world rather than hovering above it in some disembodied way" (Bennett & Layard, 2015: 417; Blomley & Clark, 1990). Moreover, feminist geographers have recently demonstrated the need to employ an intersectional analytic in order to consider "how law reproduces inequitable power dynamics" (Cuomo & Brickell, 2019: 1045). An intersectional analytic facilitates an understanding of the impact of law not only through whether or not it is enforced, but also how law is experienced differently through an individual's own intersecting identities and structural social hierarchies (Cuomo & Brickell, 2019; Gorman, 2019). Through this embeddedness between law and power, the law shapes space and vice versa, thus producing our social reality (Delaney et al., 2001: xv). The sociospatial impact of law and the state carries forward into the realm of housing as well (Blomley, 2004, Hubbard & Lees, 2018). As Freeman argues, "The decisions of local governments and the limits of local law directly impact the most precarious tenants in our cities" (2017: 2).

#### **4.1.2. Feminist care infrastructures of housing**

As state-declared housing crises have long plagued cities in the global North, local state reactions to, and definition of, crisis warrants further interrogation (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). Understanding local state responses to housing crises is strengthened when analyzed through feminist care geographies. Care, which is the provision of practical or emotional support, occurs both as a practice and as a politics (Lawson, 2007). Care is relational, multidirectional, and unevenly experienced and unequal work. Hegemonic care discourse suggests that there are particular social groups who are ‘deserving’ of care, particularly care distributed by the state.

This was exacerbated as neoliberal urban policies took hold in the 1970s, as the restructuring of the welfare state in both the U.S. and Canada meant that the realm of what crises responses were acceptable and possible, and who was deserving of these types of state care, began to change as well (Gustafson, 2011; Hancock, 2004; Schram & Soss, 2015; Elwood & Lawson, 2018). This restructuring has contributed to a ‘care gap’ where there is a mismatch between the availability and accessibility of care and the care needs of society (England & Alcorn, 2018; England, 2010). Due to the broad withdrawal of the welfare state and changes to the provision of social services in the U.S. and Canada, urban scholars writing from these places have also taken up questions of the shadow state—the increasing reliance on non-profits, volunteerism, and ‘community’ to address the care gap left by the collapse of the welfare state that largely began in the 1970s and has escalated since (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003; Trudeau, 2008; Brown, 1994; Power et al., 2022). Alongside the shadow state, we are left with questions of whether the local state is even capable of caring at all, when so often the semblance of state care falls short or fails completely (England, 2017; Smith, 2005; Yu & Xue, 2023).

One pathway through which to consider state care within the context of racial capitalism and settler colonialism is through the longstanding histories of care theory and action rooted in the work of Black and brown organizing and disability justice (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Most recently this work has been taken up through the lens of radical care, which centres these histories and underscores the role of mutual relationships of care in ensuring survival in spite of state violence (Edelman, 2020; Herrera, 2015; Herrera, 2023). An engagement with these histories and ongoing work is crucial not only in developing our understanding of care under a racial capitalist, settler colonial system, but also because feminist geographies of care have been repeatedly called upon to engage with postcolonial theory (Raghuram, 2016), address whiteness and cis-heteronormativity in much of the discipline's care theory (Seiler, 2020; Malatino, 2020), and expand and challenge the boundaries of care (Bartos, 2019; Lewis, 2018), including through considerations of concepts of 'uncaring care' (Bartos, 2018) and the role of care in responding to unequal housing systems (Power, 2019).

The relationship between care and housing is relatively recent in its conceptualization. Care in housing includes activities like creating varied housing structures, enacting policies that create safe and secure housing, and tenant rights education. Tenant experiences of care in housing is also shaped by landlord-tenant relationships, tenant tenure, affordability, and interactions with the state and housing market (Ruming & Zurita, 2020; Power & Gillon, 2019; Easterlow & Smith, 2004; Clark et al., 2022). Increasingly, housing is conceptualized as an infrastructure of care (Power & Mee, 2020; Power & Williams, 2020). Through the broader 'infrastructural turn' in the social sciences, infrastructure includes socio-technical systems and tools that structure the "possibilities of urban life." Alam and Houston (2020) argue that

conceptualizations of care as alternative infrastructure both draws attention to the work of care and can open up new possibilities for how we relate to one another and structure societies around the care that is a necessary function of our everyday lives.

Extending this to housing, Power and Mee (2020) suggest that housing performs as care infrastructure through materialities, markets, and governance—how housing can be spaces of care, as well as the relationships of care that occur within different housing types, the role of so-called care-full housing policy, and housing markets that frame housing as individual responsibility centred around investment and profit. They argue, “Infrastructures are thus not simply enabling or limiting but can also become sites for political context and change” (Power & Mee, 2020: 489). I suggest that much of local state capacity for care operates through infrastructure: for example, through the development of law and policy and the oversight of low-income housing development and preservation. Yet, infrastructures are often theorized at the national or global scale when they also hold an intimate role in our everyday lives.

The state’s relationship to the intimate is helpfully articulated through conceptualizations of intimate geopolitics, though the focus is predominantly on the role of the nation-state. This work has illustrated that the state’s capacity for violence in war and conflict includes intimate forms of violence, including at the scale of the body (Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Mountz & Hyndman, 2006). Though, there remains a need for further examination of the relationship between local state spaces, intimacy, violence, and care. Considering intimacy in local state spaces is necessary because urban residents on the ‘social margins’ “most often see and feel the state intruding into their ‘innermost private lives’” (Higginbotham 1991: 265, cited in Canaday et al., 2021: 14). As Gorman (2019: 1064) demonstrates, “Institutions and states are tied to intimate violence through their decisions about (non)intervention.” Drawing on the histories of individual

rights movements for LGBTQ people and women, Canaday et al. (2021) theorize ‘intimate governance’ as the use of expansive state power to regulate at the intimate scale, through our identities and marriage, family, and sexuality, and thus create rigid social order.

Moreover, there have been calls to expand urban geography to more effectively engage with everyday and intimate politics (Datta, 2016; Datta & Ahmed, 2020; Knopp et al., 2018), and more broadly, a call for an ‘intimacy turn’ across the discipline where closer attention is paid to “everyday intimacies” (Walsh, 2018; Valentine, 2008; Lulle, 2021). I suggest that we need to further develop our understanding of the intimate housing care infrastructures at the urban scale in particular, that begin to tease out the complexities that exist at the nexus of local state, housing, and care politics. Questions of how the state provides or regulates housing in crisis as an infrastructure of care for urban residents experiencing housing precarity remain prescient.

In this paper, I bring together geographical theorizations of the local state, care, and housing to address a gap that remains across these literatures: an understanding of the intimate local state care roles in responding to housing crises and how this role is placed in conflict with the state’s occupation as benefactor and violent enforcer of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. Within these intersecting contexts, I consider the following: How does the state conceive of and enact care in its responses to housing crises? How is this care limited by the state’s role in reproducing and upholding racial capitalism and settler colonialism? While urban residents perhaps reasonably expect a level of care from the local state in housing crisis, the state is ultimately embedded within a racial capitalist, settler colonial system that relies on, and reproduces, the same crises the state is responding to with its care. In order to conceptualize this paradoxical relationship, we need to understand the role of intimacy and violence in theorizations of local state housing care infrastructures.

### 4.1.3. Local state archives

I engage archival materials to analyze two cases that I theorize as care infrastructures developed in local state responses to housing crises in Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA. Specifically, in Seattle I examine the case of the Housing Preservation Ordinance (HPO), a short-lived and lawsuit-plagued landlord-tenant law passed by city council in 1980 that aimed to slow the loss of low-income housing. In Vancouver, I analyze the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board (RAGB), a municipal entity that mediated conflicts between landlords and tenants from 1969 to 1975. These cases were selected because, despite their distinct geographic contexts, they have a similar lifespan: enacted in local state responses to urban housing crises during the heart of the shift to neoliberal urban governance, the HPO and RAGB were initially presented as success stories. Yet, while still in their infancies, other actors began to react to these care infrastructures, fighting to have them removed or amended so that they, within a few short years, were rendered illegal or ineffective.

In drawing on cases in Seattle and Vancouver, I conduct a relational comparative analysis of these two cities. This methodological approach does not attempt to simply analyze the similarities and differences between two places: rather, the goal is to understand the ways that a place is shaped by, and connected to, its relationship to another, and in doing so better understand the ways that power flows through state care in settler colonial cities (Ward, 2010; Elwood et al., 2017; Robinson, 2016). For example, Vancouver and Seattle operate in different welfare states and in environments with distinct government-citizen relations, so we would expect responses to housing crises in the two cities to be different, but they also mirror one another in surprising ways. Vancouver and Seattle each enacted a number of new landlord-tenant laws in the 1970s in response to urban housing crises. Vancouver's new laws took effect a few

years before Seattle, which resulted in Seattle actors blaming Canadian investors and their foreign capital for an exacerbated housing crisis. Dominant discourse suggested that foreign investors were looking for a more pro-investment (i.e., anti-tenant) environment in order to maximize their capital and profits. As McCann and Ward (2011) suggest, all places are truly “assemblages of elsewhere.”

Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2020-2022, I analyze files from the City of Vancouver Archives and the Seattle Municipal Archives, both of which are the primary archives of their respective local state. These local state archives help us to understand how the state perceives its own care responses, show some of the ways tenants interacted with the state during housing crises, and suggest what documents the state determined were worthy of preserving. Archival materials included city committee agendas and minutes, audio recordings of public hearings and government meetings, records of board proceedings and decisions, press releases, and communications received by local state actors from urban residents.

To complement the municipal archive materials, I also analyzed newspaper articles from the *Seattle Times*, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Province* to provide additional empirical context as well as to illuminate how state actors were talking about their care work in the media. I approach the archives through feminist methodologies, considering the ways that archives are always incomplete and inaccurate narratives of history and spaces shaped by complex relations of care (Stoler, 2002; Sant et al., 2020; Moravec, 2017; Wideman, 2022; Marshall & Tortorici, 2022). Moreover, archives themselves are intimate spaces: in the ways tenants’ experiences of crises are laid bare, through the preservation of violent acts that are given new permanence, and in the reproduction of cisheteropatriarchal, racist, colonial power

structures that historicize and normalize limited perspectives and identities. The municipal archives, too, are a tool of the local state.

I will now turn to the empirical cases of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board and the Housing Preservation Ordinance to consider the state care paradox, analyzing the relationships between local state care, intimacy, and violence in housing crises, as shaped by a racial capitalist and settler colonial urban context.

## **4.2. Regulator of Harm: Vancouver's Rental Accommodation Grievance Board**

Following demands from Vancouver Tenants' Council (VTC), in September 1969 the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board (RAGB) was established in Vancouver under Bylaw No. 4448. At the time, a number of factors left tenants vulnerable to landlord actions. There were no restrictions on evictions, so often tenants advocating for their rights were simply given a Notice to Vacate in retaliation. Vancouver's low vacancy rates meant that landlords could do this with a reasonable expectation their unit would not be left empty, whereas tenants were left scrambling to try to find a rental that met their needs and budget. In an effort to address this, the Board was tasked with mediating conflicts between tenants and landlords and was authorized to settle grievances. Common grievances between landlords and tenants included improper notice of rent increases, unauthorized entry by the landlord, accommodation standards, excessive or withheld damage deposits, and repair issues. With an office located on the ground floor of City Hall, tenants and landlords could contact the RAGB in a number of ways, including in-person, phone, or letter. Three board members were appointed by City Council for three years each, with one of those members also being appointed chair of the board. Board members had to live in

Vancouver for at least two years prior to their appointment, could not be aldermen or city employees, had to be electors and had to be either a Canadian citizen or other British subject.

The board members were W. Orson Banfield (chair), a former city alderman who worked in real estate until he retired in 1960; Reg T. Rose, who worked for 25 years with the Vancouver Board of Trade; and Theresa Galloway, past president of the Vancouver Council of Women<sup>5</sup> and one of the “city’s biggest boosters,” whose husband was a landlord (Vancouver Sun April 26 1981). The Vancouver Tenants’ Council was deeply critical of this board membership, pointing to an absence of tenant representation. Bruce Yorke, secretary of the VTC, said, “The present structure of the board has resulted in tenants throughout the city lacking any confidence in it” (Vancouver Sun, May 1 1973). Ultimately, the RAGB was set up as a way to mediate the impacts of the housing crisis on low-income tenants and as such is a state-produced infrastructure of care. Cowen (2020: 479) writes of the ways that examining infrastructure as both object and method of inquiry “reveals the imperial and colonial contexts out of which cities emerged and expanded.” Thus, a close examination of the RAGB infrastructure in terms of how local state care was provided, the limits to this care, and who is perceived as deserving of state care illuminate the reinforcement of structural inequalities brought forth through local state care infrastructure in responses to housing crises.

#### **4.2.1. Types of local state care**

In its first year alone, the board dealt with 378 grievances, the majority of which ruled in favour of tenants. The Rental Accommodation Grievance Board office also responded to letters,

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<sup>5</sup> The Vancouver Council of Women was a federation of 45 local organizations which included Planned Parenthood, YWCA, and the Salvation Army. The organization’s goal is to “work for the betterment of conditions pertaining to the family and the state” (Vancouver Sun, April 26 1982).

phone calls, and in-person visits where people asked for help as they navigated a landlord-tenant conflict. When the RAGB was first established, they were granted the power to arbitrate conflicts between landlords and tenants, in addition to their advisory capacity where they answered questions. Tenants or landlords contacted the board to ask for help resolving an issue and if the matter could not be efficiently resolved, they would then file a grievance. The board held grievance hearings regularly—as demand grew they were eventually having four hearings a week over two days. If someone did not follow a Board-issued order, they were subject to a fine of up to \$500 or imprisonment up to three months, or both. The hearings were held for the first 3.5 years of the board’s existence, before their arbitration powers were reallocated to the provincial government through changes to the Landlord and Tenant Act. Once hearings were no longer permitted, the board was still able to provide some advice to tenants but predominantly were referring tenants to other agencies or to the Small Claims Court to try to resolve the conflict.

Through these practices, there are a number of types of local state care that were provided to tenants. In this section, I focus primarily on the care relationship between the RAGB and tenants because the people reaching out to the Grievance Board were overwhelmingly tenants. This too speaks to who relied on the services of the Board and who experiences the greatest imbalance of power between themselves and landlords.

The first and most significant form of local state care provided to tenants was help in navigating landlord-tenant laws and guiding tenants through the process of upholding their rights. This occurred through sending copies of relevant bylaws, translating legal jargon and explaining how it applied to the tenant’s case, and explaining which parts of the law were relevant to a person’s individual situation. This care practice subverted power hierarchies that

limited who was able to use the law to their benefit under racial capitalism. With local state care, tenants were able to enforce the law and very briefly interrupt the cycles of racial capitalism that facilitate and prioritize the maximization of profit for property holders and normalize tenant displacement.

However, tenants writing letters to the board were writing because their landlord was not following the law, either through ignorance, negligence, or intentionally breaking it. Often, this resulted in eviction, tenant displacement, tenant loss of money, and in many cases, physical and verbal violence conducted by landlords against tenants. Sometimes the violence occurred when tenants advocated for their rights, but violence would also occur as a form of harassment to get tenants to move out so that landlords could raise the rent (Alderman Harry Rankin, 1973-74). Typically, the failure to follow the law resulted in more capital for the landlord: through withholding security deposits, rapid and high rent increases, evicting ‘bad’ tenants, and not completing repairs. In their letters to the Board, tenants wrote about their landlords’ disregard for the law. As one tenant wrote, their landlord said “the law did not mean anything to him” (Alderman Harry Rankin, 1973-74). Landlords’ contempt towards the law speaks to the protection and power propertied subjects are afforded under racial capitalism: as Bonds (2019: 4) argues, “Property is reproduced through racialized and gendered social relations, enshrined in capitalist markets, protected by the law, and vigorously defended by the state.”

Often, when tenants first contacted their landlord to educate them about the law, tenants included in the letter that they had sent a copy to the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board or that they had been in touch with the Board. The meaningfulness of this to tenants is illustrated in their positive expressions of gratitude to the Board, expressing thanks to the board for their “kindness” and “courteous attention to my problem” (Complaints, 1973-74a). Actions by the

Board had important material impacts for tenants as well: from getting their electricity turned back on to getting refunds from their security deposits. One tenant wrote, “It is indeed good news to hear that the board found for us. Both my wife and myself had quite given up on the issue and so were most happy to hear of your decision” (W.J. French, 1970-71). The surprise expressed in this letter speaks to the normalization of landlords successfully failing to follow the law and maintaining their power as property holders. Moreover, the gratitude exhibited by tenants for local state care demonstrates the centrality of local state actors in their everyday lives (Painter, 2006). The Board’s function as authoritative overseer is a second form of local state care: as a form of landlord surveillance that tenants can call on to feel that they are not alone in navigating their situation. This relationship manifests care as social control: in terms of state surveillance of landlords, as well as ensuring that tenants continue to turn to the local settler state as a legitimate and powerful institution (Alam & Houston, 2020; Porter & Kelly, 2022).

The third type of local state care experienced by tenants in the context of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board occurred when the board communicated with landlords directly. While sometimes the board suggested strategies for how the tenant should communicate the landlord-tenant laws to their landlord, in the initial years of the RAGB the board would more often reach out to the landlord and instruct them to follow the law. This appeared to be effective, but if the landlord still failed to follow the law the tenant had the option of filing an application for a grievance hearing. When the board contacted the landlord directly, they were able to use the power they have as local state actors to address housing inequalities. Importantly, though, they were also redistributing care labour from tenants onto themselves. Care work is often disproportionately done by people who are low-income, racialized, and gender minorities and this is reinforced when tenants experiencing housing precarity are forced to enforce and navigate

the law themselves in order to receive care in their housing (Green and Lawson, 2011; Cox, 2013). While tenants still have to do a lot of care work when landlords break the law, by contacting landlords the board is using its power to reduce the overall amount of that labour.

#### **4.2.2. Limits of local state care**

While these local state care practices arguably increased the amount of care tenants experienced in their housing, there are limits to how much care can occur and who receives this state care. These limits are shaped by what Marcuse (1978: 21) theorizes the “myth of the benevolent state,” or the idea that the “government acts out of a primary concern for the welfare of all its citizens, that its policies represent an effort to find solutions to recognized social problems, and that government efforts fall short of complete success only because of lack of knowledge, countervailing selfish interests, incompetence, or lack of courage.” He argues that this is false because state benevolence is performative as state interests align with those of the private market. Extended through care, this holds true—though it is not only the private market, but more specifically private property that is protected.

When tenants wrote into the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board asking for help, they were effectively demanding local state care for themselves, in a system that does not care for non-propertied subjects. Notably, not all tenants would feel able to demand care from the state, that they deserve state care, or that it would be worthwhile to complain in the first place. Following a longstanding project of racial banishment in cities (Roy, 2017), local state care is predominantly inaccessible to urban residents who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, reinforced by the structural “organized abandonment” by the state of racialized peoples

(Gilmore, 2007; Pulido, 2016; Rodriguez, 2022; Summers & Fields, 2022). Moreover, as Ahmed (2021: 1) points out, “to be heard as complaining is not to be heard.”

When considering local state care, we must begin at the starting point that who can demand local state care, and who will receive it, is shaped by racism that “enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires” (Melamed, 2015: 77). In this way, the local state acts as a regular of harm in a settler colonial racial capitalist housing system: while care infrastructures like the RAGB are effective in providing care for some tenants, local state processes determine the scope of infrastructural violence and abandonment: which harms, to whom, and how much are acceptable (Alam & Houston, 2020; Gilmore 2007, cited in Cowen, 2020). Before the state cares, harm has to be rendered. In this way, racial capitalism is able to still function as designed through crisis, social separateness, and protecting property, while the state determines when a care intervention is necessary (Melamed, 2015). For this reason, there are very explicit boundaries on the practices and politics of local state care infrastructures like the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board. There are concrete ways that these boundaries were present in the everyday operations of the RAGB.

First, the actual structure of the RAGB was often critiqued by the Vancouver Tenants’ Council (VTC) for not adequately representing tenants. The VTC argued that all three members of the RAGB held real estate interests, either directly or through their spouse or family. The VTC also took issue with the timing of the grievance hearings: while they occurred twice a week, all of the sessions were during daytime hours. Bruce Yorke, who at the time was the secretary of the VTC, told The Vancouver Sun newspaper that, “it is inconvenient for the ordinary tenant and probably the landlord to attend these meetings.” Yorke also stated that tenants had expressed “complaints which we consider to be serious” to the VTC about the attitudes of RAGB staff

towards tenants (Vancouver Sun July 4 1970). There were other boards set up at this time in Vancouver's neighbouring cities and the VTC pointed out the difference in structure between boards as a way to broaden the understanding of what was possible in the development of this care infrastructure.

In some cases, particularly once the RAGB lost the power to hold grievance hearings, the duration of letter exchanges between the RAGB and tenants lasted for months. The abundance of time required for low-income people to access care is paralleled in Miewald and McCann's (2014) work on individuals accessing charitable food programs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. The concerns of the VTC about the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board illustrate that while some tenants were able to receive local state care through this infrastructure, the design of the board and its operations placed limits on who was able to access this care—for example, by being able to take time off work to attend hearings or by having the time and ability to follow up with their case if they did not receive a satisfactory result.

Beyond needing time to demand care for themselves, tenants also wrote to the board after they had already moved or been displaced to other cities, especially when they were trying to get security deposits back from their landlords, or to provide care to other tenants who still remained behind and feared landlord retribution if they came forward. Collective care between tenants challenges hegemonic discourse about who is a caregiver versus care-receiver, as well as addressing care gaps left by local state care (Rodriguez, 2022; Power, 2019; Thompson, 2022). Tenants' fear was warranted, as is illustrated by a case in early 1973. A tenant filed forms with the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board to request a grievance on behalf of other tenants in the apartment building in early 1973. The landlord then came to the RAGB office to look at the grievance forms and looked at the names of tenants who had filed the grievance. The RAGB

received a call from one of the tenants, who reported that the landlord visited her, “and had been very abusive regarding her signature on the petition, and had as a result greatly intimidated her.” The tenant asked that her name be removed from the petition, “saying that she did not refute anything on the petition, but that she was afraid that if she did not comply with Mr. [Landlord]’s demands that she delete her name, she would no doubt get a Notice to Vacate.” A few days later the grievance was fully withdrawn, though reports from other tenants stated that nothing had improved in terms of the tenants’ living conditions (Memos, Appeals, 1973).

This case powerfully illustrates the significant impacts that the limits of local state care have on the everyday housing experiences of tenants. Because local state actors released the names of tenants to the landlord, the landlord was able to use the information to intimidate tenants into retracting their grievance. Here, the RAGB did not provide effective care to account for the power imbalance between landlords and tenants in a housing system that privileges property owners. In actuality, the state would not benefit from addressing this imbalance: as in the case with a solution for the ‘environmental racism gap’ that Pulido (2017: 6) describes, to solve housing inequalities “would be too costly and disruptive to industry, the larger political system, and the state itself.”

Further, the RAGB placed its own limits around care. In reports to city council where board chair Banfield would describe the RAGB’s work and impact, it is apparent that the board believed they were providing support, protection, and care to tenants. In communications with tenants, however, the board made clear the limits of their care and capacity: that their care was always bound by the word of the law. For example, if a tenant wrote a letter describing that their unit was always cold, but the landlord had been providing heat at the required temperature described in a bylaw, there was no issue. If a tenant described that a rent increase was so high

that it would result in their displacement or inability to purchase other necessities, but the rent increase notice adhered to the bylaw notification requirements, the board would respond and say that there was nothing they could do. For example, to one tenant the board responded: “We have noted that you have been given a high rental increase, but unfortunately this Board has no jurisdiction with regard to the amount of rental increase, but it does have jurisdiction regarding the time given to a tenant for a rental increase, ie: (sic) 3 clear months’ notice” (Grievances in abeyance, 1970-71). These types of responses that excuse profit-generating actions demonstrate how laws were used to protect the power of property-holders and profit.

#### **4.2.3. Deserving Local State Care**

Tenants felt the limits to local state care and in their letters described to their landlords and to the RAGB their life circumstances that rendered them deserving of care within these limits. Whether it was pregnancy, pain, illness, children in school—tenants frequently bared intimacies in their life to illustrate why they should not be evicted or given a rent increase. As one tenant wrote: “I know we older people, alone, are a problem, Mr. [Mayor], but we do live on?!?” (518 32 A 2 F4). In other cases, tenants felt it was hopeless to try to get local state care: “I could send you a copy of my rental increase but what good would it do. You’re a millionaire already. To hell with us – ‘let them eat cake,’” a tenant wrote, signing their letter “Les Miserables” (sic) (Complaints, 1973-74b). Tenants were forced to make visible their intimate lives in an attempt to fit themselves within the boundaries of local state care and the normative categories of who is deserving of this care, particularly from the state—such as seniors, children, and low-income people (Elwood & Lawson, 2018; Elwood et al., 2017; Green & Lawson, 2011).

Whether someone is deserving of local state care is also shaped by structural exclusion through everyday operations of the settler state and prioritization of property and capital. For example, communication with the RAGB and grievance proceedings were all conducted in the English language. Minutes from hearings often recounted when tenants and landlords had friends or family attend with them to help them navigate a system that privileged people who spoke English: “Mrs. [Tenant] was not too familiar with the English language and requested that Mrs. [Friend], a friend, speak on her behalf” (Minutes Nov. 69-June 1970, 1969-70). In some cases a landlord’s other tenants served as a translator for the landlord. Cuomo and Brickell (2019: 1046) argue for the importance of, “unpacking the way racism and sexism remain embedded within the law to show how the law shapes legal subjectivities and who becomes grievable.” The dominance of English as a language is rooted in settler colonialism, whereby legal proceedings were conducted in the language of the colonizer—as a means of eradicating and erasing language and culture, as well as to enforce a power dynamic where procedures (including the signing of land treaties) were conducted in English to obfuscate understanding of process and uphold white supremacy, which continued in the practices of the RAGB (Lipsitz, 1995).

Sociospatial processes that upheld structural racism were not limited to grievance hearings. While board infrastructure made it easier for some tenants to access care than others, tenants themselves also told the board who was deserving of care (or not), in ways that uphold racial hierarchies. There was great concern from urban residents at this time about the impact of “foreign capital” on the housing market, and specifically capital coming from investors in the Asia Pacific and “Hong Kong interests” (Complaints, 1973-74b; Mitchell, 2004). Such comments express longstanding anti-Asian racism in B.C., rooted in settler colonialism and imperialism (Cowen, 2020). In some cases, the language of ‘citizenship’ was employed as a way

to mark racialized groups differently. In the context of the RAGB, perceptions of citizenship led to the positioning of some people as more deserving of care and access to housing and property, as evidenced in this letter:

These people are here just for material gain. Should they be allowed to buy so much? Is the money circulated here or does most of it go to Hong Kong? ... Our [slur for Asian people] Canadians are not like this. I have friends among them – they are fine citizens. But, I understand these investors are not even citizens? (Complaints, 1973-74b)

Another tenant wrote first to their representative in the federal government, whose office then passed on the letter to the RAGB. The tenant identified themselves as a senior, pensioner, and veteran who lived in a single-room occupancy hotel and who was dealing with a rent increase. They wrote: “There is a down right [sic] piece of injustice and racial discrimination being perpetrated right here in your own constituency ... I am the victim of it.” The tenant goes on to describe the rental increases and the notices they received from the landlord. The tenant explains that their rent is paid through their pension and veterans allowance, “which in my opinion amounts to a government subsidization to this Chinese Landlord” (Chronological File A, n.d.).

This illustrates conceptions about the identities of an urban resident who is deserving of state care depending on how other residents include or exclude them, often through the label of ‘citizens’. This is always shaped through power structures inscribed in racial hierarchies. As Melamed (2015: 77) describes, “Contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders.” In the letter above, the tenant is informing state actors that their landlord is not deserving of this type of state care, through this “subsidy” because of how they pay their rent.

When local state actors expressed the limits to care, as described above in the case of rent increases, they also illustrated who remained deserving of care. As the RAGB wrote in one response: “It would seem that your landlord is merely catching up to the average monthly rate for a two bedroom suite in a highrise building, by asking you to pay \$240.00 per month” (Chronological file B, n.d.). In another: “Unfortunately, we are unable to determine whether or not the rent is justified, and we have no authority whatsoever, to set any increase less than the rent requested, we must admit that the Landlord has gone out of his way to explain the reason for the increase, and it does appear as if he has justified his proposed change in rent” (Chronological file B, n.d.). In both of these responses, local state actors effectively align themselves with the landlord and normalize the displacement, rent increases, and violence of a system that privileges property-holding subjects. As Summers and Fields (2022: 3) describe, “The view of land and housing as a fungible commodity is rooted in a colonial concept of property evacuated of any ‘historical memory, social use, kinship ties, or other relations’” (citing Bhandar, 2018: 85). Responses to tenants justified prioritization of property and profit, laying plain the local state’s active role in reproducing racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

These examples reveal that the limits of who can access, and who is deserving of, local state care function to protect the processes that facilitate ongoing dispossession of tenants and inscribe power into property and the settler state. The RAGB is a reactionary form of care, responding to an unequal and violent housing system that the state reproduces. Local state care infrastructures are about regulating harm: they are not proactive or preventative but rather determine who is deserving of care (and harm), how much, and when. Tenants who had the privilege of time, spoke English, and were able to navigate bureaucracy enough were able to access local state care provided by the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board, but this care

was always limited and unevenly experienced and accessed. The RAGB, as local state care infrastructure, was only established once tenants were already being harmed by housing crisis and more broadly, an unequal housing system. The creation of local state care infrastructure that prevents harm altogether is not possible in the present sociopolitical imaginaries of housing and care.

Any felt care impacts of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board were short-lived. By 1970, a revised version of the Landlord and Tenant Act in British Columbia was enacted by the provincial government. The changes placed the types of duties performed by the RAGB under provincial jurisdiction, in effect rendering the Grievance Board's very existence in contravention of the law. The RAGB continued to operate in a legal grey area until 1972 when the Small Claims Court determined that these provincial changes did in fact move the RAGB's powers under provincial jurisdiction, further confirmed in a 1973 BC Supreme Court decision (*The Province*, Feb. 1 1974). After 1973 the Grievance Board had virtually no authority to oversee landlord-tenant relations and essentially became a referral agency. As the news was received by the staff and members of the Grievance Board of their inevitable demise, there was a notable shift in the tone of their responses to tenants. Banfield referred to the role change as "the muzzling," saying: "Now we just give telephone advice: we direct the complaint to the proper agency or court. That's the problem—we've been told to lie down and be good boys" (*The Province*, Feb. 1 1974). On February 18, 1975, Vancouver City Council passed a motion terminating the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board altogether. The Grievance Board ceased to exist, after having only been in operation for less than six years, and having any measurable authority for less than four.

The rapid decline of a state tool like the Grievance Board, an infrastructure of care designed to regulate the harm of a racial capitalist housing system, was not a story unique to Vancouver. A few hours south in Seattle, Washington, a similar saga began to unfold just a few years later. In the next section, I turn to the case of Seattle’s Housing Preservation Ordinance to analyze the ways that local state caring capacity towards tenants is further complicated by the power of multiscalar state actors.

### **4.3. Local state intimacy and violence: Seattle’s Housing Preservation Ordinance**

The late 1960s and 1970s were a time of change and increased housing precarity for residents of Seattle. Despite the enactment of an open housing ordinance in 1968, in response to racist housing discrimination via redlining and racially restrictive covenants, there continued to be unequal access to housing. Further, employment rates were struggling because of the ‘Boeing Bust,’ where the aerospace company Boeing laid off 60,000 people in one year. There were also low vacancy rates of less than one percent in most of Seattle’s neighbourhoods, due to little construction of new rental units, the conversion of low-income housing into condominiums, and the withdrawal of the federal government’s financial support (Seattle Municipal Archives, 2021). Federal funding in Seattle dropped from \$42-million in direct housing assistance from the federal government in 1980 to \$3-million in 1987. The situation was dire enough that a couple of real estate agents put up a billboard in April 1971 that read, “Will the last person leaving Seattle – Turn out the lights” (Historylink.org).

One of the neighbourhoods disproportionately impacted by the loss of low-income housing was Seattle’s downtown, which was experiencing widespread displacement and

increased housing costs as a result of redevelopment in the area, including the construction of a new convention centre. The U.S. Census in that year reported that there were at minimum 10,000 low-income people living downtown and this neighbourhood was also home to a significant percentage of the city's overall affordable housing, including single-room occupancy hotels, and social service providers.

In response, pressured by demands from housing organizers to implement new and stronger tenant protections, Seattle City Council discussed a number of new landlord-tenant laws, one of which included the Housing Preservation Ordinance. Originally passed in 1980, the HPO aimed to slow the loss of low-income housing. Instead, it transformed into a legal fight that plagued the City of Seattle from 1980 to the early 1990s, as people clashed over how affordable housing should be preserved and provided, and, importantly, whose responsibility it was to make sure that housing was available to people with low or fixed incomes. In this section, I will focus on key moments in the history of the HPO that help us to consider the ways that local state caring capacity is necessarily shaped by multiscalar state interests, local state intimacy with tenants, and local state responsibility to prioritize care for property over care for non-propertyed tenants.

#### **4.3.1. Local State Intimacy**

When the Housing Preservation Ordinance was first passed in July 1980, it charged a licensing fee to property owners seeking to demolish their low-income housing property or to “convert residential property to more profitable uses” (City of Seattle, 1989: 4). If the property owner replaced the building with similarly priced housing, then they could avoid paying the licensing fee altogether. The HPO, or Ordinance 109220, was ultimately a de-incentivizing tactic

to reduce the overall profitability of building use conversion. The ordinance also created a low-income housing replacement fund, provided tenant relocation fees for displaced tenants, and enacted penalties for ordinance violations—it created a series of policies that offered local state care to Seattle tenants. However, these limits on developer profits meant the city found itself in a series of lawsuits over the next several years, the most prominent of which was by landlords San Telmo Associates. Many of the lawsuits would end up ruling in favour of the property owners.

Before the lawsuits were filed the HPO was already facing issues from within the state itself. In 1981, Councilmembers Benson and Sibonga filed a series of amendments that would effectively weaken the HPO by removing many of the developer fees. Then in 1982, the state government of Washington amended a law that effectively invalidated the HPO by rendering it illegal for a municipal government to impose taxes or fees on the construction or reconstruction of residential buildings. Yet, the Seattle City Attorney disagreed, arguing that it was just a “regulatory enactment” and recommending the city continue to enforce the HPO (Robinson v. City of Seattle, 1992). Local state enforcement of a law made illegal through other state actors illustrates the complex relationship between different state scales when it comes to state care. The City of Seattle continued to enforce a law that aimed to reduce housing precarity for low-income residents, while the Washington government continued to prioritize the needs of property owners. This illustrates the relative intimacy of local state care for Seattle tenants, even as the longevity of these infrastructures was limited by multiscalar actors. Following Cowen (2020: 479): “Through infrastructure that is at once imperial and intimate, the city is assembled.”

The role of local state intimacy is clear in residents’ communication about the Housing Preservation Ordinance, evident in residents’ expressions of a felt proximity to local state actors like city councilmembers and staff. They often emphasized that it was the responsibility of the

municipal government to intervene in the loss of affordable housing. Both residents and city actors suggested that it was a responsibility to care for “the elderly,” “the homeless,” and “the poor” that necessitated the implementation of an infrastructure like the HPO. As one resident wrote:

Without large fees, there is nothing to prevent developers from tearing down what little affordable housing is left in our city. Increasing relocation assistance may be helpful, but it just doesn’t address the issue of how to protect our existing housing stocks. (Housing Preservation Ordinance, 1981).

Following the myth of the benevolent state, this resident’s sentiment implies that local state roles are to protect city residents from the precarity produced by an unequal housing system (Marcuse, 1978). These types of direct asks for help, and care, from the state illustrate the intimate relationship that occurs between local states and residents that is not experienced in the same way at other scales of the state. This is further strengthened through the intimacy in the space of housing, and housing’s capacity as a potential site of home and care (England, 2017; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). A representative of the League of Women Voters described this when they said: “The City is working to achieve a balance between protecting the purity of the investment process on the one hand, and protecting the helpless people who are affected by the play of economic forces on the other hand. We believe the proposed ordinance represents a good attempt to achieve this needed balance” (Urban Development, 1984). In this statement, the speaker is positioning low-income people as helpless and deserving of state care, while also simultaneously suggesting that the protection of profit is equally valuable. Suggestions that the HPO was important in order to care for particular social groups also align with normative ideas about who is deserving of state care and under what circumstances.

The withdrawal of federal support for housing during this time period, through the growth of neoliberal housing policies and the shrinking of the welfare state, were often cited as urgent reasons for why the city needed to take responsibility for the protection of low-income housing. As one tenant wrote, “The crisis of homelessness demands this kind of government intervention” (Constituent Mail, 1984-1985). Tenants expressed gratitude to the city council for their hard work and efficiency on establishing the HPO as “an ordinance designed to protect Seattle’s people” (Housing Preservation Ordinance, 1981). Often local state actors were positioned as allies of city residents, both groups fighting against together against the “greedy developers” (Housing Preservation Ordinance, 1981). As one tenant wrote:

We need all the low-cost housing we can get, and we definitely don’t need developers to come in and tear down housing we already have. Please don’t let the developers take it away. We can’t count on the Feds for any help anymore and things are worst on the poor. (Housing Preservation Ordinance, 1981).

A failure of non-local state actors to develop infrastructures of care in housing crises had residents turning to local state actors instead. This parallels Pulido’s (2017: 7) assertion that, “Far too often the state is seen as an ally, or neutral force. Indeed, even when people lose faith in the state, they often still turn to it because there is no other apparent alternative.” Specifically turning to the local state reinforced an intimacy with the scale of the state seen to be most able to have a positive impact on the everyday lives of residents and their neighbours, while simultaneously reinforcing recognition of the legitimacy of the settler state (Painter, 2006).

Though, in some cases residents were asking for local state care for the city itself, expressing concerns about Seattle’s reputation and liveability, as well as hoping that the state could take action to ensure that Seattle stayed an “attractive and healthy” city (Housing Preservation Ordinance: Amendments, 1981). In one particularly notable postcard, a travel agent

who stayed at the Seattle Sheraton and complained that he encountered too many “street people” on his visit:

I was approached time and time again within a block of your lovely hotel by panhandlers. A nearby Wendy’s was full of the most awful looking winos I have ever seen. Someone said it was because Seattle pays alcoholics some sort of relief. Vancouver, on the other hand, was exquisite; a hands-down favorite over Seattle. (Constituent Mail, 1984-1985)

The postcard was passed onto the mayor of Seattle, with a letter that said, “It is unfortunate that our city is leaving this impression, and more unfortunate that it invites unfavorable comparisons with Vancouver” (Constituent Mail, 1984-1985). In this exchange, the concerns are that the city is not being adequately cared for, rather than urban residents themselves. Precariously housed and homeless people are positioned as ‘problem’ to be managed through state intervention. This example helps us to understand how the shifts in urban governance to be increasingly outward-looking and entrepreneurial also shaped care politics by city actors. Demands that the city be cared for in this way are demands that physical urban infrastructure be cared for: like sidewalks, public spaces, and downtown towers. This type of care is conceptualized by Bartos (2018) as ‘uncaring care’: care that does not fuel and uplift life, but rather causes violence and harm by upholding social power structures. In other words, this is a demand for local state care of land and property: prioritizing property and capital over life.

#### **4.3.2. Local state violence**

*If the city wants to preserve low-rent housing on a large scale, it should pay for it. Or those who benefit—the citizens—should pay.*

*Howard Hagar, investor in San Telmo apartments (Anderson, 1986)*

While the initial enactment of the Housing Preservation Ordinance served to reinforce the intimate relationship between urban residents and the local state, the response to the HPO by real estate actors that led to a rapid end of the law illustrates the duality of local state care: that it is shaped by a felt intimacy as well as a protection of profit and violent processes of displacement.

In 1983, property investors San Telmo Associates were awarded an injunction against the HPO by the King County Superior Court because the HPO was ruled to be a violation of state law. The city did not appeal, as they were already in the process of amending the HPO. In 1985, they enacted a revised version of the HPO, Ordinance 112342. The key difference between the two was that there was no longer a mandatory payment to be made to the city: rather, developers would have to replace a percentage of the low-income housing lost through demolition, but would not have to pay at all if the payment would deprive the owners of an economically viable use of the property. The HPO-2 also still accounted for tenant notice and relocation provisions for displaced tenants.

In 1986, San Telmo Associates filed another lawsuit against the HPO, and the King County Superior Court again ruled that the ordinance was unauthorized given state law. This time, the City of Seattle appealed the decision, and continued to enforce the HPO against everyone except San Telmo. The case advanced to the Washington Supreme Court, which in 1987 ruled that the housing replacement requirements were invalid under state law. The judgment stated:

We sympathize with the problem created by the low income housing shortage in the city of Seattle. However, the City must cure this problem by the lawful exercise of powers granted to it by the constitution and the Legislature ... Nevertheless, the City may not constitutionally pass on the social costs of the development of the downtown Seattle area to current owners of low income housing. The problem must be shared by the entire city, and those who plan to develop their property from low

income housing to other uses cannot be penalized by being required to provide more housing. (*San Telmo Associates v. City of Seattle*, 1987).

At this time, the city attorney advised that the housing replacement requirements should no longer be enforced, but the tenant relocation provisions could continue (*San Telmo Associates v. City of Seattle*, 1987).

The *San Telmo* case places state care for property and property owners in opposition to state care for low-income urban residents. The initial resistance from the City of Seattle to respond to demands from property owners is unique because typically the governance of property falls under local state jurisdiction through property taxes and other similar governance structures (Valverde, 2005). These care infrastructures point to the conceptualization of property as a spatialized object, rather than a series of interconnected relationships embedded within processes of power (Blomley, 2004).

In 1987, R/L Associates, another property developer, filed a lawsuit against the City of Seattle arguing that the tenant relocation policies were against state law, and the King County Court ruled in their favour. The City once again continued to reinforce the HPO against everyone except R/L Associates while they appealed the decision. As a result, in 1988, R/L Associates secured a contempt judgment from the King County Court. In 1989, the City appealed the 1987 decision in the Washington Supreme Court, which they lost (*R/L Associates, Inc. v. City of Seattle*, 1989). Into the early 1990s, there were also a number of additional cases filed against the city from property owners, most of which ruled in favour of the property owners. These cases indicate hegemonic discourses around property rights, in particular through repeated claims by both county and state courtrooms that the City of Seattle was impeding property owners' rights to do with their land as they pleased via an "unconstitutional tax" (*San Telmo Associates v. City*

of Seattle, 1987). Changes to Washington State law to protect the “owed profit” of property owners under racial capitalism point to the ways that “under increasingly neoliberal housing regulation, non-state actors shape the actual outcomes” of state laws and municipal housing policies (Sullivan, 2014: 479). Yet as Blomley (2009: 586) asks, “Why should I receive the increased value of my home when it was society at large that created that wealth?”

In 1988, the City of Seattle declared a low-income housing emergency in their downtown, and enacted a moratorium on the issuing of permits or decisions for demolition or change of use on low-income housing sites in the downtown. The moratorium included penalties for violations and lasted for approximately three years.

It would be simple to frame the Seattle city government as the hero in the HPO story, as local politicians caring for their low-income residents but being thwarted by the legal system, property owners, and multiscalar state actors. Yet, the issue is more complex. Throughout their letters, city residents repeatedly turned to the local state as caring actors relative to the uncaring developers who only sought profit, as these excerpts illustrate:

Legislation should be developed and enacted that serves as a deterrent [sic] to any over zealous [sic] profit seeking land redevelopment activities and or proposals that threaten to reduce and not replace decent, safe and affordable low-income housing. (Constituent Mail, 1984-1985)

Developers and owners are responsible for the consequences of their actions. I believe that it is reasonable for the city and its citizens to require owners and developers to use their property in a socially reasonable manner. (Low Income Housing - Constituent Mail, 1984-1985)

While the city did enact the HPO, this is a law that was made necessary due to a housing crisis exacerbated by other state processes (Marcuse, 1978). Around this time rent control was rejected

and the city approved development plans for a new convention centre: that in many tenant letters was cited as a key reason for the widespread loss of low-income housing and displacement in Seattle's downtown neighbourhoods. While some Seattle residents feel more intimacy with local state actors than other state scales, and through this feel local state actors are "on their side," an argument could be made that this othering of developers and speculators is a creative local state tool behind which to hide their role in reproducing the very crises they are responding to with laws like the HPO. Melamed (2015: 77) describes the "seemingly infinite creativity" of states that is mobilized to enact racialized violence. This creativity, through care infrastructures like the HPO, maintains a myth of intimacy that is useful in the settler state's retention of power.

Individual tenants and housing activism groups wrote letters to the city government expressing their concerns about who was receiving local state care. One tenant noted that when an inspector from the Department of Construction and Land Use came to inspect an issue in their apartment building, the inspector went directly to the building manager instead, who then lied about the conditions of the tenant's apartment (Housing Preservation Ordinance, 1981). Irene, another Seattle resident, wrote a letter to the Urban Redevelopment Committee to express support for the HPO and made an observation about public hearings:

What strikes me at every hearing, however, is the absence of any testimony by the developers and/or property owners, the supposed opposites to these ordinances. Their absence is often alluded to in a humorous manner at the hearings. But, I believe this to be a very serious problem. The members of the Downtown Seattle Association are members of the public. Their access to the City Council ought to be the same as the rest of the public. If they do not express their views to you at these hearings, when are they doing it? I suspect blatant circumvention of an open public process in this area. (Constituent Mail, 1984-1985)

These sentiments suggest that while there is a performance of care through infrastructures like the Housing Preservation Ordinance, outside of the public arena the local state remains beholden to white property owners and capital, preserving and upholding the power of property under racial capitalism. This is not to discount the care enacted for tenants by individual local state actors, who in many cases had material impacts on the lives of tenants in crisis: care relations are always complicated where the care provided by individual actors may extend beyond local state institutional or formal care capacities (Mee, 2009).

Notably, the Housing Preservation Ordinance was itself a neoliberal housing policy where the state was assigning the responsibility of providing low-income housing to private developers. While local state care was performed for low-income tenants through an insistence of the importance of the HPO, simultaneously the local state shifted the responsibility of care to the private sector and the shadow state. The shadow state describes the role of volunteerism and non-profits in care provision (Brown, 1997; Wolch, 1990). This is illustrated clearly through a statement from Michael Hildt, a councilmember who sponsored the original HPO legislation:

The strong market for investment and redevelopment in Seattle is a great asset. The loss of lower cost housing, however, is a serious side effect. Neither government nor the private sector can cope with this deepening shortage of housing for the poor. Neither can, nor should, be expected to bear the entire burden. The Housing Preservation Ordinance is a beginning in the delicate but urgent task of seeking a shared responsibility in the process of redevelopment. (Housing Preservation Ordinance: Amendments, 1981).

While the HPO did slow the loss of low-income housing temporarily, what does it mean when neither local state nor private sector will own the role they play in the displacement and violence of an unequal housing system, while simultaneously refusing that they are the ones who should care?

## 4.4. Conclusion

Under racial capitalism and settler colonialism, local state responses to housing crises are shaped by an allegiance to private property, whiteness, and profit over non-propertyied subjects. The power of property extends into the caring capacity of local states in developing housing care infrastructure. Power et al. (2022: 1174) urge us to develop a nuanced understanding of care and care infrastructure, by “attending to its benefits and harms, differentiating care practices that enable survival but that are inadequate, problematic or harmful, from those that support flourishing and wellbeing.” I argue that attending to these benefits and harms in settler colonial contexts necessarily requires theorizing care in housing through the analytical lens of racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

In this paper, I engaged this approach through theorization of the sociospatial processes of housing care infrastructure in local state responses to housing crises. I focused on the case of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board in Vancouver and the Housing Preservation Ordinance in Seattle. In analysis of these cases, I demonstrated that local state care results in material and felt impacts for tenants experiencing housing crises, but the limits and deservedness of local state care are shaped by the protection of private property and profit. Ideas about who deserves local state care under racial capitalism is enacted through the mobilization of citizenship discourse rooted in structural racism and white supremacy.

The forms of local state care and the limits placed on the practices and politics of state care demonstrate that local state care infrastructure is developed largely as a regulator of harm and are reacting to harm that has already been rendered in a housing system that relies on social separateness and crisis in order to operate as intended. Further, I argued that the intimacy felt

between urban residents and their local states are shaped by multiscale state relations, discourse about who is responsible for providing housing in crisis, and demands that state care prioritizes caring for private property and the “owed profit” under racial capitalism above all else. These types of intimate relations then shape local state violence, where creative local state tools are employed to legitimize settler state power while permitting and creating housing crises. Together through these analyses, I theorize the state care paradox: where local state care is an intimate and reactionary regulator of harm who determines who receives care and when, always limited by core elements of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that privilege property and devalue people and places.

Conducting local state care analyses through a relational comparison of cases in Vancouver and Seattle helps us to understand how racial capitalism and settler colonialism shape experiences of housing and care at the urban scale, despite the distinct national contexts of these two cities. Local state care infrastructure in Vancouver is shaped by that in Seattle, and vice versa: we see this in the ways that Vancouver’s pro-tenant laws are blamed for the investment of Canadian capital in Seattle’s housing market and through the juxtaposition of Vancouver and Seattle in the postcard from the visiting travel agent. Local state care infrastructure is responding and reacting to these comparisons, particularly as cities increasingly at this time became extrospective. Moreover, there is value in tracing the ways that capital and profit in racial capitalist housing systems spatializes across settler colonial borders. This helps us to deepen our understanding of the magnitude of these power structures. The care infrastructure found in the Housing Preservation Ordinance and Rental Accommodation Grievance Board are different, yet they each shaped tenants’ experiences of housing crises and were limited by local state protection of property and profit over life.

The presence of the state care paradox does not mean that an organizing for local state care should be abandoned or that we should not demand more from local states in terms of housing policies that provide some protection from the precarity experienced in housing crises. To suggest this would be to ignore the very real, urgent, and dire needs of tenants in crisis. The local state care infrastructure provided in the form of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board and the Housing Preservation Ordinance made material and needed impacts on the lives of tenants navigating housing crises. Care in the form of housing must be demanded from local states. Developing a nuanced understanding of the ways state care is limited and why allows us to extend the possibilities of what lies beyond in alternative, wide-reaching housing futures.

We must also recognize that under the current racial capitalist colonial housing system, the state will never provide adequate care for tenants. Tenants can both demand local state care and recognize that there will be limits to this care. Local state care and the desires of landlords have a rhythmic, symbiotic relationship. Despite the felt intimacy between local state actors and urban residents, care for and protection of property and land ownership supersede the care needs of tenants. Yet, tenants' housing care needs are greater because of the precarity and displacement created by the racial capitalist, settler colonial system upheld and protected through the local state. Local state care will never effectively care for both tenants and property. While care infrastructures may be enacted in response to housing crises that momentarily care for tenants experiencing housing precarity, when pressed local state care will always care for property over people. This is the paradox of state care.

## **Chapter 5. “I hope you can help me”: Tenant careworkers and the accessibility of local state care infrastructure**

In the summer of 1974, as Vancouver, Canada faced a state-declared housing crisis, two female tenants received an illegal twenty-five percent rent increase from their landlord. The legal maximum at the time was eight percent. The tenants, Katherine and Deanna,<sup>6</sup> notified the landlord that he needed to provide proper notice, but still agreed to accept the increase—suggesting that he could use the extra money from the illegal increase to repaint their apartment. A couple days later, they received an eviction notice that was backdated to before the initial rent increase notice. They informed the landlord that because they had not received proper notice for the eviction, they would not be leaving their apartment. Less than a week later, their phone was disconnected and three men walked into their apartment unannounced, saying that an advertisement had been placed in the newspaper identifying their apartment for rent and stating that people should stop by whenever to look at it if they wanted. The tenants again contacted the landlord asking if they could have a discussion, which he agreed to but then did not show up. When they finally did talk to him, the landlord told the tenants that he wanted to evict them because they were messy and because he could get more money for the apartment than they were paying. Shortly afterwards, they returned home to find a bag of garbage spilled outside their front door. The landlord claimed that he had dumped it there because the tenants were a “nuisance” who “did not tie [their] garbage properly.” The tenants had also received a previous eviction notice from their landlord in January of that year, after they had asked the landlord to

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<sup>6</sup> All names of tenants and landlords have been changed throughout to pseudonyms. Names of public officials are unchanged.

install a fire extinguisher in the apartment building hallway. According to Katherine and Deanna, the landlord said that “it would get stolen and that anyway he was heavily insured and he didn’t care if the building burnt down.” The tenants determined that a landlord was not legally required to provide a fire extinguisher and so they bought their own.

The harassment continued for over a month. After their electricity was cut off, Katherine went to talk to the landlord in-person to ask him to turn the electricity back on. According to the tenants, he “proceeded to be rude and then said some extremely obscene things to her. As she left his apartment he shouted down the stairs ‘you pig – piggy piggy, oink, oink.’” The tenants sent yet another letter to their landlord a month after the initial rent increase notice, writing:

We have a long record of being good tenants and have no other desire than to live in peace and harmony with you and those around us. We do not wish to cause you any problems [...] We would like to mention that since our letter ... not only has your attitude to us been most unreasonable and unpleasant, but we have also suffered a steady succession of breakdowns to our apartment appliances. The telephone, hydro, toilet and oven have all ‘mysteriously’ suddenly gone out of working order one after the other. Of course, this may have nothing whatsoever to do with you, but merely be a series of coincidences, even though our conveniences never caused any problem before ... We would ask, however, that if you do have anything to do with all this, that you discontinue such childish pranks immediately. We look forward to the possibility of a more harmonious relationship with you. (Chronological File A, n.d.)

The tenants eventually went to Vancouver City Hall to meet with the Vancouver Rental Accommodation Grievance Board, local state infrastructure that was established in order to mediate conflict between landlords and tenants. Their in-person meeting was followed up with a series of letters to the board, detailing numerous exchanges with their landlord. The tenants stated that they wrote the letters because they wanted what happened to them to be on the record. The conclusion of the case is not documented in the archives.

I open with the story of Katherine and Deanna because their retelling of interactions with their landlord immediately lays bare the stakes of tenants' experiences of precarious housing. Simultaneously, we are able to see some of the ways that care also shapes tenants' relationships to housing. Care describes practices and politics of support and is relational work: in housing, this includes things like how tenants take care of their apartments, housing policies that aim to reduce housing insecurity, and tenants supporting other tenants in retaining their housing. In housing crisis, we increasingly see a turn to state-led responses to 'solve' housing insecurity and displacement, despite the retrenchment of the welfare state that took hold in the 1970s. Thus, care in housing can also be understood as an infrastructure of care: as "dynamic patterns that are the foundation of social organization" where care in housing is "iteratively shaped through housing materialities, markets, and governance" (Power & Mee, 2019: 485).

In the case of Katherine and Deanna, they reached out to local state actors through the infrastructure of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board to demand state care, when other state care infrastructure, in the form of landlord-tenant laws, were failing them. Prior to reaching out to the RAGB, they attempted to provide care for themselves and each other, by refusing to leave their home when the landlord was threatening eviction; by continuing to advocate for themselves and supporting each other as the landlord enacted violence and harassed them; and positioning themselves as "good tenants" who were not causing "problems." Yet, their care work for themselves and each other was only necessitated because of a housing system in crisis whereby landlords as property owners hold greater power than non-property tenants. This is aggravated by the ways that structures of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy are embedded within discourses, transactions, and experiences of housing and home. Not insignificant is the fact that these two tenants, who were women, were violently

harassed by their landlord, who was a man. His actions put their health, safety, and lives at risk through his decisions to prioritize housing as a source of profit rather than a potential site of home.

While Katherine and Deanna reached out to the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board for support upholding their rights under landlord-tenant laws, the capacity of local state infrastructure to provide care is always limited by state-embeddedness in a colonial racial capitalist system. Moreover, who feels able to demand care from state infrastructure in the first place is rooted in these same power structures and bound by ideas of social citizenship and the accompanying legal entitlement. Following Brown (1994: 5), citizenship describes “a political identity of entitlements and responsibilities that is (potentially) equally shared in a liberal democratic society.” Notions of citizenship are contested, but the concept of citizenship does help us to consider how rights are assigned through hegemonic liberal logics (Lister, 2000; Mouffe, 1992). Moreover, discourse on citizenship also illustrates what Pateman (1989: 183; cited in Lister, 2000: 44) describes as the “patriarchal separation” that treats “irrelevant to citizenship whatever occurs in the ‘private’ sphere and has thereby helped to sustain the power of male citizens.” Considering tenants’ rights posited through landlord-tenant laws is about the governance of housing relations that are at once tied to private and public spaces. In the context of pervasive housing crises, a focus on the impact of landlord-tenant laws as state-led interventions on tenants’ experiences of housing, warrants further interrogation.

Landlord-tenant laws are thus a crucial (though limited) form of state care infrastructure, particularly in housing crises and we must then attend to the ways that the laws and associated infrastructure offer care only through the addition of care work from tenants themselves. Tenants should be understood as the active care agents they are, contrary to hegemonic discourse that

perceives marginalized tenants as helpless and only able to receive care when it comes from others, such as state actors. In this paper, I engage archival materials to analyze the interactions between tenants and Vancouver's Rental Accommodation Grievance Board. I argue that overwhelmingly tenants are able to access care in housing crises only when they themselves provide extensive care work in order to either render themselves deserving of state care or provide labour that is necessary for the state care infrastructure to function. Because of the labour required to receive state care in housing crises, all tenants are therefore care workers: for themselves, each other, landlords, and the state. Further, I demonstrate that the required care demands from state infrastructure and landlords exacerbate violence experienced by tenants already navigating housing precarity. In what follows, I begin with an overview of extant literatures on theorizing cisheteropatriarchal relations in housing through a focus on private spaces and home, heteropaternalism and property, and care and housing. I then discuss methods used, before turning to empirical analysis and discussion of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board as state care infrastructure, landlord responses to care needs, tenants' role as crisis careworkers, and tenants' labour to challenge hegemonic care norms.

## **5.1. Cisheteropatriarchal relations in housing**

Access to housing is uneven and shaped by structural impacts of intersectional power. Cisheteropatriarchy, which embeds power in cisgender, heterosexual, and male identities, is one such axis of social power which shapes normative property relations and housing inequalities for housing systems in the United States and Canada. I draw on Arvin et al.'s (2013: 13) definition of heteropatriarchy as "the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent." Heteropatriarchal structures are reinforced through heteronormativity, which

normalizes an assumption that “individuals’ sexual identities conform to a social norm of heterosexual love, sex, and reproduction” (Hubbard, 2008: 643). The resulting spatializations and impacts of heteronormative power are complex (Knopp & Brown, 2003).

Importantly, Oswin emphasizes that “heteronormativity is not simply an expression of the valorisation of heterosexuality over homosexuality. Rather, it is a set of norms that makes not just heterosexuality, but particular expressions of heterosexuality seem right,” such as marriage, notions of domesticity, and nuclear family structures (2010: 260). Connecting “cis” to “heteropatriarchy” signals the ways that heteropatriarchal relations, through cisnormative constructs, reinforce gender binaries that limit legible gender identities to cisgender men and women, at the violent exclusion and harm towards a spectrum of genders, including transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary individuals. Cisheteropatriarchal structures embed cisnormative, heteronormative, and patriarchal hierarchies with power. Each of these normative structures intersects with additional power axes that uphold hierarchies of race, class, disabilities, citizenship, and other identities—or the non-cisheteropatriarchal other (following Oswin, 2010).

Therefore, cisheteropatriarchy describes the structural social organization of power that privileges and normalizes white, cisgender, heterosexual men. One way that such power occurs is through state support of heterosexual nuclear family structures through tax programs and other social supports, rendering heterosexual relationships as “legitimately public, and deserving of recognition” (Johnson, 2002: 325, cited in Hubbard, 2008: 643). Cisheteropatriarchal structures ‘other’ and devalue relationships, bodies, and identities that do not conform to this norm and this extends to housing and home (Reddy, 1998). Cisheteropatriarchy thus impacts housing systems and relations in a number of key ways, including: shaping conceptions of private space and the

home; heteropatriarchalism which reinforces housing as a masculine sphere; and normalizing relationships of the domestic economy through care labour. I will discuss each of these below.

### **5.1.1. Public-private spaces of housing and home**

Cisheteropatriarchal structures shape conceptions of private space and the home which in turn structure relations of housing and property ownership. The home is “arguably the most concentrated space of heteronormativity” (Peake, 2017: 2). While concepts of housing and home are often conflated, critical theorizations of the home have illustrated that it is a complicated space that can be supportive, safe, secure, and key to identity formation, though it can also be a place of instability, violence, and isolation (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; hooks, 1991; Elwood, 2000; Thompson, 2023). I utilize housing and home interchangeably in this paper not to collapse their distinctions, but rather to emphasize the ways the two concepts are entangled. Utopian ideals of the home have long been rooted in gendered relations that frame it both as private space and as a nurturing space created by women for men to return home to after participating in the public spaces of the city (McDowell, 1999). Massey highlights early characterizations of the place of home that are rooted in perspectives “from those who have left” rather than those who “stayed behind” (1994: 166). This is a reproduction of cisheteronormative nuclear family structures of husband, wife, children and the nature of these relationships (Peake, 2017). Home discourses that normalize these gender roles and power dynamics of heterosexual relationships are thus rooted in cisheteropatriarchal structures.

We begin to see a conflict in the public-private nature of housing when we consider that the commodification of housing occurs in public spaces of the market, yet in its role as shelter and potentially home it is positioned as private space. The fluidity of public/private boundaries

of space (and their deconstruction) has been well-theorized by feminist geographers, but housing is a particularly interesting site through which to examine these conflicting labels as it is often both at once (Domosh, 1998; Bondi & Domosh, 1998). Housing is private in that it is typically a domestic space and home. It is also public in that it is also a space of work, particularly for many domestic care labourers, and it is public as it is also a commodity through which property transactions and real estate capital flow. Private shapes public and vice versa; there is public in private and vice versa (Cofield & Doan, 2021; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2016; Catungal & McCann, 2010). Spaces of housing continue to challenge the boundaries of public and private spheres that have long been examined by feminist and queer theorists, while simultaneously remaining an elusive space where the responsibility of state actors to intervene is often contested (Smith, 2005). We can recognize the fluidity of boundaries between public and private space while also accounting for the ongoing ways that housing and home are coded as private spaces and the resulting impacts. As Peake (2017: 2) describes, “both public and private spaces [are] regulated through disciplinary discourses that normalize and fix heterosexual gendered and sexual behaviors and practices while rendering invisible nonheteronormative bodies.”

McDowell (1999) illustrates that long-held beliefs of the home as a ‘man’s castle’ have had lasting impacts on hegemonic discourses about housing and home. Home as the ‘man’s castle’ reinforces the cisheteropatriarchal power of men in property ownership and over housing in general. This logic places a cloud of privacy, secrecy, invisibility, and concealment over the home that normalizes gendered power relations in housing as well as gender-based or intimate violence (Datta, 2015; Brickell, 2011; Donovan & Barnes, 2020). McDowell (1999: 88) demonstrates that the ‘man’s castle’ narrative, “in combination with the idea of the home as a private place for personal relations, led to official tolerance by the state of unacceptable forms of

male power over women.” The associations between housing/home and private spaces shapes state responses to it.

### **5.1.2. Heteropaternalism and property ownership**

Structures of housing, property, and landlords are further gendered through processes of heteropaternalism. I draw on Arvin and colleagues’ (2013: 13) definition of heteropaternalism here, as “the presumption that heteropatriarchal nuclear-domestic arrangements, in which the father is both center and leader/boss, should serve as the model for social arrangements of the state and its institutions.” They note that both heteropaternalism and heteropatriarchy rely on “very narrow definitions of the male/female binary, in which the male gender is perceived as strong, capable, wise, and composed and the female gender is perceived as weak, incompetent, naïve, and confused.” Operations of heteropaternalism cement privilege and masculinity into property ownership because through the father as responsible figure and property ownership as the endeavour of a responsible citizen. Power and Gillon (2020: 459) remind us that, in a system where homeownership is “an expectation of responsible citizenship,” renters often perform the role of the ‘good tenant’ to compensate for their perceived “lack of responsibility or will to achieve home ownership.”

The impacts of heteropaternalism on property ownership are made clear in the work of McCann and Lovell (2020). As they describe:

Dominant groups of white property owners who allied with the state became both the lead actors and the self-appointed exemplars of desirable character traits for adjudicating entry by other groups seeking inclusion in the community of rights-bearing citizens over time. The premise that rights-bearing subjects must be disciplined, rational, and conventional to deserve rights provided a justifying, even motivating, moral logic for dominant groups to deny rights to select categories of racialized, disposable populations [...] those branded as inherently undisciplined

and prone to disorder and violence; those (including women) viewed as presently too undeveloped or weak in mind, will, or body to govern themselves but governable by disciplined white males; and those historically characterized as deficient in both regards but potentially civilizable by exposure to disciplinary socialization and incentives. (M. McCann & Lovell, 2020: 372)

Property ownership is always situated in cisheteropatriarchy and therefore, regardless of the genders or sexualities of individuals, the structural power embedded within cishteropatriarchy remains. The enforcement of gender norms in housing relations has consequences for those who are not protected by cisheteropatriarchal structures. Experiences of housing are always also intersectional experiences of a system that devalues anyone who is not white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, property-holding and a man (Crenshaw, 1991). This is illustrated through the uneven representation of tenants experiencing housing precarity who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, as well as women, disabled, queer, trans, gender non-conforming, or nonbinary individuals. For example, cis- and transgender Black women in the United States were disproportionately impacted by the targeted for subprime lending crisis following 2008, after having been targeted for subprime loans (Lichtenstein & Weber, 2013; Whitley, 2022).

Through the entrenched domination of white, male property owners and the ways their power is protected through an intimate relationship with the state, heteropaternalism therefore enforces what Massey (1994: 167) describes as, “the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life [which] have always been directed particularly at women.” The protected means of control over those who are not cisgender, straight, white men are upheld because of the challenges urban life presented to the power of cisheteropatriarchal systems.

### **5.1.3. Care structures in housing**

Cisheteropatriarchal structures grant institutional and structural power to landlords and property owners which establishes the context of landlord-tenant relationships. As a result, the ability of tenants to access care, from state infrastructure or elsewhere, must be theorized through the lens of cisheteropatriarchy. Positioning housing as private space shapes the possibilities for tenants' experiences of care, particularly in responses from the state.

Conceptualizations of housing sociospatial relations as cisheteropatriarchal are strengthened when brought into conversation with feminist geographies of care, as a means of theorizing the complex ways in which notions of the domestic and household economy operate (Byrd et al., 2018). I utilize Fisher and Tronto's (1990: 40) definition of care as, "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." Through Tronto's work, there are five categories of care: caring for, caring about, receiving care, caregiving, and caring with. Similarly to discourses about home, care too is problematically associated with private spaces and feminized labour. Analyzing care sheds light on the networks of relationships, lives, politics, and work that are typically undervalued or devalued under cisheteropatriarchy.

Understanding these networks is vital in comprehending how gender and heteronormativity shape experiences of housing crises, especially in how tenants interact with state infrastructure as well as how tenants interact with each other. Considering housing in relation to care is an emerging approach within the field of care geographies that emphasize the

strength in understanding housing through care theory, as a way of moving beyond solely market-oriented theorizations of housing and crisis and to instead focus on the everyday experiences, negotiations, and work of people experiencing housing precarity in crisis (Power, 2019; Desroches & Poland, 2023; Rodriguez, 2022; Bowlby & Jupp, 2020; Ruming & Melo Zurita, 2022). The relationship between housing and care includes activities like tenant rights education, developing supportive housing, tenant mutual aid, and enacting ‘caring’ housing policies. “Housing is understood as both a site and a resource of care”: housing offers a potential space where care work and relationships are navigated and negotiated, while also shaping care materialities through the provision of shelter and potential creation of home (Puszka, 2020: 3). In other words, this approach helps us to account for the ways housing might be sites of care work or as infrastructures of care that organizes the possibilities for urban life, within cisheteropatriarchal structures and beyond (Power & Mee, 2020).

As with housing, care complicates boundaries between public and private spaces, where care is often relegated to belonging in private spaces such as the home, but yet for many care workers this private space is also their workplace (England, 2010). Despite the fact that we all need care, care work is also devalued and underpaid. Care work is feminized and typically thought of as being “fulfilling” where lower wages are acceptable because of the personal satisfaction people get from caring for others (P. England et al., 2002). McDowell (1999: 81) emphasizes the entanglement between housing, home, care, and cisheteropatriarchy, where, “the home was constructed as the locus of love, emotion and empathy, and the burdens of nurturing and caring for others were placed on the shoulders of women, who were, however, constructed as ‘angels’ rather than workers.” Thus, whether paid or unpaid, care work is rooted in racialized and gendered heteronormative relations.

Care has increasingly become individualized, privatized, and more accessible to those who can pay (Green & Lawson, 2011; Cox, 2010). The restructuring and retrenchment of the welfare state in Canada (in its early stages in the 1970s through to full form by the end of the 1990s) (McKeen & Porter, 2003) has meant that state care infrastructure has become less available and more difficult to access (England & Alcorn, 2018; Smith, 2005). Moreover, as feminist theorists have illustrated, any restructuring or retrenchment of the welfare state is a refiguring of the relationship between the state, markets, and unpaid labour, including that which occurs in the home. Calls to expand the boundaries of care (Bartos, 2019) serve to challenge dominant ideas about who is deserving of care and who is a caregiver versus care receiver.

Dominant public care discourse also typically positions care relationships within a heteronormative gendered power hierarchy of the care provider holding power and care receivers being “vulnerable ‘others’” without power (Cox, 2010). This includes the paid care worker in a care home to the care-receiving senior, parent to child, shelter worker to person seeking shelter, and so on. While Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, queer, trans, women, and low-income people are disproportionately care workers, they are simultaneously also perceived as “vulnerable” and “other,” incapable of caring for themselves or each other and reliant on, for example, state care infrastructures while simultaneously also not being seen as “deserving” of state care (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). This aligns with what Crosby and Jakobsen (2020: 79) point to, drawing on the work of Grace Chang: “Care workers and those in need of help are in certain ways structurally aligned. Both are positioned as unproductive, a particularly precarious position given neoliberalism’s ever-increasing demands for productivity.” One impact of this is that often people have to wrestle within and against normative categories in order to be perceived as ‘deserving’ of state care infrastructure: whether through the struggle to access disability

accommodations from a university (Chouinard, 2010) or navigating the moral landscape of what makes a “good tenant” in an attempt to preserve housing security (Power & Gillon, 2022). The impact of these narratives about who cares and who is deserving of care thus often result in care that is uncaring and care that is violent (Bartos, 2018; Neely & Lopez, 2021).

The undervaluing of care results in a care gap, where the amount of care needed by all of us individually and collectively remains a need that is generally unmet (Rodriguez, 2020). To address this care gap, additional (typically unpaid) care work is conducted where people are caring for themselves and their communities. Despite the overwhelming presence and impact of cisheteropatriarchal care norms (Brown et al., 2014), low-income tenants, for example, care with one another by providing material resources, knowledge sharing, and offering childcare (Thompson, 2022).

Housing and care relations are deeply gendered. Analyzing these relationships through consideration of cisheteropatriarchal structures facilitates a deeper understanding of systemic contexts shaping tenants’ experiences of housing crises and the protection of property ownership through normative hierarchies of gender and sexualities. Considering these approaches across home and private space, heteropaternalism and property, and care and housing, there remains a gap in our understanding of the ways tenants’ care work is situated within cisheteropatriarchal relations and further, the differential work that is required in order for tenants to be deemed worthy of care and to access care infrastructures in housing crises. In what follows, I seek to address this gap, guided by the question: how do tenants conceive, experience, and enact care through state responses to housing crises?

## 5.2. Locating care in state archives

In this paper, I draw on archival materials from Vancouver, BC to analyze tenants' experiences of state care in housing crises and the labour of care work they must enact in order for state care to be available. Specifically, I focus on encounters between tenants and local state infrastructure between 1969-1975 to unravel the care work and relations that occurred between tenants and state actors, landlords, and other tenants. At this time, Vancouver was navigating state-proclaimed housing crises and local governments were seeking 'solutions' to their respective crises. Vancouver was also navigating broader shifts in urban governance: as cities became increasingly extrospective, entrepreneurial, and guided by neoliberal principles of privatization, competition, and individualism (McCann, 2017; 2013). This was compounded by broader impacts of neoliberalization that shaped the changes to the Canadian welfare state: while it was not completely eradicated, this time period was marked by a hollowing out of resources and capital that resulted in an increased reliance on individualized care or care responsibility shifted to the non-profit and volunteer sectors (McKeen & Porter, 2003; Chouinard & Crooks, 2008).

In Vancouver, tenants faced unrestricted evictions, rapid rent increases, and low vacancy rates. While eventually the government of British Columbia revamped the provincial Landlord and Tenant Act, Vancouver's local government passed a number of new tenant protections in an attempt to alleviate some of these impacts, but most notably they developed the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board (RAGB). During its tenure from 1969-1975, the RAGB served as a mediator between landlords and tenants and in its initial years also had the authorization to settle grievances. While the creation of the RAGB did not 'solve' the housing crisis, arguably this state care infrastructure had material impact on the lives of some tenants. In

what follows, I will analyze the nuances of these impacts and under what conditions state care was accessible to tenants.

From 2020-2022, I conducted fieldwork in Vancouver, on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish First Nations. I employ archival relational analysis of files gathered from the City of Vancouver Archives, which are the state archives at the urban scale in the city. In conducting a dual reading of landlord and tenant claims in relation to one another, I focus specifically on local state archives in order to assess how tenants interact with state actors and infrastructure, as well as interpreting how the state perceives state care obligations and efficacy. I analyzed materials included letters and other communications between local state actors and urban residents and organizations, petitions, press releases, audio recordings of public hearings and government meetings, city committee agendas and minutes, and records of board or committee proceedings and decisions. I also assessed newspaper articles from the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Province* which offer additional empirical context to events being described in archival materials. State archives also illustrate which materials were designated as being worthy of preserving. We can never know all that is or is not in an archive and this is especially true with state archives. Engaging feminist methodologies as a guiding compass, archives are understood as incomplete and inaccurate in their portrayal of history and are themselves representative of power relations shaped by cisheteropatriarchal, racist, colonial systems (Stoler, 2002; Sant et al., 2020; Moravec, 2017; Wideman, 2022; Marshall & Tortorici, 2022). When considering tenant interactions with state infrastructure, as represented in state archives, we must always consider who is not represented here, which is never fully knowable. As Trouillot writes, describing the moments at which history is produced:

These moments are conceptual tools, second-level abstractions of processes that feed on each other. As such, they are not meant to provide a realistic description of the making of any individual narrative. Rather, they help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner. Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly (1995: 27).

For example, it is likely that predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual tenants would feel safer demanding care from state infrastructures in the first place, because the colonial, cisheteropatriarchal, racial capitalist system protects whiteness and cisheteronormativity. To this end, I do not presume identities of individuals represented in the archives. Where identities are described in the below analysis, I am relying on self-identification of the person or group: through how they describe themselves explicitly or through letter sign-offs (e.g., Mrs., Miss., Mr.). Even as I rely on these formal signifiers, they represent cisheteropatriarchal relations and will not necessarily be wholly accurate or complete representations of those whose lives and experiences have been placed in state archives.

I will now turn to an analysis of tenants' interactions with local state care infrastructure, to consider the role of tenants as care workers for themselves, each other, landlords, and the state, as well as the care work from tenants that is required in order to access state care infrastructure in the first place.

### **5.3. Local State Care Infrastructure in Crisis**

In September 1969, Vancouver City Council passed Bylaw No. 4448 which established the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board (RAGB). The bylaw was enacted following tenant organizing in the city, including through the work of the Vancouver Tenants' Union. While there were some landlord-tenant laws that protected tenants, overwhelmingly an absence of restrictions

on things like rent increases, eviction notices, and security deposits mean that the power dynamic between landlords, as property holders, and tenants, as non-property subjects, was exacerbated. Even where there were laws governing the landlord-tenant relationship, an absence of oversight or enforcement weakened the efficacy of the laws for tenants. The Rental Accommodation Grievance Board was created in an attempt to alleviate some of these factors that exacerbated tenants' experiences of housing crises.

The role of the RAGB was to mediate landlord-tenant disputes and conflicts. If tenants or landlords had an issue with each other, they could reach out to the RAGB and ask for support or guidance on how to resolve the issue. From 1969 to 1973, city residents (primarily tenants) could file a request for a grievance hearing with the RAGB to resolve a housing dispute. The board was authorized to arbitrate landlord-tenant conflicts, via grievance hearings that were eventually occurring four times per week. Once the board issued a ruling on the grievance, anyone who did not follow the order could be subject to a fine of up to \$500 or 3 months' imprisonment, or both (City of Vancouver Bylaw No. 4448). Not every issue escalated to a grievance: in some cases tenants sent a copy of correspondence with their landlord to the RAGB as well as way of ensuring there was a landlord watchdog, and in other cases tenants were simply asking for advice on how to proceed. The RAGB had an office in City Hall and tenants could reach out to the board in-person, or in other ways such as via phone or letter. The most prevalent issues raised by tenants to the board related to rent increases, repair issues, eviction notices, or withheld security deposits. In its first year the RAGB dealt with 378 grievances and eventually had enough notoriety that tenants from other cities were writing to the board for advice as well, even if their own city had similar infrastructure. Interactions with the RAGB were shaped through

constellations of cisheteropatriarchal relationships, such as wives writing into the board for their husbands or male landlords freely entering female tenants' homes as though it was their right.

The Rental Accommodation Grievance Board is a form of local state housing care infrastructure, as are the landlord-tenant laws that they respond to. This follows the 'infrastructural turn' in the social sciences and in geography specifically that understand infrastructures as co-constitutive to urban life, as more than objects, and as wholly relational structures (Amin, 2014; Kapsali, 2020). Care infrastructures are conceptualized as "socio-technical systems of care operating in cities" (Williams & Tait, 2022: 2). As with all analyses of care, attention must be paid to care infrastructures as not equally experienced or as systems that are inherently positive or 'caring': as Williams and Tait (2022: 2) illuminate, "Infrastructures can facilitate and enable both care and neglect, justice and injustice and spectrums of both in how they can configure cities." Through its function as infrastructure that served as mediator of the power dynamic between landlords and tenants, the RAGB at once served to "order and create difference" (Power & Mee, 2019: 488). The creation and recreation of difference is apparent not only in how the board responded to tenant asks for support, but in the structure of the board itself.

The RAGB's infrastructure was shaped by cisheteropatriarchal norms of property owners and who is a care receiver versus care worker. For example, the Board consisted of three appointed members, all of whom were tied to the real estate industry in some way and all whom had access to wealth. The lack of tenant representation on the board, despite demands from the Vancouver Tenants' Union to rectify this absence, positions people with access to wealth and property as reliable, capable state actors who can rule on landlord-tenant conflict and positions tenants as vulnerable others who must turn to the state to ask for help and care. The role of

property owners as reliable and capable of providing care to ‘vulnerable’ others is a relationship upheld by cisheteropatriarchy (M. McCann & Lovell, 2020). Yet, even within the board there were gender politics that shaped how board members were perceived. Two of the board members were men, and one was a woman. In letters to the RAGB, tenants also often referenced speaking to women who provided staff support to the office. The set-up of the RAGB reproduces gender norms through the feminized labour of women administrative staff, as care workers for both the board and tenants writing in, with presumably less pay and power than board members, as well as in the public perception of the woman board member.

Theresa Galloway, the lone woman in an appointed role on the board, notably contributed to a number of philanthropic projects in the city, including the creation of the Dog and People Drinking Fountain (a water fountain both dogs and people could drink from together) through the Vancouver Gifts Program, and the commission of a bronze bust of Major Matthews, who helped to develop the City of Vancouver archives (Dog and people drinking fountain inauguration, 1986). Media coverage of Galloway’s work was often shaped through heteropatriarchal discourses about what women “should” be doing. For example, articles describing her volunteer work included language like “Too busy to get home early” and “This Good Citizen Keeps Burning Husband’s Meals” (Vancouver Sun, June 19 1963). In a 1947 article, Galloway explained that despite keeping her maiden name, “I’m very happily married, and to a man who believes a wife should also be an individual” (Vancouver Daily Province, June 30 1947). Her husband said that if she ever stopped volunteering, “It will mean she is not doing the one thing she likes in life—helping others” (Vancouver Sun, June 19 1963).

Discourses about Galloway and her work point to gendered expectations about who should be doing care work, as well as reinforcing ideas that care work is a selfless and fulfilling

practice that does not warrant financial compensation. Public responses to Galloway's work illustrate cisheteropatriarchal impacts on care infrastructures remain even when someone is perceived as a reputable care provider, relative to Vancouver tenants. As Power and Mee (2019: 490) argue, "Neo/liberal care philosophies instead understand care as a private practice for which autonomous and rational individuals are responsible and capable. These understandings have far reaching implications for the visibility and valuing of relational care work, the making of social policy, and the organization of social welfare." While the RAGB had a positive impact for many tenants, when analyzed through the lens of care, the complex impact of cisheteropatriarchal structures and uneven power in these relationships becomes apparent.

#### **5.4. Care demands and landlord violence**

Tenants' access to state care infrastructure was shaped by their own labour of demanding local state care. In unequal housing systems, this means that state care infrastructure is unequally accessible. Care inequalities are intensified when trying to access care triggers violence and harassment in various forms.

When landlords broke landlord-tenant laws, it was up to the tenant if they were going to do the work of trying to get their landlord to follow the law. Tenants had to contact the RAGB, file a request for a grievance, gather the evidence needed for the grievance, and attend the hearing. While evidently not all tenants reached out to the RAGB for support, that was not necessarily a choice that was made: for example, there was a significant time investment needed (including the potential for lost wages) and for many tenants the state is not the place to go for care, given the organized abandonment of people of colour and Black and Indigenous people, as well as the ways that state infrastructure have been used to escalate violence against

marginalized communities (Spade, 2015). Further, tenants' invocation of their rights under the law in many cases exacerbated the violence of housing crises for people experiencing housing precarity: where landlords responded to tenants' care needs with verbal and physical violence and harassment. I include these tenants' experiences here not to reproduce narratives that suggest tenants are vulnerable or weak, as is too often done in research on marginalized groups, but rather to make explicit the conditions that tenants are responding to when demanding care, pushing back on public narratives that suggest tenants organizing for tenant protections, completed repairs, and affordable housing are 'entitled' or 'whiny'.

In early 1974, Mrs. Grayson received an illegal notice of a rent increase from her landlord. The landlord had not followed the legal requirements of a rent increase, so Mrs. Grayson stayed in her unit. The landlord became "abusive with harassment and surveillance" (Landlord and Tenant Act, n.d.). Mrs. Grayson reached out to local state actors for support, including a Vancouver Alderman who advised her to remain the unit. Notes taken by the RAGB state that the landlord attempted to strangle the tenant and that she was now requesting a letter to advise the landlord of her rights. In their response, the RAGB wrote:

We have your request for some information regarding Tenant's rights. This is a topic which is quite extensive and would take a long letter to fully explain it. We would suggest that you go to one of the nearby book stores, and ask for a copy of the British Columbia Landlord and Tenant Relations ... attached is a copy of Section 51, of the Landlord and Tenant Act, which deals with rent increases and this you could hand to your Landlord to bring him up to date on this question. We hope that this will help you with this problem. (Landlord and Tenant Act, n.d.).

Mrs. Grayson experienced physical violence from her landlord after she informed him that he had broken the law. When she reached out to local state actors for support, she was told to remain in her housing and to seek out additional information from the bookstore. Her case illustrates the protection that many landlords experience as propertied and masculine subjects:

when this landlord was told not to break the law by a tenant, his response was to physically threaten her. While at this time the RAGB no longer had the political authority to hold a grievance hearing, their inability to provide care beyond this referral points to one of the ways that local state care upholds difference across gender and class: by failing to address the gendered violence caused by the propertied landlord and through this failing to provide adequate care to Mrs. Grayson. In actuality, the RAGB's response contributed to further harm by recommending Mrs. Grayson stay in her unit and suggesting that she confront the landlord again after he had already assaulted her.

The violent responses from landlords to tenants' care needs were mirrored in other cases as well: landlords would give tenants eviction notices when tenants informed them they broke the law; remove tenants' belongings and then change the locks; keep security deposits without cause; enter units without consent or notice; and use their power to bring other tenants to grievance hearings to testify against their neighbours. In one case, a tenant moved out of her place without notice because the landlord was repeatedly entering her apartment without consent (Minutes Nov. 69-June 1970, 1969-70). One tenant acknowledged that she did break a rule by having someone over for tea late at night, but the next day the landlord walked in, without knocking, "and grabbed my clothing at my neck and threatened me with his fists almost punching my chin" (Complaints, 1973-74a). The tenant was so frightened that she immediately left her home and was too scared to get her belongings. Her brother tried to help her but they still struggled to get her stuff back.

Finally, through landlord violence and other behaviour, tenants were often exasperated at the ways landlords were 'uncaring.' One tenant described their landlord as having "utter disregard for tenants living here" and another wrote, "In short Mrs. Landlord does not seem to

understand the plight of the poor and how sincere I really wish to be happy” (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973; Landlord and Tenant Act, n.d.). Landlords’ violent responses towards tenants are illustrative of a cisheteropatriarchal relationship that upholds gender and class inequalities. Landlords not responding to tenants or responding with violence against women in their homes reproduces a normalization of gender-based violence in housing, that does not require state response or intervention because it is not exceptional under cisheteropatriarchal relations.

The violence and retaliation exhibited by these landlords in response to tenants advocating for their rights, after the landlords themselves broke the law, illuminates a number of key components about the stakes tenants faced in trying to access local state care infrastructure. First, tenants had to be able to reach out to the RAGB to ask for support in the first place when the state’s own laws were broken by landlords, which required significant labour and risk to tenants. Second, the capacity of the RAGB to care is limited by its own political power as determined by multiscalar state actors like the provincial government. Through such limitations, further harm can be rendered to tenants, after tenants had already taken on the labour of contacting them and risk of landlord retaliation when the RAGB cannot provide adequate care or meaningful resolution to the issue. Finally, that some landlords felt able to respond to tenants’ rights enforcement with violence and harassment speaks to the unequal power dynamic between landlords and tenants in a cisheteropatriarchal housing system that privileges white, straight, propertied men. This is further evidenced through the fact that it was overwhelmingly male landlords who were assaulting female tenants. The processes of the housing system are inherently violent: through displacement, dispossession, eviction. This type of landlord violence in response to care demands, that occurs inside people’s homes, is at once intimate and

inescapable (Blunt & Varley, 2004; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Neely & Lopez, 2021). Care infrastructures are not only relational through systems and people, but are also shaped by notions that care is private and that what occurs in private spaces, such as the home, should be outside the purview of local state actors. While there is a tendency to place capitalist relations in the public sphere, away from the private sphere of the home and care work, the behaviour of these landlords serves as a clear reminder that private and public spaces are not bound by rigid borders and are always interconnected. The relegation of the home to private spaces, as a ‘man’s castle’, allows for cisheteropatriarchal domination through the concealment and hiding of gendered violence against tenants by landlords.

## **5.5. Tenants as crisis careworkers**

As a local state infrastructure of care, the caring capacity of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board is limited and privileges the need of cisheteropatriarchal subjects. Further, any care from the RAGB only becomes possible through the work of tenants. Through their encounters with state care infrastructure, all tenants are careworkers. Through interactions with the RAGB, tenants’ care work occurred in two key ways: first, they positioned themselves as ‘good tenants’ deserving of state care, and second, they provided care to the state and landlords through reporting violating laws and educating landlords about landlord-tenant laws. Power and colleagues (2022: 1173) explain that care work “includes the work of reproduction, sourcing food and cooking, cleaning, securing and making home, caring within households, and getting by in a broader community of strangers.” In what follows, I describe how tenants render themselves deserving of care and educate landlords in order to secure home, emphasize the cleanliness of their housing or the cleaning and maintenance done on behalf of the landlord, their household care such as care for children, and how these actions together enable them to “get by” in the

context of housing crisis. Tenants' care work, made necessary by the limitations of state care infrastructure and pervasive housing crises, occurs through positioning themselves as deserving of care and in their work educating landlords about the laws.

### **5.5.1. Myth of “good” and “bad” tenants**

When tenants contacted the RAGB asking for local state care, they often tried to align themselves within normative categories of who deserves care: by identifying themselves as seniors, parents to young children, or as veterans. This framing from tenants points to the power of dominantly held ideas about who deserves care in the form of housing support from top-down local state care infrastructures, paralleled in discourses about deservingness and poverty assistance in North America (Hancock, 2004; Elwood and Lawson, 2018; Sparks, 2010). Overwhelmingly though, before asking for care or support, tenants would position themselves as a ‘good tenant.’ According to letters, ‘good tenants’ were those who paid their rent on time, kept the unit and themselves clean, were quiet, did not cause ‘trouble’ and did not complain. Many of these characteristics align with cisheteropatriarchal norms of the responsible, masculine citizen: independent, reliable, and rational.

For example, in August 1970, Kira, a female resident of a single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel, wrote into the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board asking for assistance. She wrote:

Dear Sirs: Please protect me from the cruel uncalled hatred of this man who calls himself Terry. The people at the [SRO] will tell you I keep my bed made as near perfect as would permit. My floor and bath mat is washed every day. A snow white cloth covers the table. I wear spotless uniforms and bathe daily, never once interfering or meeting other guests. [...] His cruel ethics have moved me around 22 times. I suffered terror, loss; theft; cruelty; threats and hatred. Each time at the [SRO] they raised the rent from \$18 to \$30 per week and said ‘Oh he hurt you did he?’ He is using this for one reason only to cause hatred [...] I have a lady witness to prove I avoid all difficulty or contact. (Chronological File A, n.d.).

In Kira's letter, we see how she asks the state for care while simultaneously positioning herself as deserving of this care and undeserving of landlord harassment. This deservingness is by providing evidence that she is clean, orderly, and does not interfere with anyone else. However, she also references multiple times that she has witnesses who will support what she is saying, which suggests she is used to not being believed at her word. The need to overcompensate with evidence in order to be believed aligns with dominant ideas that positions women as emotional and, because of these emotions, unreliable. McDowell (2004: 78) also reminds us that women "as the angels of the domestic arena whose duty it was to bring order to the homes," through cleanliness and particularly if they were in a relationship with a man.

In January 1974, Miss. Pike wrote to the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board after receiving three rent increases between 1972 to 1974, amounting to a rent increase equal to nearly seventeen percent. Earlier, she contacted the landlord inquiring as to why the rent increase was needed and asking to see a profit and loss statement from them. According to her letter, the landlord replied to Miss. Pike, saying that "he could certainly not give this kind of information [...] He also mentioned to me that he considered the good tenants who were the ones who never called him or had complaints and just absorbed (or to this effort) the increases—if you can believe." Miss. Pike then asked why a larger unit with a better view had a smaller increase than she was receiving for her place. The landlord told the tenant that her "rent has been too low for too long" and asked her if "she was speaking for the [apartment] block or myself." In the rest of the letter to the RAGB Miss. Pike describes the many repair issues with the building and that the landlord had told her that if she "didn't like the situation that [she] should move." She writes:

I am a little nervous about submitting this to you [the RAGB] but these are the facts [...] I do hope that the situation can be rectified without any undue harm or personal

upset to myself and would have legal support for any action [the landlord] may take against me. (Chronological file B, n.d.).

In Miss Pike's case, the landlord's response suggests that the expectation is that rent increases do not need to be materially justified, that it is Miss Pike's behaviour that is the issue, rather than the rent increase, and that anyone questioning the increase should find another place to live. This behaviour brings into view the prevalence of the commodification of housing and that tenants asking questions or issuing complaints should be removed from the property, making clear the high stakes of these interactions and the reliance on "good tenant" narratives.

These are cisheteropatriarchal characteristics, upheld through heteropaternalism (Arvin et al., 2013). Tenants also conducted additional labour for landlords that took care of the landlord's property: in one case, a tenant provided cleaning services for her landlord and in exchange he deducted ten dollars from her rent each month. In another case, a tenant requested that their landlord replace burnt out lightbulbs on the property that were causing a safety hazard in the absence of lighting. After no response, they eventually fixed the issue themselves: "In order to prevent an accident on your property to your tennants [sic] or visitors, I yesterday replaced a lightbulb over the main front entrance door [...] and propose to continue doing so every time a bulb burns out, deducting the cost of such from the monthly rent" (Complaints, 1973-74b). The tendency for tenants relying on 'good tenant' discourse to situate themselves as deserving of state care in particular illustrates how the dominance of heteropaternalism overlaps with the privileging of propertied subjects in a cisheteropatriarchal housing system.

Aspirations of wanting to be 'good tenants' had material logics of wanting to stay housed: tenants submitted copies of Notices to Vacate to the RAGB that showed some of the reasons landlords were evicting people. Landlords on occasion also wrote letters to the RAGB to

take issue with their tenants. The characteristics of ‘bad tenants’ included tenants that were messy, irresponsible, or causing ‘trouble’. This is further illustrated by the following landlord descriptions of undesirable or bad tenants.

One landlord wrote to the RAGB, expressing frustration that a tenant moved out without notice: “There is a lease! Of course, we do not like to keep the tenant if he/she is a bad one. But, we should have at least one month’s notice if they are moving out so that we can have enough time to find another tenant more suitable to the property” (Recommendations by the board, 1973). Another wrote that “as you have shown yourselves to be irresponsible tenants [sic] and the experience [of being a landlord] has been unpleasant and distasteful I intend in future to use the house for myself and family” (Aldermen, 1973). Finally, on an eviction notice, a landlord wrote that the reason the tenant was being evicted was due to “un-tenantlike use of the premises” (Minutes July 70-Feb. 71, 1970-71).

The sentiments of these landlords emphasize the conflicting relationship between housing as business and housing as a potential site of home. To suggest that there is an ‘un-tenantlike’ way to live in a unit necessarily also implies that there are ways that tenants should behave. This in turn reinforces notions of the ‘good tenant’ which has longstanding implications for how tenants are able to occupy their rentals.

While low-income tenants in particular are typically perceived as deserving of top-down protection and care, the category of ‘bad tenant’ illustrates some of the limits that define when someone is deserving of that care or not. These discourses are often rooted in narratives of responsibility that translate how much risk to their profit and investment the landlord is taking on (Power & Gillon, 2020). These limits extend into ableism through referencing drug use, ‘mental

distress' and ableist slurs for disabilities, landlords and sometimes other tenants suggested that a tenant was undeserving of care or is unreliable or incapable due to disability. This parallels normative ideas about the "valued able-body and its disabled 'other'" that again presents limits around who is deserving of care (Hall & Wilton, 2017: 736). While ideas of 'good' and 'bad' tenants in the RAGB letters already problematically present moral arguments around human behaviour, rooted in these sentiments are ultimately conflicting needs of landlords to maximize their 'owed profit' for owning property and tenants' needs for shelter and care through their housing.

### **5.5.2. Local state and landlord education**

Tenants provided labour by educating landlords about landlord-tenant laws and through informing state actors that their own laws had been violated. Tenants educated landlords about the law, resulting care labour tenants provided in order to prop up state care infrastructure. In a system that anticipates the "bad tenant," tenants also had to rely on the oversight of the RAGB to give them authority. Mr. Sloan asked the RAGB, "Would you be so kind as to send me this legal decision in writing so that I can, without fear of error, face the [Landlord] with this decision?" (Complaints, 1973-74b).

In their responses to tenants requesting information about the law, the RAGB would often suggest that tenants notify their landlords of the law that had been broken, or file an application for a grievance hearing. As described in the previous section, landlords often responded to this education labour with violence. In one case when Miss. Yates refused to answer the door when her landlord was knocking, the landlord used the master key to enter her unit without consent and placed an eviction notice on her table. In other instances, the landlord would refuse to

believe that the tenants were correct, even with the backing of the RAGB, which required further labour from tenants as they had to continue communicating with both the landlord and the RAGB. As Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien wrote, "He [the landlord] steadfastly insists that he is right" (Chronological file C, n.d.). Illustrating that tenants were not unaware of the extent to which state care infrastructures necessitated that they provide care labour, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien go on to write:

We wish to state, respectfully, we are dumbfounded that the onus is on the tenant to advise the landlord on the Landlord and Tenant Act. Being a businessman he should be aware of the law. (Chronological file C, n.d.).

Further, in some grievance hearings landlords brought other tenants with them to testify as witnesses in favour of the landlord, or to provide translation services (though whether or not tenants can consent to this labour, given the power differential, is questionable). Tenants' care work in these contexts was in addition to the other care work that tenants provide in their lives: many letters recounted that the substandard living conditions were impacting the health of tenants' children. In one case a landlord's refusal to fix a plumbing issue where there was no water, resulted in Mr. Sisko and his "family of six children" having to eat in restaurants (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973).

Labour in these circumstances continued to be shaped by the gendered nature of care and domestic work. In grievance applications where the issue was related to a withheld security deposit, male tenants often recounted how their wives and daughters had thoroughly cleaned the unit before they moved out. As one grievance detailed, "My wife took a day off work and cleaned the apt [apartment] the day we moved. The manager and his wife were quite satisfied" (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973). This illustrates how women's labour is differentially valued and the reference to "the manager and his wife" suggests that cisheteropatriarchal norms of who

is the property owner shape propertied relationships as well. Letters sent to the RAGB also point to the structural power of landlords as propertied subjects: the consistent, pervasive pattern of landlords not responding to tenants, or responding with retaliation, violence, and delegitimization of tenants' claims reveals the structural workings of propertied citizenship. Tenants who faced violated landlord-tenant laws were not the result of one 'bad egg' or the individualized 'failures' of a tenant, but rather their experiences are symptomatic of a system-wide issue of uneven power dynamics between landlords and tenants.

The labour conducted in RAGB cases illustrates that this is care work provided by tenants that enables state care infrastructure to operate as it is intended to. While the RAGB held power as a watchdog of sorts, as a conflict mediator tenants needed to reach out to the board to notify them of the housing issue and eventually file a request for a grievance, all of which required labour before accessing local state care infrastructure. If tenants did not contact the RAGB, the RAGB would not have landlord violations to respond to. Moreover, tenants' ability to access this infrastructure was always unequal: it required a lot of time, and grievances were held during the day on weekdays, an issue repeatedly critiqued by the Vancouver Tenants' Union. Tenants had to take time off work and may not have access to paid time off. Without tenants' labour, local state care infrastructure would likely cease to function. What would happen if landlord-tenant laws were enforced by the state from the outset, instead of waiting for them to be broken? Under the existing system, care infrastructure relies on harm first being rendered: through crisis, landlord power, and the privileging of property. When tenants notify local state infrastructure of these harms, the state then has something to react to.

In RAGB reactions, the burden of labour continued to be placed on tenants. When they reached out to the RAGB, often tenants were at first asking the RAGB for support around law

navigation and understanding their rights. Tenants often asked that copies of the law be sent to them, or what the laws were regarding repairs or security deposits. One tenant explained, “I would also like to know what rights tenants have under municipal by-laws” (Grievances in abeyance, 1970-71). The practice of writing to the RAGB to ask for help navigating the law, or by sending a copy of correspondence with their landlord for the record, as a means of establishing evidence, suggest that for some tenants the care they asked for from local state care infrastructure was support so that they could then continue the labour of challenging their landlords themselves. This demonstrates another way that the division of care labour remained unequally distributed with tenants taking on a majority of the work of making care infrastructure function as intended. While tenants were responsible for significant amounts of care labour throughout the tenure of the RAGB, it was exacerbated when the RAGB lost its power to mediate through grievances and the associated legal power which came with that function.

To the RAGB, tenants often expressed hope that they would receive the support that they needed. For example, as one tenant wrote, “I hope you can help me” (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973) and as Miss. Tucker wrote, “[I] can only hope that you are in a position to advise me further in the matter and help me to secure my legal rights” (Chronological file C, n.d.). Alongside expressions of hope, tenants tried to rationalize their asks for care. As Miss. Torres wrote, describing issues with water shortages in the building: “I can put up with a lot as these people [her neighbours] are not rich either and I cannot move as I have had 4 funerals in 4 months that have to be paid for” (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973). Another tenant explained that they had been dealing with issues in their housing for two months:

We have now lived here two complete months with various inconveniences. Because of their constant presence, we began to think of the workmen as roommates [sic]. They placed their heavy duty painting equipment on both of our patios making

it impossible to use them unless you wanted to climb an obstacle course. The most dangerous and yet easiest obstacle is to trip over the equipment, fall over the 26” high balcony wall, landing 200 feet below on a badminton court in garden surroundings. (Grievances in abeyance, 1970-71).

In each of these letters, tenants are demonstrating that they have already experienced issues with their housing and have “put up with it” as much as they can. Often, the boundary for “putting up with it” was arguably quite high—in one case, the landlord raised the house ten feet off the ground and the tenant was unable to access their belongings or the house because stairs had not been provided (Rental Accommodation Grievance Board, n.d.). The tenant had to go to stay with a friend in the meantime, but contacted the RAGB because they were worried about getting their belongings back. The existence of the “putting up with it” limit suggests that for some tenants, there is a level of undesirable living conditions that they will accept before they begin the laborious process to attempt to access their rights. McCann and Lovell (2020) detail the longstanding relationship between the unequal deployment of rights and citizenship to maintain hierarchical power relations that mark groups as worthy of protection or not. They suggest that white property owners, through their intimate relationship with the state, are deserving of rights and positioned as rational, disciplined, and conventional—in contrast to non-propertied groups who are framed as erratic and undeserving of rights. Tenants’ care work is pushing back against pervasive social categorization that positions them as less deserving of rights and citizenship. Tenants therefore have to negotiate when and how they will pushback, in order to reduce the risk of further distancing themselves from rights—and care—access. The limits of “putting up with it” are shaped by the need to be a ‘good tenant’ in order to secure housing, tenants’ rights, and survive the violence of a colonial, racial capitalist system.

Tenants’ care work gives care to themselves, but the capability of the RAGB to provide care at all would be further limited if tenants did not provide the labour to get themselves much

needed care through the infrastructure. This in turn allows local state actors to perceive themselves as caring, which perpetuates the ‘myth of the benevolent state’ where the state is seen as a legitimate authority that is responsible for providing protection, support, and care to citizens (Marcuse, 1978). The role of tenants as careworkers in crisis demonstrate that tenants are not only receivers of care, but care workers whose labour is integral to the capacity of local state care infrastructure. Tenants’ care work in this context speaks to what Power et al. (2022) conceptualize as ‘shadow care infrastructures.’ Shadow care infrastructures “foreground the constellation of networks and practices through which people living in poverty sustain life in post-welfare cities” (Power et al., 2022: 8). Shadow care infrastructures extend well beyond the possibilities of state care, but I draw on this concept to illuminate the oft-unacknowledged work of tenants that is central to the function of local state care infrastructure and tenants’ own survival.

## **5.6. Normative relations of state care infrastructures**

The juxtaposition of tenants’ care work to responses from state actors and landlords to tenant care needs suggests that cisheteropatriarchal structures not only shape these care relationships, but also reinforce that tenants are care workers but are not largely perceived as being deserving of care. Many tenants resisted other care norms that categorized their care needs as undeserving and secondary to the protection of profit and property. This resistance occurred primarily through tenants directly challenging the normalization of propertied power and what ‘belongs’ in private spaces, exhibiting self-care through the act of letter-writing, and collectively caring for one another through the act of witnessing.

### 5.6.1. Tenant pushback

In letters to the RAGB, tenants repeatedly challenged hegemonic property logics that privilege property and capital over life and housing as shelter. Instead, they suggested that rent increases were unwarranted, that they deserved to live in housing that met their health, housing, and care needs, and that they should not be evicted simply for asserting their rights and demanding that landlords follow the laws. Tenants challenged care norms through the act of letter writing. I argue that the letters written, primarily by women, to the RAGB are a form of care labour that specifically represented care for the self. While ‘man’s home is his castle’ narratives normalizes the concealment of what occurs in private spaces of the home, by writing letters tenants resist these norms by bringing landlords’ actions in tenants’ homes into direct sight of state actors, forcing it into the public.

Many tenants expressed that they were “tired” and questioned the fairness of landlord behaviour that resulted tenants losing money or their housing, especially when they perceived the behaviour to be illegal under landlord-tenant law. For example, as these tenants wrote:

Your help in settling this complaint would be appreciated because it is landlords like this, abusing their privileges, who cause so much of the problems between landlord and tenant.

Miss. Tilly (Awaiting Grievance, 1971-1973)

I’m rather tired of unscrupulous landlords that always seem to think that once you have paid them \$25 damage deposit, it is theirs as a gift.

Tenant (Apartment Managers' Association, 1972)

In their letters, these tenants are pushing back against the notion that tenants should accept a loss of security deposit, incomplete repairs, and rent increases. In a system where housing is synonymous with property and profit rather than as a potential site of home, landlords are

empowered to suggest that tenants are in the wrong for challenging rent increases. Tenants who question the necessity of a rent increase, asking for an explanation beyond a landlord's increased profit, are creating an interruption to housing business as usual.

The act of writing letters to the RAGB is a form of self-care because tenants were taking on significant risk to write the letters in the first place, in order to advocate for themselves. This was evident in the fear expressed in tenants' letters, where people asked to remain anonymous as a form of protection against landlord eviction. Letter-writing was a significant undertaking of labour: in the actual writing itself, which often took multiple exchanges with the RAGB; the personal risk of violence that tenants were taking on by challenging landlords and issuing complaints publicly; and the evidence gathering that required not only trying to navigate landlord-tenant laws, but also often involved recounting intimate details about their lives. Tenants were required to do this self-care work because the functioning of the state care infrastructure of the RAGB was predicated on it. If tenants did not do this self-care work, they faced other severe consequences: such as health risks from incomplete repairs; lost capital due to illegally-withheld security deposits or high rent increases; or displacement anyway, without eviction, due to rent increases being higher than they could afford.

I am not employing self-care in this context in order to suggest that this is where care in housing should be taking place: rather, I follow Kim and Schalk (2021), and Lorde's ([1988] 2017) use of self-care to reference care for the self that is rooted in survival, made necessary in a housing system intensely short on top-down care.

### 5.6.2. Witnessing and believing

Tenants' resistance to care norms also occurred through collective tenant-to-tenant care, through the labour of witnessing and believing. In parallel with conceptualizations of 'caring-with', tenant-to-tenant care subverts dominant discourse that positions low-income tenants as 'vulnerable others' rather than care actors who can provide care for themselves and each other when state care infrastructure is inadequate. The focus on the labour of witnessing and collective protection is necessary in a cisheteropatriarchal system that also portrays feminized tenants as less believable and less capable than masculine landlords and state actors.

Tenant care in resisting normative relations of state care infrastructures occurred informally, through the labour of witnessing and believing. In their letters, many tenants would note that they had a witness, usually a neighbour or friend, who could corroborate the details the tenant was sharing with the RAGB in order to receive state care. In addition to the signoff from the tenant, sometimes there would also be the signature from their witness. The act of witnessing for another is care labour and is a crucial component of receiving care in a system that designates tenants as unreliable, irresponsible, and less believable. Witnessing is an act of solidarity that tells the tenant that they are reliable, responsible, and worth of being believed, while simultaneously increasing their opportunity to receive care because they become more legible to the state. This stands in contrast to what some tenants had to navigate when they alerted landlords to the law violation. As Miss. Boothby wrote, "I feel the worst thing about it, is the fact that after studying the rules I cannot find anything we have done wrong" (Grievances in abeyance, 1970-71). Notably, when witnesses had to also attend grievance hearings, they too were taking on additional labour in order to increase the likelihood that tenants could access care from the state care infrastructure of the RAGB.

Another form of collective tenant care occurred through activism in tenant organizations, such as through the work of the Vancouver Tenants' Union. Throughout the tenure of the RAGB, the tenants' union was vocal in the press, demanding that the RAGB better serve tenants and have actual tenant representation in its membership. This type of organizing work was resisting to normalized ideas about the responsibility for care in housing, which were shaped by dominant framings of housing as just another industry where business people should not experience limitations on their profit imposed by landlord-tenant laws.

Finally, some tenants operated collectively in order to challenge the power imbalance between themselves as non-propertied subjects and landlords as property owners. Grievance applications were filed with multiple tenants in the building signing on or roommates would submit letters or grievances together. In one case, a former tenant of the landlord came to the hearing in order to support the current tenant's grievance. In grievance hearings and in navigating broken landlord-tenant laws, tenants were often supported by friends, family members, roommates, and neighbours who helped them navigate the grievance proceedings, obtain their belongings, and communicate with state actors and landlords. Tenants would confer with their neighbours to see if they too had received rent increases, before contacting the RAGB. Collective organizing with neighbours and other tenants runs contrary to heteronormative structures that prioritize the heterosexual nuclear family as the relationship that occupies the private home.

In some cases, tenants contacted the RAGB after they had already left their unit, or even if they were uncertain they would be able to stay. As one group of tenants wrote: "As this woman has been ruthless in her earlier transactions, we are taking any steps we can at this time to prevent abuse of future tenants on this property, whether that be us or someone else"

(Chronological file C, n.d.). One group of tenants who wrote to the RAGB to inform them of illegal rent increases were also being supported by a law student. In their letter they wrote, “The purpose of this letter is to notify you of our situation so that in the event of problems arising with the Landlord our position will be protected in so far as any eviction proceedings may be concerned” (Chronological File A, n.d.). The collectivity of this care work strengthens tenants’ care demands and provides support for the significant amount of tenant labour that is required in order to access state care infrastructure. This increases the power of tenants and might also provide protection from negative state or landlord reactions to care demands. The collectivity of witnessing ruptures one of the consequences of the privacy and secrecy of cisheteropatriarchal property relations: if events occur in homes that are not meant to be seen in public, it reinforces the discrediting of feminized tenants’ experiences. Collective witnessing, in public grievance hearings, disrupts this process and forces state care infrastructure to also witness events and make a decision about whether or not they will enact care for tenants.

Though, the complexities of care work also mean that collective tenant care was not always accessible or existent: in some hearings tenants would support the landlord by being a witness or translator for them (though there is a differential power dynamic here), and in other cases tenants would complain about their neighbours being noisy or messy and sometimes use ableist slurs to report their neighbours to landlords. This illustrates the ways that the structure of the housing system always means that within the category of tenants, care is still unequally accessed and available, and tenants can be uncaring towards their neighbours.

## 5.7. Conclusion

Hegemonic discourse in housing crises positions tenants solely as care receivers in need of saving. The housing precarity shaped through housing crises increases the care needs of tenants. Tenants' access to care, including through local state care infrastructure, are shaped through structural impacts of a cisheteropatriarchal housing system. While some tenants turn to local state infrastructure for care, the inherent limits of local state care means that we must pay careful attention to the possibilities of care accessible to tenants in crisis, through the state and beyond. I argue that housing's positioning at the intersection of public and private makes it a crucial space through which to understand the complexities of local state care infrastructure. At the forefront is the fraught relationship between notions of the domestic, citizenship, care, and state infrastructure, all of which are shaped through the overarching cisheteropatriarchal structures undergirding urban housing politics.

In this paper, I have demonstrated that multifaceted approaches through which tenants demand care from local state infrastructure in housing crisis, as shaped by cisheteropatriarchal structures. Through an analysis of tenants' interactions with Vancouver's Rental Accommodation Grievance Board, I argue that without the care work of tenants, local state infrastructure's capacity to provide any form of care would be significantly limited. I illustrated that the very structure of the RAGB reinforced notions of men and property-owners as the capable, paternal figures responsible for doling out care to other populations. The enforcement of landlord-tenant laws compounded this discourse, because the labour of ensuring laws were followed was put on tenants, who then had to turn to the paternal RAGB in order for the issue to possibly be addressed. Male landlords who responded to women tenants' enactment of their rights through violence remind us of the complex orientation of housing as public and private,

where domestic space is too often situated as an intimate space of violence beyond the purview of the state. Further, tenants' role as crisis careworkers extended in other directions: from educating tenants about the law, to taking care of the landlords' property, to care work that maintained their own lives, such as through raising their children.

Tenants would often try to mold themselves into normalized categories of deservingness, relying on notions of the 'good tenant' through cleanliness and non-complaint, both of which are rooted in cisheteropatriarchal notions of the role of women in cities. Tenants did this even when providing care work to facilitate the operation of the RAGB as local state care infrastructure. The responses from the RAGB to tenants sometimes exacerbated harm to tenants or ensured that the onus of labour continued to be placed on tenants. Finally, tenants did not take on this care work without pushing back: they challenged the normalization of capitalist housing processes, through questioning rent increases or continuing to complain about repair issues even when they had been occurring for long periods of time. The letters that tenants, many of whom were women, wrote to the RAGB challenging notions of tenants as uncaring illustrate the potential for different types of self-care: in writing these letters tenants were asserting that they were deserving of care through safe, secure, reliable housing. Tenants' labour in witnessing, believing, and collectively organizing with each other continued to cement these demands and challenge the power imbalance between hegemonic concepts of the masculine, reliable, and propertied subject versus the feminized, unreliable, unpropertied one under a racial capitalist, colonial housing system.

While the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board did have a positive impact in the lives of many tenants, particularly in the ways that it overwhelmingly ruled in favour of tenants during grievances, the burden of care labour placed on tenants in order for this to occur only

reinforced the unequal distribution of care work on urban populations already experiencing marginalization and precarity.

The case of the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board helps us to deepen our understanding of the ways that local state care is only accessible to tenants when they themselves become careworkers, which often subjects them to greater risk of violence and displacement. The reliance on tenant care work raises important questions about the nature of state care infrastructure in its current form, and what reformations might result in state care that is more readily accessible for a broader range of tenants. All tenants are deserving of care through housing. This care must be accessible without further exacerbating the violence of displacement through housing crises.

## Chapter 6. Beyond crisis: Tenants' housing care imaginaries for urban futures

*"I mean, you know, it's not my dream house, but it's fine for now."*

*A.H., Seattle tenant (Interview 4)*

*"The precarity, the instability, is baked into the law."*

*Asura, Vancouver tenant (Interview 21)*

Late one night, Sarah received a text message from one of her housemates that there was water pouring out of the ceiling light in their rented house. They called the landlord to let her know, who told the tenants that it is late, plumbers are expensive, and she needs them to deal with it. Sarah and her housemates tried to find another solution, but eventually get the landlord to call a plumber who arrived at one a.m. The plumber turned out to be not a plumber at all, but a home restorer. All he could do was shut the water off for them. The next day when a plumber did come, he told the tenants that there were rats chewing through the pipes. The landlord does not deal with the rats, and eventually the ceiling started leaking again. There was also mold in the bathrooms, a window permanently jammed open, and blocked drains. Sarah explains that repair requests were often dismissed because the landlord often treated her and her housemates like they were being "hysterical." Eventually, Sarah took the lead on communicating with her landlord, because the landlord was so rude to her housemates. Sarah says she "always wondered if it was just plain racism ... she was much politer to me than my other two roommates."

Together, the housemates navigated their options. Sarah recounts, "When we were sitting there at the kitchen table, like counting them [the violations] all up, it was still like wow...this is

a lot.” They tried reaching out to the city, but the office was so overwhelmed with tenant issues it was going to be four months before an inspector could look at the house. They reached out to the tenants’ union who told them that yes, the things that were happening were against the landlord-tenant laws and that they needed to get legal advice. Between them, the housemates split the cost of one hour with a lawyer who said they could just leave because the lease had so many illegal clauses it would not hold up in court. Once they gave notice to their landlord that they planned to end their tenancy, the landlord started entering their place without consent and at one point threw one of the tenants’ belongings out into the street. The tenants house-hunted for a while due to their limited budget, but eventually found somewhere new to live. They got their stuff out, spent hours cleaning the space, and moved into their new place. Sarah says that while it was easy enough to find out what her rights were as a tenant, it was hard to actually enforce them. She notes, “It took a lot of concerted effort between the five of us to access and utilize those [tenant] resources.”

Sarah is a tenant in Seattle, Washington and has been for about a year. In that time she has already moved twice. As a major city in the global North, Seattle has been frequently plagued by housing crises, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and housing financialization, compounded with the impacts of a prominent presence of tech companies. Sarah’s hopes for future housing involves being “at least somewhat secure in the knowledge that the rent is not going to suddenly go up and force you out of the place, or you know, that the ceiling is not suddenly going to collapse on you and force you out ... I feel like sense of permanence and a sense of safety in a rental property is very important, if not of the utmost importance in my mind.”

Excerpts from Sarah's housing experiences help us to begin to see some of the ways that tenants' experiences of housing crises are shaped by care. Care is the provision of practical or emotional support and plays a fundamental role in all of our lives, acknowledged or not (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Care remains an undervalued type of labour, largely because the work of care is highly gendered and racialized (Lawson, 2007). The centrality of care to social organization also shapes how we think about, access, and experience housing. This includes the infrastructural capacity of housing to provide care and support life through its function as shelter, as well as how we experience care work, practices, and politics through the availability and affordability of housing, through different housing forms such as supportive or transitional housing programs, and through organizing that demands greater protections, safety, security, and habitability for all tenants (Power & Mee, 2020; Ruming & Zurita, 2020; Power & Gillon, 2019).

In the case of Sarah for example, structural sexism and racism shaped the ability of these tenants to receive care from their landlord in the form of maintenance and repairs. Sarah took on communication with the landlord as a form of caring with her housemates to reduce the harm they were experiencing from the landlord. The housemates also cared with one another as they navigated the situation, discussing the issues around their shared kitchen table and finding new housing together. Advocacy organizations and city renter helplines cared for the tenants as they learned about their rights. Even in this one brief example, there are many complex relationships of care, shaped by power. When Sarah considers her housing future, she imagines a future that is more supportive, or caring, to her as a tenant.

For many tenants, especially those on low or fixed-incomes, a housing crisis is not only an economic crisis of profit, like it may be for many landlords. Rather, a housing crisis shapes the context within which they try to survive in the city: will they be able to afford their

apartment? Will they be displaced from their neighbourhoods, their care networks, their homes, or other important places that are central to their everyday lives? Housing systems in the United States and Canada operate within the power structures of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, which are predicated on displacement, dispossession, and erasure from cities for people of colour, Black and Indigenous tenants.

While we have begun to develop our understanding of the entanglement between housing and care, there remains a gap in our analysis of how the conditions of crisis shape the possibilities for care. How do tenants rely on care to ensure their immediate survival, while developing housing care imaginaries that account for a range of urban futures? To consider these questions, I am guided by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's conceptualization of "survival pending abolition," an expansion of earlier organizing by the Black Panther Party through ideologies of "survival pending revolution" (Gilmore, 2020). In the context of multiple interlocking crises, there is value in theorizing the everyday survival work that tenants do to exist in this housing system, while also making space for futures that imagine possibilities for how housing can meet all of our care needs.

In this paper, I draw on semi-structured interviews with tenants in Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC to analyze the everyday care work that facilitates tenants' survival of housing crises, alongside tenants' housing care imaginaries where they detail housing futures that would provide them with care. I develop our conceptualization of 'housing care imaginaries' to consider these components together to better understand the conditions that tenants are responding to as they develop imaginaries for housing futures that meet a broad spectrum of care needs. I argue that, while care work plays an important role in tenants' everyday lives, tenants regularly negotiate a 'making do' with housing that is unsafe, insecure, incites fear, or presents

significant health risks because the conditions of crisis mean there are no housing options available to them that would meet their housing care needs. Further, I argue that the broad spectrum of these care needs become clear as tenants conceptualize their housing care imaginaries, describing housing futures that extend beyond what is hegemonically deemed possible within the confines of the current crisis-dependent housing system.

In what follows, I begin with a discussion of feminist theorizations of housing-as-care, care imaginaries, and urban housing futures. I provide a brief of overview study methods and the empirical context for Vancouver and Seattle's housing systems. I then turn to empirical analysis and discussion of tenants' experiences of care in housing crises, with a focus on how they navigate survival, their care imaginaries of housing futures within the existing system, and their care imaginaries of housing futures well beyond what is currently hegemonically considered possible.

## **6.1. Housing care imaginaries**

Theorizations of care in geography often begin with Fisher and Tronto's (1990: 4) now well-cited definition of care, as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." Care practices, politics, and relations are typically placed into five categories: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, care-receiving, and caring with (Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 2013). This categorization recognizes the multi-dimensional, multiscalar nature of care that can be organized into three spaces: the household/community, the marketplace, and the bureaucracy. Analyzing connections between care and housing helpfully

accounts for a blurring of boundaries between these three spaces which Fisher and Tronto (1990) recognized. As with care, housing too is situated within each of these sites and each site impacts the others: as a potential space of home and as the household; in the market through its function as a commodity impacted by financialization, and with the bureaucracy through government-led housing projects, policies, and funding.

Analyses of the possibilities of housing-as-care are relatively recent, yet feminist geographers have made important strides in developing our understanding of the nuances in different types of housing and housing relationships, to “make visible, re-vision and re-value the caring possibilities and constraints of housing” (Power & Mee, 2020: 486). Experiences of care in housing are shaped by tenure, materialities of housing, housing policy, and relationships within the housing itself, as well as by intersecting identities of residents and property owners (Power & Gillon, 2019; Power & Williams, 2019; Ruming & Zurita, 2020). Geographers have argued that care in housing is an important factor in whether or not housing is understood as home (Ruming & Zurita, 2020). Further, as Spade (2020) argues, everyday care plays an important role in developing collective responses for and by tenants as a result of systemic inequalities.

Yet, there continue to be gaps in care geographies broadly, as well as theorizations of housing-as-care, that necessitate responses to calls on the discipline to consider impacts of (settler) colonialism and care beyond the white cis-woman subject (Nayak, 2023). For example, Raghuram (2016) highlights the centrality of the global North to much of care geographies. In their paper on the gay bar as a caring place, Brown et al. (2014: 301) unpack the ways that men do care work and how gay men in particular are theorized as carers, and that “hegemonic masculinity can be reinforced, redefined or resisted through men’s care.” Most recently, work

from Malatino (2020) and Davenport (2020) on trans care demonstrate the significance of understanding care in spaces outside of the home or cis-heteronormative nuclear family, where everyday and mundane spaces are also crucial spaces of care where the focus is ensuring care can exist and be accessed longterm. Further, Woodly et al. (2021: 891) suggest that a politics of care “aims at unmaking racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present. The politics of care is an approach to political thought and action that moves beyond the liberal approach which situates care as a finite resource to be distributed among autonomous individuals, or as a necessarily feminine virtue.” These theorizations of care, alongside the work on care and housing, together serve to expand the boundaries of care in important ways (Bartos, 2019).

Unbounded care relations and spaces that emphasize the necessity of care to survival, beyond racial capitalist relations of profit and individualism, have been theorized in-depth through work in disability justice and queer crip theory (Kim & Schalk, 2021; Hall & Wilton, 2017). For example, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 1) conceptualizes “caring deeply” as a way where we are in control, joyful, building community, loved, giving, and receiving, that doesn’t burn anyone out or abuse or underpay anyone in the process.” In their discussion of care by sick and disabled people and predominantly Black and brown queer people, they describe the creation of care networks that reduce reliance on state infrastructure or families through “care webs,” rooted in an approach of “solidarity not charity” of mutual aid and respect (2018: 6). Crucially, Crosby and Jakobsen (2020: 78) underscore that disability justice “is not to call for one’s rights within existing social relations but to envision and demand a profoundly different set of social relations.” Drawing on Audre Lorde’s work, Kim and Schalk (2021: 327) argue for a reclaiming of the “radical crip, feminist, queer, and racialized roots of self-care.”

Theorizing ways their unmet care needs are addressed by tenants for their own survival in housing crisis necessitates broadening understandings of what constitutes care relations and accounting for care relations that may not be legible in cisheteropatriarchal spaces. In this paper, I turn to the work of Hobart and Kneese (2020: 2) who theorize the concept of radical care as “a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds.” They argue, “Radical care can present an otherwise, even if it cannot completely disengage from structural inequalities and normative assumptions regarding social reproduction, gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship” (2020: 3). Radical care is distinct from what has been described as neoliberal ‘white care,’ which upholds and reproduces “institutions and infrastructure dedicated to the education, health, security, mobility, and comfort of white citizenry” (Seiler, 2020: 2). Rooted in longstanding histories of Black and brown organizing and disability justice, radical care is a response to the failures of state infrastructure to care adequately for all in the face of the violence of crisis brought on by racial capitalism and settler colonialism (Osborne, 2023). Radical care protects, endures, and engages in worldmaking beyond a system predicated on crises.

Recognizing the entanglement between crises and a housing system built the valuation of profit, capital, whiteness, and dispossession is necessary in order to comprehend the conditions radical care is responding to. Housing systems in settler colonial states like the United States and Canada understand housing as a commodity rooted in a “colonial concept of property evacuated of any ‘historical memory, social use, kinship ties, or other relations’” (Summers & Fields, 2022: 3, citing Bhandar, 2018: 85). The role of housing as a commodity, or its exchange value, is privileged over its use value as shelter or potential site of home (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Housing systems in the Global North have been shaped by neoliberal policies that promote individualism, entrepreneurialism, and privatization, increasingly at the urban scale since the

1990s (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hall & Hubbard, 1996). The rise of ‘roll-with-it’ neoliberalism in the 2000s led to the normalization of neoliberal crises and social structures (Keil, 2009). Following the 2008 financial crisis, financialization became prominent in real estate markets across the U.S. and Canada. Financialization continues to embed racialized logics into property markets (Fields & Raymond, 2021; Fields & Uffer, 2016).

Thus, while housing crises are often positioned as economic crises borne of an economic system, Massey and Rustin (2015) argue we must re-politicize and question our understandings of the economy as non-political—including the focus on wealth-building and ‘growth.’ Further, the pervasive nature of housing crises is owed to the centrality of crisis to the function of capitalism: while the term ‘crisis’ suggests this is an unusual or temporary state, in reality a crises are indicative that everything is working as it is meant to under these systems of power (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Fields & Uffer, 2016). Following Easterlow and Smith (2004: 1001): “Housing markets are not economically designed, or politically required, to work in (or, specifically against) the interests of needy or vulnerable groups.”

I use ‘crises’ in the plural here to signify that we are never navigating only one crisis—within housing alone, we have crises of affordability, of safety, of habitability—and these are compounded by the work that racial capitalism and settler colonialism do together to enshrine the “organized abandonment of racialized peoples” by the state and the intersectional and multiscale violence that occurs against urban residents who are not white, cis-heterosexual, property-owning men (Roy, 2017; Gilmore, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991). Housing crises and housing precarity are produced through structural injustices that are integral to determinations of who has access to safe, stable, secure, and affordable housing (Roy, 2019; Muñoz, 2018; Maharawal & McElroy, 2018; Ramírez, 2020).

Being precise in definitions of crisis and recognizing their normalcy can also serve to illuminate a broader range of futures that foster different forms of relationality and ways of being: possibilities when we imagine ourselves futures beyond crisis (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). As Hall et al. (2015: 13) write, crisis can also be “a moment of potential rupture” that points us to a wide range of housing futures that are presently unthinkable within a racial capitalist, colonial housing system. As Elwood et al. (2023: X) argue, “that unthinkability also entails forms of relationality that open the possibility for pluriversal projects of world making and political futurities.” An emphasis on futuring, with focus on the beyond, allows us to imagine “a future with futures” (Escobar, 2018: 117) instead of the hegemonic future that surround us with replication of the same crises, inequalities, and violence that undergird the present housing system (Leszczynski, 2016). Summers and Fields (2022: 4) specifically theorize the relationship between care and housing as a form of “speculative urban worldmaking—a form of collective care and a praxis of providing an alternative present that imagines and advocates for urban futures beyond the abstract racial violence of financialization.” Such a framework accounts for the range of care relationships occurring in the present while making space for what can be created beyond.

The concept of ‘housing care imaginaries,’ then, is situated at the intersection of theorizations of feminist geographies of housing-as-care, housing crises as projects of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, and urban futures and worldmaking. Extant literature on care imaginaries, which largely focus on health care and human-AI relations with roots in social imaginaries, describe ideas or understandings of how care should be experienced now and how things should be in the future, and is both an individual and collective idea (Miles, 2015;

Mackereth, 2019; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022; Varvarousis, 2019). Urban scholars' theorizations of urban imaginaries suggest:

An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the scene of histories of destruction, crime, and conflicts of all kinds ... an urban imaginary is the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work, and play. (Huysen, 2008: 3).

Often drawing on the early work of Lynch (1960), theorists of urban imaginaries emphasize that they are political, conflicting, dynamic, shaped by power, and central to urban residents' everyday experiences of the cities in which they live. Following Edward Soja (2000: 324), urban imaginaries constitute "the mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretative grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live" (cited in Lindner & Meissner, 2018; Çinar & Bender, 2007).

I bring these discussions together to conceptualize housing care imaginaries as how individuals understand their experiences of care in housing in a contemporary context, as well as what they imagine individually and collectively for urban futures where housing can meet all of our care needs. These imaginaries see beyond the limits of liberal economic logics that currently shape much of what is currently understood as possible in responses to housing crises (Elwood et al., 2017).

## **6.2. Understanding Vancouver and Seattle in crisis**

Guided by feminist methodologies, the data for this paper comes from semi-structured interviews ( $n=24$ , 12 per city) that I conducted with tenants in Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA in 2022. From 2019 to 2023, I also conducted participant observation of Seattle and Vancouver's

housing crises, through social media posts, newspaper articles, and tenant organizing, all of which provided broader empirical context for the housing experiences shared with me by interview participants. Interview participants were recruited via social media posts in neighbourhood Facebook groups and on Instagram, as well as posts in online organizing spaces I was a part of. In Vancouver, physical posters were also placed on local community boards where possible. Participants had been renting in their respective city for at least six months and were over the age of 21. They were not required to have experience navigating landlord-tenant laws, but many did.

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked optional demographic questions. Notably, a majority of interview participants fall into the category of low-income according to rates determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (scale: King County)<sup>7</sup> and Statistics Canada (scale: Canada).<sup>8</sup> Across the two cities, 75 percent of participants identified as female, woman, or non-binary and 46 percent identified as queer, bisexual, demisexual, or fluid homosexual. Forty-nine percent of participants were aged 21-34 and 38 percent were aged 35-44.<sup>9</sup> A number of participants were also single parents with children. Seattle participants had lived in the city for between 6 months up to 13 years. Vancouver participants had lived there between 1.5 years to 20 years.

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[https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2023/2023summary.odn?STATES=53.0&INPUTNAME=METRO42660MM7600\\*5303399999%2BKing+County&statelist=&stname=Washington&wherefrom=%24wherefrom%24&statefp=53&year=2023&ne\\_flag=&selection\\_type=county&incpath=%24incpath%24&data=2023&SubmitButton=View+County+Calculations](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2023/2023summary.odn?STATES=53.0&INPUTNAME=METRO42660MM7600*5303399999%2BKing+County&statelist=&stname=Washington&wherefrom=%24wherefrom%24&statefp=53&year=2023&ne_flag=&selection_type=county&incpath=%24incpath%24&data=2023&SubmitButton=View+County+Calculations)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/tab/index-eng.cfm?ID=t2\\_4](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/tab/index-eng.cfm?ID=t2_4)

<sup>9</sup> Full demographic table is available in Chapter 3.

### **6.2.1. Empirical context**

In this paper, I conduct a relational comparison of Vancouver and Seattle, two cities with notable housing crises. A relational comparative analysis aims to understand cities through each other, considering their relationships, connections, and contexts, rather than examining only the similarities and differences between two places. These empirical sites are both settler colonial cities experiencing housing crises, in the same geographical region of the Pacific Northwest of North America, and are majority-renter cities, where the percentage of renters surpasses that of homeowners. Vancouver is the third largest city in Canada and in 2022 had a vacancy rate of 0.9% for purpose built rentals, with rents generally being higher for new tenants moving into units (compared to those already renting) (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2023). Seattle is the fifteenth largest city in the United States and the largest in Washington. In 2022 the vacancy rate for Seattle's region, King County, was reported at 4.2 percent (Washington Center for Real Estate Research, 2022).

When considering housing care imaginaries of tenants, of use is an understanding of the conditions that tenants are responding to as they develop their imaginaries. These contexts are illustrated through characteristics of participants' housing histories. Because these interviews took place in 2022, many interview participants offered reflections on the ways that they had experienced the pandemic in their housing: from taking on higher housing costs instead of sharing with a roommate to protect the health of themselves and their pets, to noticing the brief reprieve that COVID-19 offered on the rental market when rents temporarily dipped or property owners offered short-lasting rent specials. As with housing crises, COVID-19 also impacted people differently, shaped by social hierarchies of power. Before and during COVID-19, tenants experienced displacement due to a variety of reasons, including: rent increases; health risks

caused by things like mice, rats, and mold; property sales or development; roommates moving out; discrimination; or a place being condemned by the city for habitability issues. After displacement, some tenants experienced a loss of sense of place through the loss of their neighbourhoods or communities. Most participants also expressed a pervasive worry that they could experience displacement at any time, particularly through rent increases or eviction. The omnipresent threat of displacement is exacerbated in housing crises because tenants with limited income have fewer options when they have to find somewhere new to live. The options are fewer if they have pets, children, complicated rental history.

Together, these conditions shape the circumstances within which tenants are trying to survive and meet their housing care needs in housing crises and point to the myriad ways that tenants are facing discrimination, health concerns, and high costs as they try to find and retain housing in Seattle and Vancouver.

### **6.3. Navigating crisis survival**

*I feel like I was not aware of a lot of my rights. Before I was in, you know, deep enough shit that I really needed to know them.*

*Sarah, Seattle tenant (Interview 5)*

As tenants discussed their experiences of renting, many participants described difficult housing situations they had escaped or were still navigating. Often, these circumstances arose due to a violation of landlord-tenant laws that were not enforced, particularly when the burden of enforcing them relied on tenants' labour. Tenants' responses to their circumstances were therefore responses to the failure of state infrastructure meant to provide care for tenants in

housing crises (Osborne, 2023). These responses took two primary forms among participants: decisions around ‘making do’ and organizing for care outside of state infrastructure.

### **6.3.1. Making do**

In order to care for themselves in the midst of housing crises, tenants engaged in a ‘making do’ where they navigated their unideal and often harmful housing situations in order to avoid the impacts of paying higher rent elsewhere, taking on moving costs, or to avoid other forms of displacement or possible homelessness. I do not aim to glorify the ‘resilience’ of tenants in these moments, but rather consider the role of ‘making do’ as a self-care survival strategy done out of necessity (Kim & Schalk, 2021). Following Hobart and Kneese (2020: 2): “self-care is both a solution to and a symptom of the social deficits of late capitalism.” In many cases, tenants were made to make do because their landlords were violating landlord-tenant laws or unresponsive to tenants requests for things like repairs and the enforcement of laws relied on the labour of tenants rather than state actors. The absence of landlord accountability caused frustration and harm to many interview participants, the impacts of which shaped tenants’ everyday lives and decisions: for example, one tenant switched to only using dressers made from plastic, because the unresolved mold issues in their unit meant wood furniture was quickly destroyed (Interview 12).

The ‘making do’ of tenants consisted of a series of decisions about what was worth it, what tenants could ‘deal with,’ and what was the threshold of things going too far. In Elyse’s case, for example, the physical appearance of the unit being subpar was acceptable because the rent was low. But once rats were digging through her walls, the threshold has been crossed. She

says, “I started having nightmares of them bursting through the ceiling. And it turned out they burst through the wall. So when my nightmare became real, I had to move” (Interview 3).

Other forms of ‘making do’ include activities like setting up a borrowed air conditioner to alleviate heat issues when windows do not open; taking on higher rent costs to protect themselves and their pets from COVID-19 and other health risks; dealing with a kitchen that is falling apart but staying because the place provides a yard for their dog; and living in illegal basement suites without adequate windows. Flo talked about their friend who had been living with mice for the last ten years because the landlord will not do anything and their other choice is to move: “But if you’ve been in the same place for 10 years, then you can’t find something the same price. And then you know, for the landlord there’s no big loss because they they’ll find someone else for sure” (Interview 17). The necessarily high thresholds mean that tenants might remain in their rentals even if there are health or safety risks, such as mold, pests, or harmful landlord interactions.

The high threshold of conditions tenants needed to make do with were a result of urban precarity produced through housing crises. Tyson, a tenant in Seattle, explains that he felt obligated to sign a lease for place he did not like: “The landlord was super shady ... I think that coercive element is definitely a real frustration that I’ve had, is feeling like you have to accept shitty terms because you don’t have other options” (Interview 6). Louie offered similar reflections on his living situation: “It’s just, you know, it is what it is, you know, like what are you going to do? Yeah. When I don’t really have a choice, right?” (Interview 16). Tenants’ lack of options were typically shaped by high rental costs and low vacancy rates, characteristics of a capitalist system fuelled by commodification of housing and the use of housing to maximize profit for property owners.

Further, participants faced discrimination in housing which illustrates the inscription of social hierarchies into propertied relations between landlords and tenants. For example, a group of young women were treated as “hysterical teenagers” by their landlord whenever they asked for repairs (Interview 5). A low-income tenant recounted the paternalism she experienced from the managers of her non-profit housing (Interview 10). Sadie, a Seattle tenant, recounted homophobic discrimination that she and her partner experienced when she was looking for housing, that she ended up reporting to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in case the landlord was discriminating against other tenants too who might not have the same capacity to report it. She had written to a landlord in response to a posting on Craigslist for a two-bedroom apartment, providing details about their income, jobs, and so on. The landlord replied and said that it was only suitable for one person. Straight friends and family members submitted inquiries to the landlord with the same information and the landlord replied back, ready to set up showings.

It was just baffling. And I was like, homophobia? What are the chances? It seems so unlikely. I still think it's got to be maybe that [my partner] was a student ... I don't know. Honestly, I'm baffled ... But if there was a reason she didn't want us, there's probably a reason she doesn't want somebody else. Who maybe needs it more. (Interview 11).

These situations require that tenants navigate their ongoing survival and the decisions that tenants make in these circumstances about whether to stay or leave are acts of radical self-care, even if they continue to have health, safety, or other risks. Self-care decisions that tenants make are done so in response to the broader failure of state infrastructure to care for them.

Though, a few participants felt that landlord-tenant laws were favourable to tenants or noted they had some good experiences with landlords. Sadie, for example, found her current place through social networks. She and her partner have an elderly landlord living above them and she describes a mutually beneficial relationship where she trusts the landlord to not sell her

property, and she and her partner look out for the landlord and are able to get in touch with the family if anything happens: “It is amazing how much stress it’s lifted. Knowing that if she raises the rent, it’ll be because she *has to* raise the rent. I’ve never had that experience before. So it’s really like magical, actually, [and] we’ll be here for as long as we possibly can” (Interview 11).

Sadie and other tenants who experienced a “good landlord” expressed the exceptionality of this encounter compared to their previous housing experiences. When tenants described good experiences with landlords, this typically was shaped by the relationship that they had been able to develop: such as by being friends with the building manager prior to moving in or knowing previous tenants who had rented from the landlord and finding the place that way. The unusual relationship between these participants and their landlords emphasize the role of social care relations in shaping experiences of housing systems, which runs contrary to the logics of racial capitalism that creates differential social valuation between property-owners and non-propertied urban subjects (Melamed, 2015; Gilmore, 2002).

Overall, when describing their experiences of housing in crises and what they had navigated in their different places, tenants would frequently say that they did not have a choice or that things were out of their control. The ‘making do’ is a survival response for tenants experiencing housing crises, that do not necessarily bring them safe, secure, or affordable housing, but rather keep them housed for now. Tenants are making decisions for themselves in attempt to meet some of their most urgent needs brought about by perpetual housing crises. They are enacting radical self-care by prioritizing self-preservation so they can endure housing crises by remaining housed.

### **6.3.2. Organizing for care**

Beyond the ‘making do’ where tenants stayed in housing that was a health or safety risk, or did not meet their housing needs, participants also relied on different care network structures in order to survive urban housing crises. The conditions of housing crises necessitated tenants organizing for their own housing care needs in the absence of state or landlord care (Spade, 2020; Hobart & Kneese, 2020). While some of the labour around ‘making do’ relied on tenants’ self-care, in other cases addressing this care gap came from care provided through tenant care networks. These networks typically included care from friends and family, neighbours, tenant organizations, and mutual care relationships between tenants. Asura, a tenant in Vancouver, identified that support primarily came from “community, fellow renters, your friends whom you sit down with and complain together, kind of cry about living in Vancouver, and complain” (Interview 21). Friends and family offered tenants a place to stay if they needed to leave their current housing; helped tenants view potential rentals if they were moving to the city from out of town; supported law navigation; helped with rent payments when a job was unexpectedly lost; and offered to be a future “landlord” reference when a current landlord threatened to give a bad reference if they moved out. This care helps to support tenants and provide short-term solutions for the instability they experience in the housing system.

Tenants often recounted the kindness they experienced from neighbours as another prominent source of care. If the neighbours were also renters and shared the same landlord, the two groups of tenants organized together and strategized ways to have their care needs met. This occurred through sharing information about what the landlord had told them, coordinating demands for repairs, and generally navigating their living conditions together. Another

significant form of care that tenants received from their neighbours, however, came through online neighbourhood groups such as those hosted on Facebook.

In both cities, multiple tenants recounted that when they had a significant repair issue, like their fridge breaking down, the landlord was out of town and told the tenant they would have to wait until they got back. One tenant said she ended up turning to her local Buy Nothing group in order to get a temporary bar fridge as a holdover until the landlord could take action. Another lost over \$800 worth of food because her fridge broke on a Friday night and the landlord could not fix it until Monday. She had her fridge replaced three times over four years because the landlord kept replacing a broken fridge with another old one (Interview 19). In these circumstances, the conflict between housing-as-business and housing-as-shelter becomes clear: if property is a business for landlords, they might expect to not have to deal with it all of the time. Yet, for tenants, an issue like pests, plumbing, or a functioning fridge are related to their survival and ability to live their lives. In these cases, one source of care was from online neighbourhood groups that lent tenants needed supplies such as dehumidifiers and mini fridges; offered support navigating landlord-tenant laws; or in some cases property-owning neighbours offered rentals to tenants experiencing displacement.

Advocacy organizations, including tenant organizations, also played a role in tenants' care networks. These organizations included labour unions, student legal centres, and tenants' unions. Tenant organizations in particular illustrate a form of mutual care between tenants as they are often comprised of tenants themselves. Though, tenants noted that many of the organizations were overworked and underfunded themselves and that as a result it could take a while to get support from them and that, given the amount of issues tenants were facing across

Seattle and Vancouver, finding solutions could feel overwhelming. As Asura explained, “My impression is that it’s a drop in the ocean” (Interview 21).

Beyond organizations, tenant-to-tenant care also occurred between roommates and from interview participants themselves caring with other tenants. When roommates faced repair issues, rent increases, or displacement, in many cases they would navigate the situation together collectively. Tenants would share the labour of reading and interpreting landlord-tenant laws, communicating with the landlord and collectively crafting responses, negotiating rent decreases, and making decisions about what to do or what actions to take. For several participants, there was a lot of value in sharing housing with other people. Their care for and with other tenants extended to broader communities in their cities as well: one participant emphasized that it was the support from the local community and her neighbours that helped tenants navigate things like heat waves that put tenants’ lives at risk because the windows did not open fully. The importance of tenant collectivity and care is paralleled in the sentiments expressed by Seattle tenant Avi:

I think that if one member of our community is facing such traumatizing experiences... such as not having a home, that’s a loss for us all. And the fact that it’s so prevalent is just really sad. To me, it’s always been sad. So that’s kind of why I originally started to get involved in caring about housing in general. (Interview 8).

The diverse ways that participants described tenants caring for one another plays an important role in challenging hegemonic discourse about who are caring actors versus care receivers.

Tenant-to-tenant radical collective care subverts these narratives and illustrates that tenants are capable of organizing for their housing care needs, particularly when social power structures have categorized them as being undeserving of state care. Further, tenants receiving care from each other, from neighbours, and from tenant organizations subverts the idea of care as something occurs in private spaces, like the home, or something received from members of a

nuclear, cisheteronormative family (Malatino, 2020; England & Dyck, 2012). The multi-sourced tenant care webs expands the boundaries of what and where we consider care relations to be (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Brown et al., 2014).

In discussing the care networks of tenants, my goal is not to romanticize care as a wholly positive thing. While many tenants received care from roommates or neighbours, in other situations the labour of advocating for repairs was unevenly distributed, or neighbours caused tenants to feel uneasiness in their homes. Whenever we analyze relations and practices of care we must always account for the nuances of care, how different individuals experience care, and for the ways that claims of care can be invoked in order to cause harm, as “uncaring care” (Bartos, 2018).

Further, despite the function of extended care networks in crisis survival, tenants still had limited capacity, time, and energy to address everything that was required to have their housing care needs met. As one renter in Vancouver describes:

Understanding more about tenancy rights has felt really important. At the same time, though, it doesn't feel like they do much to resolve the power dynamic [...] I can legally have a right to a mold-free place. But can I like, one, do the work to pin down that right and get the landlord to actually do something about it? Probably not, because I'm usually working multiple jobs [...] there's also no enforcement on those sorts of things ... there's no one saying like, hey, these people have rights ... it's up to renters themselves to support each other. (Interview 22).

Their reflections highlight a key aspect underlining experiences of housing crises: the social hierarchies of power that exacerbate housing precarity in a colonial, racial capitalist housing system also make it more difficult for tenants to meet their care needs on their own or through tenant care networks. Those who have higher care needs (often as a result of social structural inequalities) are least able to access the care they need due to the marketization and societal

undervaluing of care (Green & Lawson, 2011). As the Vancouver renter describes above, although they would like to enforce their tenants' rights and address habitability issues in their place, often the capacity to do so is limited as a result of needing to work multiple jobs to afford housing and the cost of living. It is not that tenants are incapable of caring for themselves and each other, but rather that the housing system has created conditions that make it difficult to do so, in order to uphold and reproduce existing power structures.

Together, the 'making do' and structurally-caused limited capacities of tenants illustrate the importance of considering a broader range of more caring housing futures, both within the existing housing system and beyond. I turn now to tenants' housing care imaginaries to consider the breadth of these futures and tenants' proposals for solutions to, and beyond, urban housing crises that meet diverse care needs.

#### **6.4. Housing futures within**

In response to the conditions of housing crises they were navigating, tenants imagined changes to the existing system or their situations that would help to alleviate their immediate housing insecurity. For some tenants, this meant achieving homeownership because they recognized the stability that would accompany becoming propertied subjects. Other housing futures within the current system were imagined through changes to landlord-tenant laws. These housing care imaginaries are centred in notions of housing futures that can exist within the current racial capitalist, colonial housing systems that might increase the amount of care and security that tenants receive in the meantime. In this way housing care imaginaries for the present are co-constituted with participants' urban imaginaries, where they are reacting to their everyday experiences in Vancouver or Seattle as they imagine an urban future that they should

aspire towards (Huysen, 2008). Housing futures within the existing system arguably remain within the realm of what is currently understood as possible within liberal economic logics, even if some, like rent control, are typically perceived as impossible within those same logics in order to maintain existing power hierarchies. In this section, I discuss these changes under two prominent themes: the addition of new landlord-tenant laws and increased oversight/enforcement of existing laws.

#### **6.4.1. Addition of new landlord-tenant laws**

While many tenants in both cities lamented the limited efficacy of municipal landlord-tenant laws, they still felt that changes to existing laws or the addition of new laws could have a meaningful impact on their present-day housing experiences. Tenants' suggestions for new laws included: more notice from landlords selling their properties; rent-restricted units; greater anti-discrimination protections; stricter repair timelines and requirements; and preventing anti-pet rental policies.

For Seattle tenants, overwhelmingly there was a desire for the implementation of rent control. Rent control has been illegal in the state of Washington since 1981, as a result of a well-funded landlord lobby. While at the urban scale a number of landlord-tenant laws have been passed by Seattle City Council in an attempt to address some of the issues created by the absence of rent control, full controls remain elusive. Even with the passage of new laws, Seattle tenants are imagining a housing system with actual rent control as one way that some of their housing issues might be addressed. As Tyson explains:

I think that the case for what the impacts of rent control are on the economy as a whole are both overstated and unconvincing ... there's that meme where it's like, if you replace the word, 'the economy' with 'rich people's money', like suddenly,

a lot of those cases become a lot less convincing ... I think that what rent control really threatens is rich people's money. I don't think what rent control threatens is the average experience of everyday people. And I care a lot more about average, everyday people than I care about rich people's money. So I think that for that reason, rent control would be a really important step. (Interview 6)

Seattle tenants identified rent control as a means to address the uncertainty and insecurity that they experienced in their housing: that each time they signed a new lease, they did not know how long they would be able to stay in that place because there were no limits to how much the landlord would increase their rent 12 months later. Tenants described this unknowing as causing a lot of "worry" and that it was "terrifying." A.H. explained that with so many residents already living paycheck to paycheck, having some certainty about how much rent could increase "would make me feel so much more secure about moving into a place" (Interview 4).

Conversely, tenants in Vancouver experience some level of rent increase protection: while rents can increase each year, the amount of the increase is limited by the provincial government. This regulation on its own is not enough, as there are loopholes to this form of rent control that tenants have been organizing around for some time. Because rents remain so expensive, particularly on units being added to the market, tenants are often forced to make do with worse housing conditions. They cannot afford to move into places that would serve their health, care, and housing needs. Critics of rent control, rooted in liberal economic logics, often use tenants not moving into places that meet their needs as a "reason" against rent control, framed as a market inefficiency. That is not what is happening here. Tenants are staying longer in apartments that have repair issues, health concerns like pests and mold, and so on, because the commodification of housing has made it so that landlord-tenant laws are not enforced and lower-income tenants have limited choices when they are seeking housing. Vancouver participants

described the need for greater “vacancy control,” which describes a form of rent control when rent increase limits are tied to the unit as opposed to the tenant.

A second example of a desired additional law is what is typically referred to as a “First-in-Time” protection. In Seattle, an available unit must be rented to the first applicant to submit an approved application—so as long as an applicant meets whichever requirements are described in the application, they will receive the offer to rent. In Vancouver however, this is not the case: landlords can choose who they want to rent to based off of all the applications they receive. This was an issue raised by many Vancouver participants, who emphasized the need to be perceived as a “good tenant” from the point of application, because otherwise they would not be offered the rental. While I have previously discussed the prominence of the ‘good tenant’ narrative (see Chapter 5), the absence of a “First-in-Time” law forces many Vancouver tenants to position themselves as desirable to “sell themselves” to landlords. That desirability often necessarily aligns with cisheteropatriarchal norms of the nuclear family and dominant ideas about stability and reliability. As Paul describes:

Well, I’ll just tell you how we sell ourselves, right? So...we’ve been married 10 years, we’ve got four kids. We want to treat the house like it’s our home, we want to put a garden in. I have some handyman skills, so, and some tools, so I can look after the upkeep a bit more, maybe than most. We’re very involved in our church. So that whole kind of picture, you know, family, I’m a teacher, my wife works for our church. That’s the sales pitch, is ‘us.’ And our references, we have good references. So yeah, I think I think that’s what sells, because there’s a lot of young people, and some of the young people are really respectful, but you don’t know what you’re getting. Families are tend to be a little easier on the house. (Interview 13).

Further, as Morgan explains that when he was trying to rent his first place, the presence of a parent was helpful in improving his credibility as a tenant:

[The] building manager was like, ‘Hey, we don’t we don’t discriminate against anyone who’s just trying to make their life better.’ And so he was like, ‘you know, you got your mom here. So that’s good. It’s a good indicator, I’ll just take that as like a good to go.’ And so that was just really refreshing. But if I hadn’t had that, like if I didn’t have the support of my mom, and I was just going out on my own to do this. I think it’d be really hard that, like, I’m sure I would have easily been rejected just based off my credit score. (Interview 23).

Other tenants described the importance of paying rent on time and being “considerate” of the property and taking action to take care of things, like repairs, before they become a bigger issue (Interview 17). Some tenants also perceived themselves as not looking “good on paper” due to past evictions, debt, or unemployment.

Tenants’ discussion of the absence of rent control and first-in-time laws illustrates one way that specific landlord-tenant laws gain collective public awareness as a path forward for a housing future that would provide some relief, and care, to tenants in the context of a current housing system. The contrast between the existing laws in Vancouver and Seattle uplifts this point because each city had a version of the law tenants in the other city were noticing the absence of. Tenants’ experiences without these laws also point to the impact that landlord-tenant laws can have in the immediate present, even with the issues tenants identified, such as absence of enforcement or recourse when the laws are not followed by landlords. The positioning of themselves as ‘good tenants’ or the suggestion for new laws is illustrative of “the ways in which the poor and other marginalized urban actors both experience and employ urban spaces in often dynamic, creative, and innovative ways to negotiate their presence, access basic resources and services in the city, and make demands” (Muñoz, 2018: 4). Tenants negotiate existing laws, create narratives to make themselves more desirable to landlords, and consider creative solutions that would make the city more habitable.

#### **6.4.2. Increased enforcement of existing laws**

The enforcement of existing tenant protections in Vancouver and Seattle currently rely heavily on tenants' self-advocacy. Interview participants identified existing issues with the lack of enforcement and expressed a desire for greater accountability by landlords. Tenants recounted experiences where landlords would say they would do repairs and then not do them or retaliate in response to habitability improvement requests with high rent increases. Tenants expressed worry about eviction or other forms of retaliation if they pushed back too much. The COVID-19 pandemic further reduced any state oversight of landlord-tenant laws due to system overwhelm. One tenant needed a health inspector to assess the habitability of her rental that had rats, mold, and a leaking ceiling, but was told that it would take at least four months because of the pandemic.

In many circumstances where tenants were relying on the laws for protection, they did not have the luxury of time to wait for the system to work: instead, tenants took on the cost and labour of moving because their place was no longer habitable, an option not available to all tenants. As Elyse explains:

Moving out because your landlord has abused you still puts such a burden on you ... why would I pay rent to somebody who's treating me like trash? Why would I continue living there because it can take literal years [to pursue a case in Small Claims Court] ... they would have expected me to continue paying this shitty landlord for two years in order to sue her for all the damages that she did to me, including, like giving me not a place to live but still charging me rent. (Interview 3).

By the time she moved out, Elyse had replaced her oven on her own and dealt with a flooding basement every time it rained; rats and squirrels in the attic, basement, and walls; persistent mold; and landlord harassment and retaliation. There were so many issues that when Elyse

organized with her neighbours they had to decide which issue to prioritize trying to get addressed first.

Tenants identified the role of existing laws as being a type of safety net or safeguard against worse exploitation or discrimination. As Sadie states: “I think they [the laws] have a chilling effect on landlords in a really important way. I think they provide disincentives for exploitation” (Interview 11). Talia explains how improving enforcement of landlord-tenant laws would address some of the present issues: “You kind of have to wait until you’re in a bad situation almost, to be able to use them ... So maybe more prevention of abuse in advance” (Interview 18).

Without enforcement of laws, tenants identified that the utility of tenant protections was severely limited. As Elyse suggests:

If your landlord wants to do a good job than they will. And if they don’t care, then they won’t do anything. Because ... even though they [the laws] have some of the things that make them sound good, like your repairs have to happen within this amount of time, there’s absolutely no way to enforce it. So they’re just like, pretty little things that don’t mean anything. (Interview 3).

Tenants often understood the inaction, incompetence, or lawbreaking from landlords as landlords not caring about them. Avi suggests, “[It] seems like the culture of the landlords is very, like, vindictive and not really caring about their tenants?” (Interview 8). They explain that they have received more pushback from landlords in Seattle around, for example, repairs, compared to other places they have lived previously. A tenant in Vancouver, Michelle posits, “You’re caring about your shareholders or yourself and not about a family that might not have any other options ... What if you’re a family and you’re low-income and you have three dogs? Most places would just out of hand not take you.” (Interview 19).

Tenants in both cities felt that the lack of oversight of landlord-tenant laws, which resulted in incomplete repairs, landlord retaliation, and habitability issues, resulted in an absence of care in their experiences of housing crises. Thus, housing futures with increased enforcement or oversight by state actors of landlord-tenant laws would increase the amount of care that some tenants had access to in their housing. The relationships of care which constitute experiences of housing are multifaceted and shaped by the behaviours of actors with differential access to power (e.g., landlords to tenants, state to tenants, state to landlords, tenants to tenants) (Power & Mee, 2020).

## **6.5. Housing futures beyond**

In the last stage of interviews, tenants were asked to “dream” of ideal housing futures for themselves as individuals and collectively for all tenants. In this dreaming process, many of the tenants imagined housing futures that were rooted in a reorganizing of what was possible in terms of care. Following Summers and Fields’ (2022) conceptualization of radical collective care as speculative urban worldmaking, the imaginings of future worlds is a response to the inadequacies of the present moment and the ways that the present housing system is not addressing the needs, care and otherwise, of tenants individually and collectively. Through the invitation to dream, tenants described their boundless housing care imaginaries: urban housing futures that would meet their care needs and offer them the care they believed they were worthy of. They spoke of futures where they could have peace of mind and not be worried about their health and safety. In this section, I reflect the housing care imaginaries offered by tenants under three dominant themes: collectivity, power re-balancing, and abolition. I quote tenants at-length here to centre their perspectives and expertise in imagining urban housing futures.

### 6.5.1. Collectivity

The first theme that connects housing care imaginaries from different participants are futures rooted in collectivity: through an imagining of collective housing models and shared forms of ownership. Tenants also imagined futures where they had a sense of ownership over their place and were able to do what they wanted in their spaces with greater freedom: from decorating how they wanted to, to smoking and using drugs, to having more control over who could enter their home and when. Being able to feel rooted in a neighbourhood and community was a desire expressed by participants, particularly if they had experienced displacement. As Michelle, a tenant in Vancouver, imagines:

I used to dream about owning a house like the one I grew up in: your typical single family with the backyard. Now, honestly, I would like to sign a thing that says, ‘I live here.’ And that’s it. I don’t want to have to worry about it being sold out from under me or renovated ... that’s the only dream that I have ... I don’t even care if, like, my furniture and everything gets trashed. I just want a place where I know I can sleep at night and it will always be mine. (Interview 19).

In addition to control over space, participants turned to diverse housing types as ideal: from housing co-operatives to public or social housing, increased social supports from governments (through, for example, better-funded disability and welfare programs), and housing models that encouraged more community-building and collective connections in general and reduce feelings of isolation among renters. Tyson proposes, “More communal ownership or more communal maintenance of spaces would probably go a long way towards ending a lot of that stuff” (Interview 6). Paul suggests, “I would really like to see cities find a way to make them liveable for families. Instead of just throwing up presale condos as fast as possible, which I understand there’s a demand. But you want people to want to live there [...] to have a long term vision for a family-livable city” (Interview 13).

Morgan used Scandinavian housing models that he heard about as a reference point, where an apartment building had a shared kitchen and each month someone cooked for the other residents:

Then there's a real sense of community [...] So in an ideal world, I think I'd like that community, but also, like be able to pay based off of, you know, a third of what I make ... my income has a single person who doesn't really plan on getting married or having any of those dual income benefits. It would be nice to have that taken into account. (Interview 23).

Also thinking about possibilities for collective and community-oriented housing, Avi, a Seattle tenant, describes housing futures that highlight social relationships:

I think I can see myself [in a] housing situation in which I'm surrounded by like, the house is part of the nature that surrounds it. Which could be nourishing in a way for both me as a tenant and the nature [...] maybe housing would be more modular in a perfect world, I'd be able to have one bedroom, but then I have a friend in from out of town, and then [...] there's people in my apartment complex that in a perfect world, we'd all be so social, that we would know what's going on with each other. And if there's an open room or something, friends can come in and out of situations. Kind of in a way that was more understanding and exciting. Excited about welcoming folks into our community. Seeing housing as more of a community, as opposed to just a place where I go to sleep. And I think that that would be really exciting in a way ... I feel like housing is supposed to be a community, but we don't really see that pretty much anywhere. (Interview 8).

In each of these imaginaries, tenants are suggesting new ways to conceptualize the purpose of housing, how relationships form and the possibilities of social relationships. This is in contrast to neoliberal ideologies that privilege competition and individualism, principles which have extended into dominant ideas of care (Woodly et al., 2021). Instead, these housing care imaginaries describe future worlds where symbiotic relationships are central to everyday experiences of housing, that extend into the physical housing infrastructure, and that relationality and models of collective care would address the housing care needs felt by interview participants.

### 6.5.2. Rebalancing power

When describing their current housing experiences, many participants identified feeling frustrated with the lack of recourse or power to make their landlords follow the existing landlord-tenant laws. When imagining housing futures then, it follows that tenants would imagine a world where the power imbalance between landlords and tenants, where landlords as propertied subjects hold power protected by racial capitalism and settler colonialism, changes.

For example, Elyse imagines a future where, “I will be treated with some amount of respect and dignity by the landlord of a place I’m renting, that they will honor the contract that they make with me” (Interview 5). Tyson recognizes the function of landlord-tenant laws but feels that they are not enough on their own: “Tenant laws, I tend to think of as more of a tool of harm reduction than of long term change [...] I feel like [...] we really need to be fighting to alter the balance of power” (Interview 3). Similarly, Avi suggests a possible reframing, necessary in order to offer protection to tenants experiencing housing precarity: “I feel like certain landlords can be real creeps to certain folks and vulnerable communities” (Interview 8). Other tenants suggested that housing futures led by Indigenous people or houseless individuals would be ideal: “I think they have the most to say, and the most, a lot of, experience in this area,” says Flo (Interview 17).

When imagining ways to address the power imbalance between landlords and tenants, these four participants suggest a reframing of the landlord-tenant relationship, fighting for a future that shifts the balance of power, and following the expertise of groups with a lot of perspective and experience. These approaches identify the significance of power to care absences in the contemporary housing system and the necessity of re-politicizing housing crises to

recognize the embeddedness of social power structures in property relations (Massey & Rustin, 2015).

### **6.5.3. Abolition**

The third theme that connects participants' housing care imaginaries is that of abolition. Returning to the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore cited in the introduction, abolition recognizes the violence and harm caused by existing power structures and argues that the only viable solution is to abolish the systems that are not serving all people (Gilmore, 2020, 2022; Spade, 2020). In interviews, when participants were told that there truly were no limits to what they could imagine for housing futures, many of them then turned to the abolition of systems and structures that perpetuate precarity, inequality, and crisis in a racial capitalist housing system. They discussed abolishing landlords, the rental system, and the notion of housing as a commodity where the prioritized function is its profit-generating potential. In a housing future without these operations that are currently fundamental to the existing housing system, tenants felt this would increase the power of tenants, provide enough housing for everyone, and offer opportunity to relate to their fellow urban residents in different ways, all of which would address their housing care needs:

Well, then, probably my ideal housing future would be like the abolition of renting companies and the radical redistribution of land such that the existing system of renter capitalism no longer exists [...] I don't think that like, companies should be reaping absurd amounts of profit off of the backs of people who are just trying to make it through the day.

Tyson, Seattle tenant (Interview 6)

I guess there wouldn't really in an ideal world, they wouldn't really even be private owners. And we would all just be able to have access to housing whenever we needed and under the type of situation that we wanted, and whether that be with others, or escaping from situations where we aren't wanting to be a part of.

Avi, Seattle tenant (Interview 8)

I think having ... regulation around, like, not just how much landlords can raise the rent, but like how many properties you can own, and the ways that you can use property as income, versus like, like the whole idea of people using property as like, this is my income. And it's like, that's not a job. That's just the thing you own. [...] if there was a way to ... make housing not a commodity. I don't know if that's possible. It's certainly idyllic.

Sadie, Seattle tenant (Interview 11)

If you're renting, you know, you're just like throwing your money away. So we talked about it in financial terms, but I think we have to kind of refocus the conversations that we're talking about, you know, people need somewhere to live.

Jameson, Vancouver tenant, (Interview 15)

As these four tenants describe their ideal housing futures, they simultaneously point to issues they identify with the system as it currently exists while imagining an urban context where people had safe, secure, and affordable housing. At the heart of each of these perspectives is that people need a place to live that meets their needs and, due to the commodification of housing, these needs are not currently being met. The imaginaries offered by participants for housing futures are rooted in practices and politics of radical care that prioritize relationality, joy, community, and an otherwise (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Through their housing care imaginaries, tenants are demonstrating care by emphasizing the importance of prioritizing housing's role as shelter over its function as an investment. In doing so, participants are questioning capitalist relations, like landlords and limitless profits, which does important work to upend hegemonic liberal economic logics about what is possible in housing and care.

## 6.6. Conclusion

*It's easy [for landlords] to be greedy when you're faceless. I was not a person to most [...] like, your renters are not people. They're part of the market.*

*Sadie, Seattle tenant (Interview 11).*

Financialized housing systems are embedded in the logics of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. The impacts of these power structures disproportionately increase housing precarity for low-income urban residents, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, women, queer, non-binary, and trans individuals. Housing precarity, underscored by the commodification of housing, results in an absence of housing security, affordability, and safety that impacts tenants' everyday lives. Experiences of housing crises are further shaped by practices, politics, and relationships of care: in how tenants navigate crises as well as whether or not they experience care from landlords and state actors. Whereas with other commodities you can return the product or ask for a refund if it does not perform how you expected it to upon purchase, rentals do not operate in this same way. If a tenant loses access to their fridge, or has their health put at risk by mold, they are still expected to pay the same amount of rent. The landlord's profits do not change. Tenants make do in crisis because there is an overwhelming lack of other options. They solve the issue themselves or seek support and care elsewhere to ensure they are still able to survive when landlords break the law.

In this paper, I analyzed data from semi-structured interviews with participants in Vancouver and Seattle to conduct a relational comparison of tenants' experiences of crises in the two cities and develop our conceptualization of tenants' housing care imaginaries. By placing tenants' perspectives in conversation with one another, I have illustrated the ways that, while discourse about the 'cause' of each city's housing crisis may differ, the broader power structures that shape these housing systems are producing comparable conditions of crisis for tenants. I argued that tenants' housing care imaginaries are constructed through tenants' current experiences of housing crises, as well as housing futures they imagine within the limits of the

present housing system and beyond. Housing care imaginaries describe tenants' imaginaries for housing futures meet a broad spectrum of care needs. Housing care imaginaries are rooted in tenants' current experiences of housing and therefore also reveal their care needs now, whether these needs are met or unmet.

I discussed the conditions of housing crises that mean tenants are forced to make decisions that support their survival in the meantime, even as health and safety risks continue. I demonstrated that tenants' practices of making do and organizing for individual and collective care are rooted in radical care survival strategies for enduring precarious and violent worlds. I then considered the housing futures tenants imagined within and beyond their city's current housing situation. Within, tenants reflected on the potential benefits of new landlord-tenant laws and the utility that enforcing existing laws would have on their everyday lives. Beyond, tenants imagined housing futures grounded in ideas of collectivity, power re-balancing, and abolition. I argued that consideration of futures around these themes illustrate the presence of housing care imaginaries that identify tenants' current unmet care needs that in turn help us to understand the diverse ways that care is experienced, navigated, and provided for through housing.

The work of radical care, then, is inherent to our understandings of housing crises and how tenants experience them. In expanding the boundaries of feminist care geography, we must consider not only the relationship between housing and care, but specifically the types of care that makes survival possible in a racial capitalist, settler colonial housing system. As tenants describe their housing care imaginaries that extend into the possibilities of different housing futures, the full spectrum of care needs that are situated within housing become clear. Tenants' imaginaries of housing futures open up pathways for how we might move forward with creating housing futures that provide needed care to tenants. Models for collective care in these futures

propose not only survival, but comfort, security, safety, and social relationships. Tenants' radical housing care imaginaries illustrate that we must expand the boundaries of what we conceptualize as possible care practices and politics in housing.

## Chapter 7. Caring Housing Futures: a radical care framework for understanding rent control politics in Seattle, USA

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For most of 2020, renters in Seattle, USA were temporarily protected by eviction moratoria and rent freezes, as a result of emergency legislation put into effect by municipal and state governments in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Explaining the emergency proclamation, Washington Governor Jay Inslee stated, “We certainly don’t need more housing insecurity in the moment of uncertainty during this pandemic” (Associated Press, 2020). This legislation stands in contrast to rent control debates that have been ongoing for decades in Seattle, where legislation proposing rent control has been struck down citing economic perspectives that suggest rent control will cause harm to housing markets.

Rent control includes laws and regulations that place restraints on how much rent a landlord can charge for a property, or the rate of rent increases that can be implemented (Arnott, 1997). Because these regulations control rent prices, they are also entangled with how evictions are controlled (Willis, 1950). Previous research on rent control suggests that the regulations guarantee a “fair rent” for housing, though critics argue that rent controls are in violation of

landlords' constitutional rights to receive "fair returns" on their investments (Turner & Malpezzi, 2003; Ambrosious et al., 2015). The question of fairness—that is, whose "fairness" is seen as the most important—underscores most of the debates around rent control. Rent control can also be understood as a means to at least partially reduce conditions of housing precarity, because stable rents might contribute to ontological security particularly for tenants on low- or fixed-incomes. I suggest that rent control is a useful case study for thinking through housing politics and crisis, illustrated with connections between COVID-19 emergency legislation and longer histories of rent control debates. I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has expanded the political imaginations of policymakers, providing an opening for renter protections that were previously framed as impossible. Moreover, COVID-19 is one crisis exacerbating vulnerabilities and unequal conditions already produced by other simultaneous, ongoing crises. I suggest that what is possible/impossible in crisis warrants interrogation. Projects once stonewalled (e.g., eviction moratoria, rent freezes/control) are temporarily available in one crisis because the social groups impacted are different—in the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency measures were passed to protect the white middle class. This in turn begs the question, 'impossible for whom, when, and why?'

How we define a crisis matters (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). Presently, there are simultaneous, intersecting, and longstanding crises shaping the urban housing environments in the United States. The nature of the term 'crisis' suggests that it should be something out of the ordinary, but in many cases it is not an exception—rather, the system is working precisely as designed. As Easterlow and Smith argue (2004: 1001): "Housing markets are not economically designed, or politically required, to work in (or, specifically against) the interests of needy or vulnerable groups." Housing crises are inevitable because the financialization of housing produces housing as a profit-generating commodity in competitive markets rather than as a

dwelling or potential home (Fields & Uffer, 2016; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). When crises are exclusively named as economic, it can be difficult not to simply perceive crises as events with prescribed outcomes (Hall et al., 2015: 20). Yet, existing housing policy relies on liberal economic logics that lead to market-based solutions. My argument begins from the idea that crises can produce more profound changes: as Hall and Massey (2010: 57) suggest, “It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing ... or to a somewhat transformed version.”

Moreover, housing inequalities and the absence of rent control are produced by intersecting projects of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. Embedded within a larger racial banishment project from cities, racial capitalism and settler colonialism enact dispossession, displacement, and erasure from urban spaces and access to housing for people of colour, Black, and Indigenous communities (Roy, 2017). This is compounded by the embeddedness of property in projects of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that prescribe white supremacy into property law, particularly through U.S. property law’s intimate relationship with slavery and an understanding of whiteness as property where whiteness accumulates wealth and is legally protected as a property-holding subject (Moreton-Robinson, 2016; McElroy, 2020; Hern, 2016). Property law and the U.S. housing system facilitates the ongoing possession of stolen Indigenous lands, further dispossessing Indigenous people from their land through evictions, displacement, and homelessness (Bhandar, 2018; Peters & Christensen, 2016). Evictions and housing crises (re)produce narratives of who owns and profits from land, and on what terms (Roy, 2017). The hegemonic housing system in the U.S. is thus central to the reproduction of the settler state, through the structural domination and “organized abandonment” of racialized peoples by the state (Gilmore, 2008; Pulido, 2016).

I suggest that responses to housing crises that rely on liberal economics provide room only for solutions that reproduce the same inequalities undergirded by structural racism and dispossession. This in turn creates hegemonic futures that are mere replications of present worlds mired by simultaneous crises and housing injustice (Leszczynski, 2016). Yet, housing justice analyses show us possible worlds that exist around other relations of survival and thriving. I explore housing futures that become possible when we move the analytical framework of housing politics away from colonial, racial capitalist understandings of financialized housing markets and instead towards a framework that emphasizes relationality and does not take the commodification of housing for granted—one with an openness towards “diverse alternative politics of possibility” (Elwood et al., 2017).

Analyses of housing politics in crises are strengthened through an engagement with geographies of care. Geographies of care recognize the embeddedness of care in each of our lives, as well as the ways that care is bound up in complex social structures of power and politics and can be deployed in ways that are ‘uncaring’ (Lawson, 2007; Bartos, 2018; Raghuram, 2016; Herrera, forthcoming). Recent work in geography demands increased theorizations of the relationship between care and housing, specifically suggesting that housing is an infrastructure of care, webs of sociospatial relationships, processes, and systems that shape experiences of housing (Power, 2019; Power & Mee, 2020; Power & Williams, 2020). I engage conceptualizations of radical care, which positions care as a collective response to immediate crises and precarious futures, which has a history centred in feminist self-care and Black and brown activist care work that addressed gaps produced by system failure and violence (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Edelman, 2020). Care exists as survival, as an ethical politics, and as a language for understanding society’s inherent relationality (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

In this paper, I develop a framework for analyzing housing politics through radical care. I suggest that such a framework relies on an examination of care practices and politics, supported by the following: first, radical care analyses must engage with the role that structural hierarchies of power play in producing housing injustice, including those of settler colonialism and racial capitalism; second, the approach understands housing justice as relational and shaped by multiscale care responses; and third, radical care offers a pathway for more expansive sociopolitical imaginaries and actions, that move beyond colonial racial capitalist limits of existing debates and actions around housing crises. In this paper, I apply a radical care framework to analyze housing politics of rent control debates and movements in Seattle, United States. I focus on three illustrative moments in Seattle's rent control debates and read each for politics and practices of care: first, the filing of Initiative 24 in 1980, which sought to enact municipal rent control; second, the Rally for Rent Control in 2019 where tenants' demanded rent control in their city; and third, the 'rent freeze' policy enacted statewide in Washington in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this empirical focus on rent control debates, I argue that analyzing housing politics through a radical care framework offers an opening for a desire-centred approach to housing politics rather than a damage-centred approach that reproduces housing crises that uphold racial capitalism, the settler state, and white property ownership. As Tuck (2009: 413) writes, in a damage-centred approach "pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains." Instead, a desire-centred approach is "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives," rather than, in this case, framing precariously housed people as helpless actors in need of care, suffering at the hands of an unjust system (Tuck, 2009). A desire-centred framework emphasizes that precariously housed people are active in the provision and receipt of

care, imagining diverse housing futures while also enacting their survival in a settler colonial and racial capitalist housing system.

In what follows, I begin by discussing theorizations of care geographies and housing justice, followed by an overview of the empirical contexts. I then employ a radical care framework to read moments in Seattle's rent control debates for care politics and practices.

## **7.1. Geographies of care and housing justice**

Care geographies theorize that relationships of care and care work are central to all of our lives and societies (Lawson, 2007). Care is “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990: 4). Feminist care geographies often use this definition of care as a starting point, conceptualizing care within five phases: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, care-receiving, and more recently, caring with. Caring with has been posited as a necessary addition to this framework, as a means of theorizing caring relationships that are non-hierarchical and grounded in practices of mutual reciprocity (Lopez & Gillespie, 2016; Power, 2019; Thompson, 2022).

The engagement of care by geographers is relatively recent and much of the focus on theorizing the spaces and relationships of care labour are within healthcare, home respite care, and domestic workers (England & Henry, 2013; Bastia, 2015; Brown, 2003). This does important work for our understanding of ways that relationships of care are often positioned as a hierarchy between caregiver and care-receiver, as well as how care work is underpaid and undervalued because disproportionately women of colour are careworkers, where “the most

privileged do least and the most disadvantaged do most” (Cox: 2010: 126). Theorizations of spaces of care, such as the complex care geographies of food banks and LGBTQ non-profit organizations, emphasize that spaces are not simply ‘caring’ or ‘careless’: experiences, relationships, and politics of care are nuanced, contradictory, and diverse (Cloke et al., 2017; Rosenberg, 2017; Conradson, 2003). Geographies of care often intersect too with social reproduction theory, particularly as we consider the commodification of care. Social reproduction consists of oft-gendered and racialized practices and processes that facilitate biological reproduction, the reproduction of the labour force, and the reproduction of caring, which together produce social relations and material processes that undergird the capitalist system (Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Bakker 2007; Gilmore, 2005). A feminist ethic of care then conversely demands an understanding of care as relational, entwined with justice, and part of a political project to imagine and work towards a more equitable world (Lawson, 2007). In this way, care is both a practice and a politics: the practice of work that enables survival and maintains lives, and a politics which uplifts care’s radical potential while refusing capitalist logics of individualism and profitability (Staheli & Brown, 2003). Care as a politics is part of a broader project that focuses on mutual aid, abolition, refusal, and solidarity.

Feminist care geographies have been called on to engage with postcolonial theory (Raghuram, 2016; Raghuram et al., 2009); conceptualizations of uncaring care (Bartos, 2018); and to expand beyond “normative care” that focuses on normative principles to which care is articulated, including an orientation towards needs, responsibility, and asymmetrical relationships (Cooper, 2007). Following Bartos (2019), one way to address the gaps within this theoretical body of work and to “expand the boundaries of care” within geography is for a robust engagement with longstanding conversations about radical care. This stands in contrast to

neoliberal ‘white care’, which Seiler (2020: 18) conceptualizes as an apparatus of “institutions and infrastructure dedicated to the education, health, security, mobility, and comfort of white citizenry.” I draw on Hobart and Kneese’s (2020: 2) definition of radical care, as “a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds.” Hobart and Kneese (2020) frame care as a “critical survival strategy,” that creates worlds beyond the failures of the (post)neoliberal state. They argue, “Radical care can present an otherwise, even if it cannot completely disengage from structural inequalities and normative assumptions regarding social reproduction, gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship” (2020: 3). This theorization of radical care, as strategies for survival and worldmaking, is important for understanding housing politics. Whereas previous theorizations of care geographies have done important work about who cares, where, and why, I employ the term radical care in this paper to consider care not only as a response to the failure of neoliberal states to care, but also the ways that care is necessary for survival and the imagining of housing futures beyond liberal economic logics.

Radical care positions care as survival, for groups systematically positioned for social or literal death, as a response to immediate crises and with a long history in Black and brown activism, organizing, and care work (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Cacho, 2012). Through this positioning, care as a politics of refusal of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, is possible (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014). For example, in discussing care webs developed by and for people with disabilities, Piepzna-Samarashinha explains that these also subvert the caregiver/receiver model because they centre on a belief of “solidarity not charity” of mutual aid and respect (2018: 6). In social movements, “political kinship networks” can often develop that centre around care and community protection (Herrera, 2015: 61). Caring with also represents the “relational emergence of care” and conceptualizations of an emergent, radical future (Power,

2019: 766; brown, 2017). Engaging in caring practices, care politics, and radical care relationships can play a role in building caring futures that are grounded in responsibility, relationships, resistance, and resurgence (Simpson, 2017).

### **7.1.1. Housing justice as care**

The relationship between care and housing remains undertheorized, in part because care continues to be framed through a limited, though important, definition of what types of labour constitute care work (Power & Mee, 2020). Through an expanded understanding of care, care is intimately embedded within housing: it might take place through care work provided from staff to tenants, or between neighbours. Care might also occur through the development of relationships in tenant organizing, the prevention of evictions by rallies blocking courthouse entry, sharing knowledge about tenants' rights or fighting for renters' protections, and providing shelter and safety through squatting. Within housing, these are all potential sites of care because they serve a broader purpose of caring for and with renters in response to housing injustice. Increasingly in literatures on geographies of care there are moves to strengthen our understanding of the relationships between care and housing (Power, 2019; Power & Mee, 2020). This builds on earlier work that conceptualized homeless day centres as possible (though conflicted) spaces of care (Johnsen et al., 2005) and suggested that while housing markets could care (for the right price), they are not economically or politically required to (Easterlow & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005). Moreover, Williams (2017) asks us to consider the meaning of 'care-full justice' in urban spaces, recognizing ways that care can reproduce the very social structures it may be attempting to dismantle.

The relationship between radical care and housing is developed further through an engagement with conceptualizations of housing justice. Housing justice is an analytical lens that emphasizes the profound structural injustices and inequalities that are embedded within access to safe, secure, stable, and affordable housing (Kurwa, 2020; Losier, 2019; House & Okafor, 2020). Housing inequalities, including evictions, are expressions of projects of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that result in dispossession, displacement, and erasure from urban spaces and access to housing for people of colour, Black, and Indigenous communities, as part of a larger racial banishment project (Roy, 2017). Yet, many analyses of housing politics remain focused on class conflicts between landlords and tenants rather than investors, speculators, and developers profiting off the commodification of housing systems (Wyly, 2013). The class-focused analysis of housing access has been challenged, particularly in the face of the foreclosure crisis prompted by predatory lending and subprime mortgages that targeted households of colour (Wyly et al., 2012; Lichtenstein & Weber, 2015; Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). Tenant-landlord class analysis alone is inadequate for theorizing sociospatial housing relations. The operation of housing markets and production of unequal residential landscapes require an intersectional analysis as they are also equally embedded within projects of racial capitalism, white supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism (Crenshaw, 1991; Ramírez, 2020).

Racial capitalism manifests through land and labour and supports white supremacist development through slavery, colonialism, incarceration, migrant exploitation, and racial warfare (Melamed, 2015; Pulido, 2016). A core feature of racial capitalism is the work it does to normalize social separateness. Racial capitalism uses what Gilmore (2002) terms a ‘technology of antirelationality’ where collective life is replaced with relations that maintain neoliberal democratic capitalism (cited in Melamed, 2015). The production of social difference, differential

social valuation, and racial hierarchies is central to the function of racial capitalism, which renders collective relations illegible except for those that feed capitalist accumulation (Melamed, 2015). Racial capitalism relies on violent accumulation and dispossession, situating it within settler colonialism, as two dominant projects that produce social hierarchy in the U.S. (Dorries et al., 2019a; Dorries et al., 2019b). Settler colonialism functions as a set of relationships that work together to facilitate the ongoing violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples—not as a historical past, but as a present project in constant (re)production through extraction, violence, and the law, including through urban displacement and gentrification occurring in many North American cities (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Bhandar, 2018). Settler colonialism upholds secure social hierarchies of power that perpetuate ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands (Coulthard, 2014). Settler colonialism benefits from domination where “power—in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power—has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations” that facilitate dispossession (Coulthard, 2014: 7). This reminds us that colonialism has never only been about economic accumulation (Espiritu, 2003). The U.S. must be understood through settler colonialism, but not in a way that renders possible “settler moves to innocence” that remedy settler guilt and complicity while furthering the goals of the settler colonial project (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The “ruse of consent” that functions in the U.S. suggests the theft of land occurred with consent when in actuality dispossession and accumulation occurred through the construction of Indigenous people as “criminal in order to mask [settlers’] own criminality” (A. Simpson, 2017: 28). A radical care analysis illustrates the intersections between settler moves to innocence and housing injustice: for example, through disproportionate rates of Indigenous homelessness and what it means for evictions to occur on colonized land. Further, these urban

processes continue to reproduce and uphold racial capitalism, which privileges whiteness, including through property relations (Robinson, 1980; Gilmore, 2007).

Geographies of housing justice too should be intersectional in their analysis, which aligns with work in tenants' movements that are increasingly centering these analyses in their own work (Vasudevan, 2017; Huron, 2018). Housing must be understood as a key site of rapid and overwhelming capital accumulation, to which access is restricted as a result of racialized, gendered, and colonial capitalism. Radical care facilitates this understanding through an interweaving of relationality and politics and practices for survival. Housing justice scholars understand housing as relational, inalienable, and multiscalar (Vilenica et al., 2019; Right to the City Alliance, 2019). The emphasis found in housing justice work develops strong ties to care geographies: together, these bodies of work demonstrate the significance of understanding housing politics and tenants' experiences as connected, collective, and shaped by the relationship between what is thinkable and unthinkable. Further, these approaches to housing justice extend well beyond a class analysis to recognize access to and experiences of housing are shaped by sociospatial processes and relations that reproduce inequalities and fundamentally shape individuals' lives (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018). They take on a feminist, anticapitalist, antiracist, queer analysis to understand structural drivers of inequality and imagine transformative world-making where housing justice is possible. There is a necessary centering of 'other' worldings and relationalities that are always already conceptualized in the writings of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, queer, and trans scholars who write of dispossession and removal through the violence of racial capitalism and settler colonial states (Muñoz & Ybarra, 2019; Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Lawson et al., forthcoming).

These other worldings and emergent futures are possible, not in response to colonization or racial capitalism, but through refusal of these systems (brown, 2017; Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014). Moreover, as Gilmore argues, the dismantling of racial capitalist, cis-heteropatriarchal, settler colonial systems does not take place in the abstract theoretical, but rather in the embodied everyday in organizing for things like healthcare access or keeping people in their homes—ensuring survival until abolition is possible (Gilmore, 2020). This approach extends beyond hegemonic capitalist discourses towards a range of imaginable housing futures. A radical care framework, when applied to housing politics, facilitates an understanding that takes each of these interwoven components into account by addressing the structural production of housing injustice, while simultaneously placing relationality and care responses at the centre of more just housing futures. I will demonstrate this as I read for radical care in rent control politics in Seattle, USA.

## **7.2. Housing politics of crisis in Seattle**

Real estate capital has acquired immeasurable political power, alongside urban housing affordability crises that have emerged on a global scale (Rolnik, 2019; Wetzstein, 2017). This is particularly pervasive in Seattle, USA, with a markedly poor housing environment uniquely impacted by wealth gaps, rapid private development, and speculative capital. Marginalized tenants, including people of color, women, Black, Indigenous, trans, and queer individuals, disproportionately experience housing precarity that is amplified through shortages of affordable housing and the financialization of the housing system (Fields, 2017). In this section I will discuss the empirical context of Seattle's affordability crises.

In Seattle, reasons cited in popular media for the affordability housing crisis often point to a tech boom combined with anti-density policy, as well as inadequate housing supply and high construction costs (Bernstein et al., 2020). However, affordability crises in Seattle are longstanding and shaped by histories of racialized exclusions and dispossession in the city by the settler colonial state. The land where Seattle is situated was colonized in 1851. Seattle occupies the unceded lands of the Muckleshoot, Suquamish, Duwamish, Snoqualmie, and Tulalip nations. Seattle's urban segregation, racist policies of redlining and racially restrictive covenants further exacerbated disproportionate access to housing, and property ownership (and the associated wealth), in favour of white people (Berger, 2018). Until the 1960s, racial segregation, restrictive covenants, and other racist laws restricted where Black, Indigenous, and people of colour could live and own property in Seattle. In 1968 City Council passed an ordinance rendering racial discrimination in housing illegal (after voters had failed to pass it in 1964), and redlining became illegal in Washington in 1977 (Seattle Municipal Archives, 2022; Gregory, 2004). Although formal policies made housing discrimination illegal, the ongoing impacts and legacies of these systems would continue long after the 1970s. These histories are further intensified through the rising housing costs in Seattle, produced in part as a result of inadequate or absent rent control. In Seattle, rent control legislation is currently banned by the state government. The statewide ban on rent control came into effect in 1981.

Rent control as a policy has been present in the U.S. since the Great Depression and there are two main generations of rent control (Arnott, 1997). The first focuses on a freeze of rent prices, with occasional rent increases. The second covers rents and rent increases, unit conversion and maintenance, and landlord-tenant relations and is present in contemporary urban housing policy: allowing for modest, but regular, increases in rent and governs unit conversion,

maintenance, and landlord and tenant rights (Ambrosius et al., 2015). If rent control regulations are present in U.S. cities, governments now tend to moderate rent increases, rather than rent prices (Turner & Malpezzi, 2003). Economic literature “quite consistently and predominantly frowns on rent control” arguing that rent control creates more problems than it solves (Jenkins, 2009: 105). Broadly, economists are often opposed to rent control because: it operates as a price ceiling, creates a misallocation of goods where tenants are living in units unsuited to their needs and income, causes a spillover effect on unregulated units in costs and landlords converting their units to other property types for greater profit, results in a loss of tax revenue, and decreases unit quality. Essentially, the argument is that rent control causes inefficiencies in the market, degrades the overall quality and quantity of the housing stock, and decreases affordability (Ambrosius et al., 2015; Sims, 2007). Yet, research demonstrates that the positive impacts of rent control are not only an ability to maintain low rents, but also the way these regulations protect against extreme, rapid rent increases and arbitrary evictions, as well as providing tools through which tenants can challenge unreasonable increases in rent (Ambrosius et al., 2015; Pastor et al., 2018). Framing social benefits as market inefficiencies, rather than the protection of life and welfare, demonstrates the limits of existing liberal economic housing logics. It follows then that thinking about rent control through a different framework would open possibilities for housing futures that centre survival and thriving.

I apply a radical care framework to analyze illustrative moments in Seattle’s rent control debates. This study is based on documentary analysis of three moments: the Initiative 24 campaign in 1980; the Rally for Rent Control in 2019; and the ‘rent freeze’ policy enacted statewide in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reading for radical care in rent control debates means attending to the role of power, multidirectional relationships of care, solidarity

actions, imaginings of housing futures, and care work that enables survival and maintains everyday lives (Elwood, 2020). In this study, I analyze the language, publications, messaging, and actions of rent control debates. Simultaneously, I engage with feminist methodologies that are attentive to the impacts of relationships between power, politics, and values that shape study sites and the research process. I do not suggest through this analysis that these spaces are uncritically caring. Rather, I analyze these illustrative moments to demonstrate that there are care politics and practices that emerge in the face of a housing system predicated on racial capitalism and settler colonialism. These care practices and politics contribute to the survival of precariously housed tenants while also broadening the possibilities within critical housing geographies to account for a broader range of housing futures.

My arguments for this paper emerge from data collected in 2019-2021 of publications and media produced by and about rent control debates in Seattle published in 2019-2021, as well as archival materials from the City of Seattle archives and the Seattle Daily Times newspaper published in 1975-1985. A significant amount of data collection occurred online, particularly beginning in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift to online research paralleled a shift to an increase in rent control debates also shifting to digital spaces: from press conferences and meetings hosted online, to campaigns that relied on social media. Feminist methodologies emphasize that fieldwork should be conducted in ways that reflect on questions of reflexivity, positionality, identity, and power and this extends to digital methodologies, particularly as digital spaces further shape everyday lives impacted by reproductions of the intersections of race, gender, class, colonialism, and sexuality (Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Elwood 2020). Further, throughout data collection and analysis I considered my own positionality both as a cisgender white woman and a renter in Seattle. Data was analyzed using

primarily deductive coding for predicted and emergent themes around topics of care, survival, support, and landlord-tenant and tenant-tenant relationships.

### **7.2.1. Initiative 24**

Changes to Seattle’s housing policies were abundant in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1968 Seattle passed an open housing ordinance that prohibited unfair housing practices, in response to racist housing discrimination through redlining and other similar processes. In the next two decades, following significant organizing by tenants, the Seattle government passed a series of tenant protections that aimed to limit evictions, prevent the loss of low-income housing, and provide relocation assistance to displaced tenants. Seattle went through the ‘Boeing Bust,’ where aerospace company Boeing reduced its workforce by 60,000 people between 1970 and 1971. Simultaneously there was little construction of new rental units and existing rental units were increasingly converted into condos. Many neighbourhoods had less than 1% vacancy and federal funding for housing was shrinking (Seattle Municipal Archives, 2021). In response, there were growing demands for increased tenant protections, including the provision of municipal rent control. In 1976, a petition for rent control legislation was sent to City Council with 2,400 signatures and 100 letters. This was followed by a public hearing in 1977 where attorney Marie Donahoe made the case for rent control. She said, “The absence of rent control has made it possible for rich landlords to pick up gold on the streets of Seattle” (Seattle Municipal Archives, 2022). A speaker against rent control said, “Apartment homeowners, like any other business, have to make a profit or they can’t stay in business” (Seattle Municipal Archives, 1977). Donahoe noted that many of the speakers were “representatives of landlords” and against rent control and that tenants, many of whom were elderly, were not able to attend due to work commitments, lack of transportation, or safety concerns about being out at night.

Following the 400-person, 3-hour public hearing, the proposed legislation was voted down by the Public Safety and Justice Committee. Just a few years later, a group under the name Renters and Owners Organized for Fairness (ROOF), whose membership included the Seattle Tenants' Union, launched a campaign to get municipal rent control policies, Initiative 24, on the general election ballot on November 4, 1980. Initiative 24 was added to the general election ballot and was meant to “address the impact of the shortage of rental housing through a program to limit rent increases for most rental units.” According to media coverage of the campaign, ROOF argued that rent control was necessary to “keep the elderly and poor from losing their homes” which positions particular groups as deserving of care (Seattle Daily Times, 1980a; Lawson, 2007).

In response, a coalition of real estate actors formed, calling themselves the Washington Coalition of Affordable Housing (WCAH). In the span of a few months, they put together a campaign funded with \$800,000 (to ROOF's \$50,000) and hired a San Francisco public relations firm that had already successfully won nine of their ten anti-rent control campaigns in other U.S. cities (Seattle Daily Times, 1980b). WCAH funded widespread media campaigns, including a number of ads that ran in the Seattle Daily Times in the days leading up to November 4. One ad suggests that to vote against rent control is to “care about Seattle” (Seattle Daily Times, 1980c). Another positions ROOF as “rookies” who do not understand housing economics, with text reading: “Economists and housing experts agree that rental control is a bad idea which means higher homeowner taxes and an aggravated rental housing shortage, along with an expensive and unlimited new government bureaucracy. But don't take their word for it. Take the word of a bunch of rookies. People with no experience in providing housing” (Seattle Daily Times, 1980d). The suggestion that rent control produces “higher homeowner taxes and an aggravated rental

housing shortage” links to Seattle’s history of privileging white homeownership through racial exclusion and the protection of property values disproportionately for white people. A rejection of rent control, which if enacted would provide protections for marginalized renters, is thus simultaneously another tool of protecting what is disproportionately the wealth and rights of white property ownership. Initiative 24 was ultimately rejected by voters and in 1981, following the events in Seattle and supported by a well-funded landlord lobby led by WCAH, the state of Washington enacted a state-wide ban on rent control policies that remains in effect in 2022.

Read through a radical care framework, the actions of ROOF and other proponents of rent control illustrate a practice and politics of care. Mobilizing for rent control policies is care work to protect housing for low-income residents and seniors (Ruming & Zurita, 2020). Their campaign for Initiative 24 represents a sociopolitical imaginary of a housing future where displacement due to rising rents is not a ‘natural’ characteristic of the housing market. That their messaging focuses on low-income residents and seniors in particular also speaks to which groups are most impacted by housing policies shaped by liberal economic logics. This is painfully demonstrated in the significant spending of WCAH, where clearly real estate actors have access to massive capital, that will be spent in the name of ensuring the housing system continues to ensure capital accumulation and protect and uphold white property ownership.

The invocation of care in WCAH’s advertising campaign serve as reminders that care can also enact harm and violence and that care is not an inherently positive relation (Bartos, 2018). The “We care about Seattle” advertisement floods the reader with names of people who care enough about the city to vote against rent control. This inherently suggests that to vote for rent control is to not care about Seattle. We can extrapolate that the ‘we’ in this ad is likely not tenants, but more probably the landlords and property owners who placed the advertisement.

Coupled with the “Rookies” advertisement, proponents of rent control are painted as uncaring actors who are only advocating for rent control because they do not understand economics. At the 1977 public hearing, Marie Donahoe was called “tender,” “naive,” and “gullible” following her comments in favour of rent control. The equation of understanding liberal market logics with intelligence and caring capacity exploits gendered, racialized discourse that paints white, male actors (and the market) as the most trustworthy and capable decision-makers. This excludes tenants’ housing experiences from being a valid form of knowledge, and renders different housing futures impossible. Together, these examples demonstrate that hierarchies of power are reproduced through caring relations (Seiler, 2020). All caring relationships, including those among tenants, are complex. The rejection of Initiative 24 further highlighted the embeddedness of the housing system with the reproduction of the racial capitalist, settler state. Yet, following the election results, ROOF’s statements emphasized that they were prepared to continue the fight for more just housing futures. Their politics of care extended beyond the length of a single campaign.

### **7.2.2. Rally for Rent Control**

In July 2019, the Rally for Rent Control took place in the Capitol Hill neighbourhood of Seattle. The rally was part of a growing demand for rent control in Seattle, as rents continued to increase rapidly following the 2008 financial crisis, compounded with a tech boom where Seattle became a hub for Microsoft, Google, and home to the global headquarters of Amazon. Rents in the Seattle area have increased by 69% between 2010-2018 (Rosenberg, 2018). In 2019 there were a number of events organized around rent control, when Councilmember Kshama Sawant submitted a proposal for a Seattle rent control ordinance. The July rally has been publicly archived on the City of Seattle website. The event brought together tenants who wanted to see

rent control legislated in their city and also built on longstanding efforts to address housing injustice in Seattle. An event for the rally on Facebook stated that rent control has “proven to be a lifeline.” While rent control is about creating affordability, there is an emphasis within rent control movements on making survival possible. This relationship between housing affordability and survival intimately links rent control and radical care: demanding rent control is providing care work to ensure tenants’ survival in precarious worlds (Hobart & Kneese, 2020).

Throughout the Rent Control Rally, tenants shared their experiences, ways they had successfully fought back against rent increases, and rallied the crowd for rent control. Speakers also emphasized why they were fighting for rent control emphasizing how this is a politics of care. They spoke of ‘rallying around’, or caring with, their neighbours and community, and emphasized the ways that the rent control campaign intersected with other social justice movements (Power, 2019). I want to quote three tenants at length here, because their sentiments are illustrative of how care can appear within housing movements (City of Seattle, 2020b):

Knowing that these increases would mean our community would be torn apart, and that many of our friends and neighbors would lose their homes, we decided to fight back.

The fight for rent control and affordable housing impacts what happens to Black, brown, Latinx, and Native communities. It impacts what happens to women, and genderqueer folks.

I am here to let you know that my undocumented, Black and brown, low-income community cannot afford to live in this city. I am one of them. It’s just impossible for us. But it seems to us that corporations want us to be servicing them. They want us to clean, they want us to work the restaurants, to take care of their children, and then be gone. Like we’re not part of this community... And that’s why we need to support rent control.

The perspectives of these speakers underscore the connections between rent control regulations and addressing inequalities produced by racial capitalism and settler colonialism. The speakers' discussions on the intersectionalities of their movements further demonstrate who is most impacted by the absence of rent control policies in Seattle—and the ways that housing markets driven by liberal economic logics benefit white people. Fighting back against rent increases is grounded in community care and solidarity, and desires to prevent widespread displacement and dispossession produced by racial capitalism and settler colonialism. This organizing work also points to Roy's (2017: 7) theorizations of dis/possessive collectivism: “a political potentiality that might not be easily contained within liberalism's compass of property and personhood” which offers ways to consider how the assertion of property rights by tenant movements is a collective endeavour done through shared labour. To achieve rent control is to enact radical care for and with other tenants because it facilitates survival in a system that only cares if the price is right (Gilmore, 2020). Tenants also exchanged stories with one another which challenges social separateness (Gonick, 2015). One tenant speaks of a loss for their friends and neighbours, not of profit but of homes: this is a key reframing of housing that challenges market logics of what housing is for. These tenants' motivations for rent control begin from a refusal of housing existing solely for profit, and points towards radical, different futures (Simpson, 2017). The imagining of different housing futures is what emphasizes the presence of care politics within these movements.

### **7.2.3. Washington 'rent freeze'**

In early 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic grew, many Seattle renters were unable to pay their rent due to conditions exacerbated by the pandemic. In 2020, Washington Governor Jay Inslee invoked an eviction moratorium, that prohibited evictions and rent increases for its

duration. In effect, the ‘rent freeze’ is rent control: the government prohibited landlords from increasing tenants’ rents. When the moratorium was again extended in March 2021, Inslee stated, “People need these supports right now. There is no other way to look at it” (Washington Governor’s Office, 2021). Although the moratorium was in effect for over a year, each extension only lasted a few months before being extended in the week or two prior to the moratorium expiry. The Washington moratorium ended in June 2021 and the Seattle moratorium was lifted in February 2022, as the pandemic continues. The design of this emergency legislation raises questions about care: while at face-value the moratorium might be read as a form of state care, simultaneously worth interrogating is the fact that organizers had to continuously fight to push the expiry each time, while they themselves experience multiple crises.

The very nature of the eviction moratorium and rent freeze requires us to ask, who is being cared for with this moratorium? Why are these policies possible now, when they were vehemently opposed in the 1980s? Under racial capitalism and the settler colonial state, who is deserving of care? I argue that eviction moratorium and rent freeze became possible in 2021 because the group that was being impacted was different. Landlords were susceptible to COVID-19, as were the white middle-class and propertied subjects. Housing crises disproportionately impact low-income, Black and Indigenous tenants and people of colour, but they become a crisis with newly possible solutions when the white middle-class is impacted (Wyly et al., 2012). This intersects with Fields and Raymond’s (2021) discussion of the geographies of racialized housing precarity, which illustrates how a “logic of hierarchical difference” through racial capitalism has long shaped the organization and impacts of the housing system and ensuing crises—including redlining, predatory lending, contract for deed procedures, and now the prevalent role of corporate landlords in housing financialization. A politics of radical care is necessary in this

system because it challenges who is deserving of care and ultimately survival in housing crises (Easterlow & Smith, 2004).

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, white people, whose power racial capitalism and settler colonialism protect, uphold, and benefit, were in crisis. While the eviction moratorium and rent freeze did protect tenants, notably many relief programs related to housing distributed capital to landlords rather than tenants. For example, landlords in Washington were eligible for the “Landlord COVID Relief Program” where they could receive up to \$15,000 from the state to cover unpaid rents between March 2020 and December 2021 (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2022). Moreover, a study by Fowle, Fyall, and the Tenants’ Union of Washington State (2021) found that while the eviction moratorium did prevent an increase in formal evictions during its tenure, informal evictions and forced moves increased where tenants were forcibly displaced through lock changes and landlord refusals to renew leases. The Housing Justice Project, a legal aid clinic in Seattle, reported that since October 2021 the majority of tenants who received a rent increase were Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, and the average increases received were \$124 more than white renters (Housing Justice Project, 2022). In the decades preceding COVID-19, the absence of rent control fed into racial capitalism and settler colonial power. This will continue once more with the lifting of the moratoria.

### 7.3. Radically caring housing politics



Figure 6: "We deserve rent control" in Seattle. Author photo (2023).

How housing crises are defined, responded to, and understood matters. Responses to crises that frame rent control policies as linked to market inefficiencies, as opposed to producing safe, secure, and stable housing for tenants have significant repercussions that put survival at stake. For this reason there is an urgency with which we must move beyond these limited frameworks and theorize responses to housing crises via already existing housing politics. Reading for radical care in housing politics and debates offers a way to move beyond the limits of prior theorizations of housing and housing policy. As I have illustrated, a radical care framework for analyzing housing politics examines care practices and politics while addressing the role of systemic power structures and understanding the relationality of housing justice. Radical care, when applied to housing politics, helps us to account for more expansive sociopolitical imaginaries and actions that point to housing futures beyond the hegemonic limits of what is deemed possible in a colonial, racial capitalist housing system. A radical care approach facilitates a deeper engagement in care geographies with the embeddedness of racial capitalism and settler colonialism within care practices and politics and how we might expand

the boundaries of care geographies to better account for the care work of survival in the endurance of precarious worlds.

Across these three moments in Seattle’s rent control debates, there are intersections of care practices and politics that respond to a housing system entwined with racial capitalism and settler colonialism. In each moment, there are demands that ‘we’ deserve care—though that ‘we’ is different in each case. From caring for Seattle by rejecting rent control to caring with tenants through organizing for housing justice, each illustrate some of the diverse ways that care appears in rent control debates. Rejecting Initiative 24 to demonstrate care elicits a caring for approach—a hierarchical care framework where the city must be cared for and the housing market and white property ownership protected. Conversely, posters in Seattle’s ongoing rent control debates state “We deserve rent control” (Fig. 1). “We deserve rent control” points to a caring with, or a mutual relationship of care: tenants caring with other tenants. This upends normative hierarchies of care that typically position low-income people solely as recipients of care, rather than caregivers themselves (Cox, 2010). Tenant-to-tenant care is further illustrated in a video from the Tenants’ Union of Washington, where a tenant and organizer said that when organizers first knocked on her door she was surprised: “Who in the world would be there to help me, or us?” (Tenants’ Union of Washington, 2020). This tenant’s reaction underscores the circumstances within which tenant organizers are providing care: an absence of rent control, combined with landlords increasing rents in a profit-driven housing market, can also be understood as a failure by the state to provide care via housing. This example positions landlords, the state, and housing policy as possibly uncaring actors. Tenants are addressing this care gap by caring with one another through mutual care relationships, out of necessity and in response to a social policy failure (Puszka, 2020). Moreover, this overarching call to action for current Seattle rent control

movements of “We deserve rent control” emphasizes a collective and a focus on advocating for communities (Be:Seattle Organizing, 2020). The emphasis on the ‘we’ here points to collective care, where it requires the efforts of tenants as a group to shift the balance of power between landlords and tenants. This framing positions rent control as something that is deserved and needed. While the commodification of care suggests that only some groups are deserving of care, this statement emphasizes that all tenants deserve access to this care through housing affordability. This disrupts neoliberal logics that emphasize individual subjects that can be successful through hard work and competition (Lawson, 2007). Though, rent control (enacted by the state through law) raises questions about the role of the ‘state care’ when the state upholds racial capitalism and settler colonialism. Yet, the demands for rent control from tenants, in order to survive an unjust and violent housing system, remain illustrative of radically caring housing politics because rent control is one such strategy for enduring the precarious worlds that Hobart and Kneese (2020) write about.

Fundamentally demands for rent control are a political and practiced enactment of care that recognizes the necessity of affordable, stable, and secure housing to survival. Tenants are developing solidarity networks and caring with one another as they exchange stories of their own evictions and rent increases. This challenges social separateness by building relations that do not serve capitalist accumulation. Calls for rent control refuse a housing market embedded in white supremacy, by privileging housing as shelter and as something that should be affordable over its ability to maximize profit. This in turn aims to reduce evictions, which are used as a tool of racial banishment in cities (Roy, 2017). The absence of rent control is used to uphold a housing market embedded within white supremacy, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism. Thus, the enactment of rent control is a disruption and rejection of these systems of power. The rent

control movements in Seattle illustrate other housing possibilities that move beyond liberal economic understandings of the role and function of housing. By engaging with housing justice analyses, housing becomes a site of survival, relationality, and care. Rather than conceptualizing rent control as a set of regulations that produce inefficient markets, rent control movements demonstrate that radically different, just, and caring housing futures are possible.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

*It just kinda felt like me and my neighbors. Against somebody who determined if I had a safe place to live or not.*

*Elyse, Seattle tenant (Interview 3).*

Some days, it feels as though glimpses of tenant care are visible everywhere in the city. From a faded poster advertising a tenants' rights workshop, to a small sticker encouraging an occupation of empty houses, to a large billboard in the yard of a house declaring "tenant power"—there are visual reminders of persistent resistance to an unequal, commodified housing system that privileges propertied subjects over everyone else. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, it felt as though tenants were some of the earliest adopters of technology to keep us all connected: hosting large Zoom meetings with synchronous translation in Spanish, English, and American Sign Language (ASL) as facilitators shared information about the rapidly changing 'emergency' landlord-tenant laws enacted in response to a health crisis. Spaces of tenant care occurred while public care narratives seemed to rise in popularity as government officials and policy leaders told residents to "be kind, be calm, be safe" and that "we're all in this together" (Luck, 2020; CBC Books, 2020). Discourses of care appear to be in a moment of exceptional popularity that escalated with the beginning of the COVID-19 public health crisis and has continued (Bhattacharya & Jaffe, 2020).



Figure 7: Moments of tenant care in Vancouver and Seattle. (Photos by author).

As care rises in public consciousness it remains important to develop critical analyses of the practices and politics of care, particularly as it remains undervalued, racialized, and gendered labour. In parallel with the issue that housing crises continue to operate in most global North cities today, considering the relationship between care discourses and responses to housing crises remains urgent. State responses to housing crises often seem to be responding to the same issues on repeat: housing is too expensive, supply does not meet demand, existing housing stock does not meet the needs of renters or homeowners, the number of people experiencing housing precarity and homelessness continues to rise. These are all real and urgent issues that need responses and action. Though, when we limit crises responses to the limited imaginaries of the current system, one that relies on and normalizes housing crises, we are in a cycle where housing inequalities and injustices are infinitely reproduced. The housing systems in the U.S. and Canada operate through settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy: systems of power that rely on social differentiation, displacement, and violence. Structurally, the current housing system cares about a very small subset of urban residents: cisheterosexual white men who are propertied subjects. What, then, is the capacity of the housing system to care and meet the housing/shelter needs of others?

This dissertation aimed to explore this question through an examination of what forms of care arose in response to housing crises, and where. The heart of this project is to understand the impacts of housing crises on tenants' experiences of care in their housing, with a focus on municipal landlord-tenant laws. The project focused on two empirical sites in two time periods: Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA from 1969-1990 and 2019-2023. By conducting relational comparison across two places and two times, I unpacked how housing crises are not exceptional events under settler colonial racial capitalism. I traced the connections between and across crises in two empirical sites that share a unique relationship. I was captivated by the parallels in state responses to housing crises in both time periods, particularly in their reliance on landlord-tenant laws, as well as the similarities across tenants' experiences. This emphasized the importance of considering responses to housing crises within their structural contexts.

The dissertation opened with an introductory chapter alongside two additional chapters that detailed my methodological and analytical approach through feminist digital ethnography. The remaining chapters detailed my findings and arguments through four specific considerations: 1) how the state conceives of and enacts care in its responses to housing crises (chapters four and five); 2) how tenants conceptualize, experience, and enact care in housing crises (chapters five and six); 3) the forms of care geographies that are produced in responses to housing crises (chapters four, five, and six); and 4) how an understanding historical and contemporary policy responses to housing crises through a framework of care informs possible housing futures (chapters six and seven).

The dissertation focused on tenants' experiences of local state care infrastructure in housing crises. I opened with a focused examination of the forms and capacities of local state care infrastructure, in order to assess housing as an infrastructure of care. I then considered how

care gaps left by local state infrastructure are addressed through the care work of tenants, followed by a discussion of tenants' imaginaries for housing futures. Across the dissertation, I argued that local state care infrastructure plays an important role in tenants' experiences of housing crises, but the care capacity of the infrastructure is limited by the state's embeddedness in racial capitalism and settler colonialism. The care that is available to tenants through local state infrastructure relies on the care labour of tenants in order to function. The nature of this labour is shaped by cisheteropatriarchal structures that exacerbate the violence that tenants' experience in housing crises.

The attention to tenants' practices and politics of care carried through to contemporary contexts, where tenants rely on self-care and collective tenant care in order to navigate their survival in housing crises, as a result of the failure of local state housing care infrastructure. To move beyond this cycle, tenants develop housing care imaginaries that illustrate possibilities for housing futures where a range of care needs would be met. I argue that that employing a radical care framework, which recognizes necessary care work that enables survival in precarious worlds, helps us to account for a range of housing futures that move beyond the normalization of liberal economic logics which limit what solutions to housing crises are currently understood as possible. I situate these arguments within a structural analysis of the power that shapes housing systems in the U.S. and Canada and grounding discussions of the care-housing relationship within critical care analyses that resist the urge to frame care as a wholly positive, heartwarming endeavour. The dissertation is structured to offer considerations of tenants' experiences of care and housing in crises through historical, contemporary, and futures contexts.

Together, the chapters point to the role of landlord-tenant laws in responses to housing crises and tenants' experiences. When I began the study, I did not set out with the intention of

focusing specifically on landlord-tenant laws. As I progressed in archival work though, it became clear that landlord-tenant laws were central infrastructure in state responses to housing crises and demands enacted by tenants. The centrality of landlord-tenant laws seemed to remain even when the laws were not working, which is paralleled in interview data. As evidenced especially in chapters four and five, there are limitations to how much landlord-tenant law infrastructure can care for tenants. For me, this underscores the importance of considering possibilities beyond the present housing system, such as the range of housing futures and functions of radical care discussed in chapters six and seven.

## **8.1. Study limitations**

However, the study has a number of limitations. Some of the limitations were as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and others were limits that I feel the study would have faced regardless. As I have discussed previously, one of the greatest impacts of the pandemic was on data collection and interview recruitment. The recruitment approach was shaped by how I could share information about the study and therefore I relied on social media/online recruitment more than I had initially intended and recruitment was geographically restricted. It is likely that my limited ability to recruit shaped representation in interview data: for example, many interview participants identified as white. There are also limitations that come from focusing specifically on local state archives in Seattle and Vancouver, particularly in cases where landlord-tenant laws were impacted or enacted at the provincial/state scale. Further, selecting state archives for examination was useful in understanding state actors' perceptions of their work and how tenants interacted with the state, but not all tenants would seek care from the state in the first place due to systemic harm and violence enacted by the state against Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, and non-cisheteronormative others. There are restrictions in the archives of knowing who

is present or absent, but the unknowing is another limitation in the data. Finally, the study would have benefitted from also analyzing tenants' experiences of housing crises between 1990-2018: particularly with low-income housing programs that operated in the 1990s and the overwhelming impacts of housing crises immediately post-2008. Unfortunately, a longer time period was beyond the scope of this project.

## **8.2. Study contributions**

The dissertation makes a number of contributions through the development of a theoretically informed analysis of responses to housing crises by local states and tenants. Such an analysis illustrates the limits and possibilities of care in shaping experiences of housing. First, this project broadens feminist care theory within geography to further account for the relationship between housing and care, with specific focus on tenants' experiences and the context of housing crises through an engagement with radical care to extend conceptualizations of what constitutes care in housing. I expand our understanding of housing as an infrastructure of care, through intersectional structural analysis of power in these spaces with specific focus on the impacts of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy as they shape the relationship between care and housing. Second, I theorize the ways that space, care, and power shape what is rendered possible within housing systems, with a focus on landlord-tenant laws as local state infrastructure. This aims to strengthen work in housing studies through the analysis of 'state care' in responses to housing crises. Analyses of how space, care, and power come together in tenant protections and struggles to improve or rescind them opens a window into what is possible in current housing systems, or not, particularly for precarious tenants and places. Third, my relational comparison between Vancouver and Seattle develops understandings of transnational social and political geographies are forged in responses to housing crises. Finally, I

develop interdisciplinary digital methodologies further through consideration of the intersections between feminist and digital methods and how we might theorize feminist digital ethnography.

### **8.3. Proposed areas for future study**

There are a number of areas for future study that could continue to develop our understanding of the relationship between housing and care in feminist geographies. First, a closer examination of how the political makeup of city councils shapes the nature of state care infrastructure and responses to housing crises would offer nuance to whether the capacity for care in housing crises shifts with any significance, depending on the political affiliation of city councillors. This would be particularly useful when there is a notable change on the political spectrum at the urban scale, such as what occurred in the Vancouver municipal elections in 2022. Second, while this dissertation focused on landlord-tenant laws and associated infrastructure like the Rental Accommodation Grievance Board, landlord-tenant laws are not the only housing care infrastructure developed by local states and a consideration of other care infrastructure would be a worthwhile endeavour.

Further, as we consider how care occurs in different types of rental housing, additional study is needed that examines care in specific housing models. In particular, there are housing types that are oriented around shared ownership or collective approaches to urban living, such as Community Land Trusts and housing co-operatives, that warrant further interrogation. Housing co-operatives in particular are intriguing as they were often referred to as an ideal housing type by tenants renting on the housing market. Relatedly, further study could be conducted about why landlord-tenant laws are often turned to as a response to housing crises, alongside the development of these housing types.

Finally, I suggest that a study examining tenants' experiences of housing crises from 1990-2019 could provide a useful addition to tracing the nature of care infrastructure in housing over time. Similarly, additional study of the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the specifics of how landlord-tenant laws operated during this time would further develop our understanding of the ways housing crises are never the only crisis that residents are experiencing in cities. I recommend these areas of further study as a means through which we can continue to develop our understanding of tenants' experiences of housing and how these experiences are shaped by care practices and politics.

As care rises in public consciousness, we must continue to consider the role of care in housing. There are limits and possibilities to housing as an infrastructure of care in a housing system that upholds social systems of power and normalizes housing crises. The commodification of housing over the possibilities of housing as shelter further devalues the role of care for and with tenants. This is echoed in the longstanding debates over who is responsible for providing low-income and affordable housing. How can we create a housing system that meets the urgent care needs of tenants experiencing housing precarity? In other words, where do we go from here?

In speaking with interview participants, it was clear that landlord-tenant laws did have an impact on their experiences of housing crises, despite issues with their enforcement. The role of landlord-tenant laws is to give more state protection to tenants. While, if enforced, they provide an important function in supporting tenants in the meantime, they fail to address the underlying issue. The housing system relies on inequalities, displacement, and violence. Enforcement of landlord-tenant laws must also not come with an increase of the already prevalent state violence and policing of marginalized tenants.

We must reimagine what is possible in the social relations that shape housing (Crosby & Jakobsen, 2020). There is a necessary navigation of needing to meet the current needs of tenants, while imagining expansive housing futures beyond that can meet all of our collective care needs. State housing infrastructures of care will always fall short of adequately caring for all tenants in housing crises. Caring and expansive housing futures can only come through uplifting and centring of tenants' experiences and knowledge. Until we can fully realize meaningfully caring housing futures, upending the limits of hegemonic housing power relations, tenants will continue to organize radical care in housing crises as they navigate their survival. The critical nature of tenants' collective care work in housing crises helps us to understand the urgent need for a broad and diverse range of radically caring housing futures.

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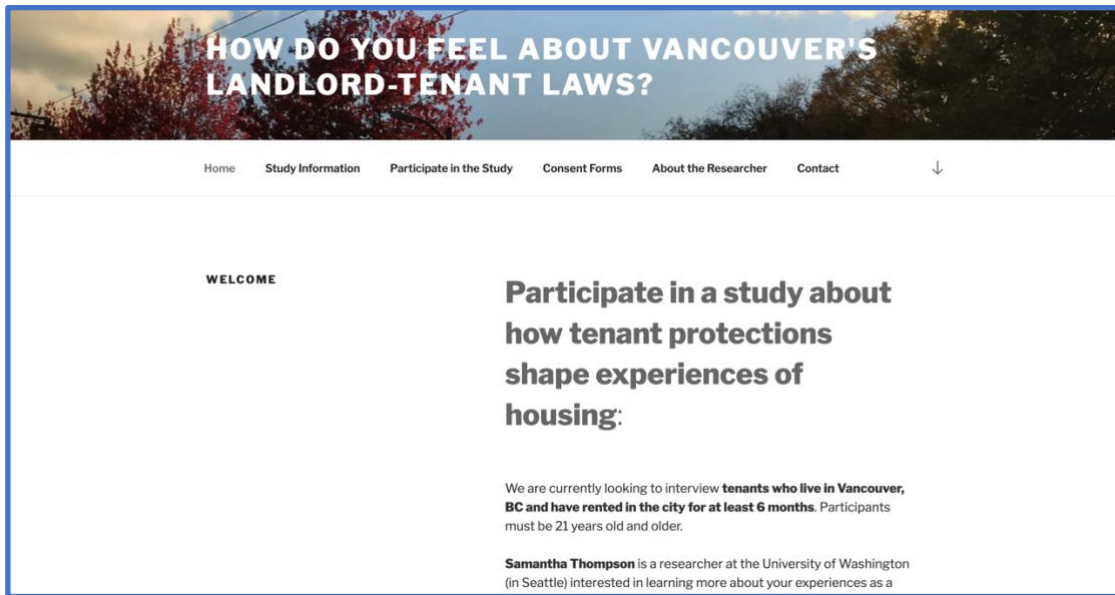
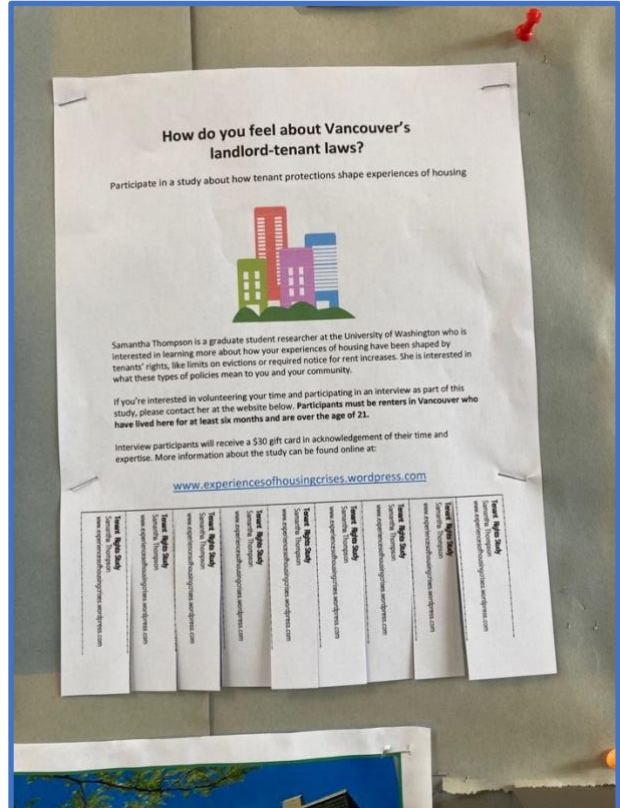
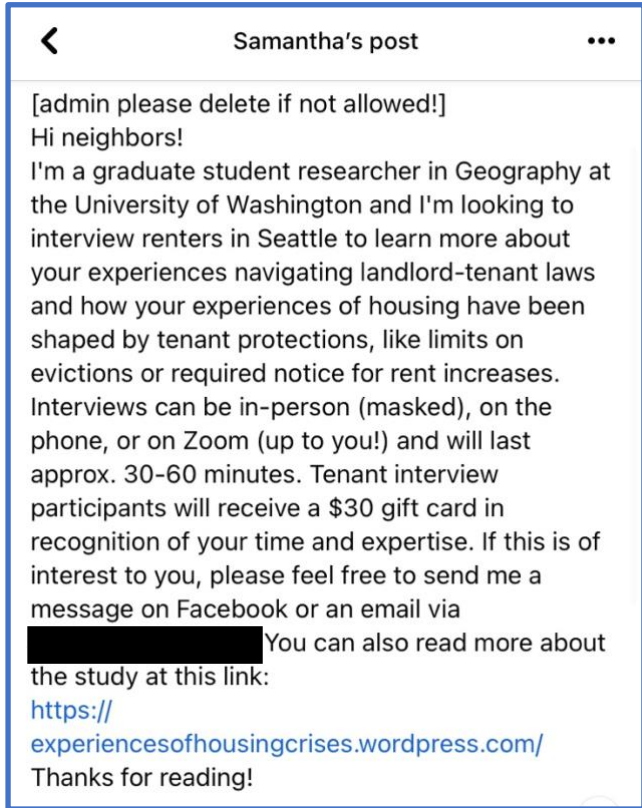
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## Appendix A: Examples of Recruitment Materials



Examples of recruitment materials (from top left to right): Screenshot of messaging used on social media posts; physical poster displayed in a community centre; screenshot of landing page for study website.

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule for Tenants

1. How long have you been a renter in Seattle?
  - a. Can you describe the first place you rented in Seattle? What was that experience like?
  - b. What stands out to you about renting in Seattle?
  - c. What do you like about renting? What, if anything, are you worried about?
2. Have you used any tenant protections (like enforcing notice for rent increases, just cause evictions, eviction moratorium, etc.) since you've been a renter?
  - a. Tell me more about what happened and what it was like?
  - b. What has been your experience using these tenant protections?
3. How do you feel about the existing landlord-tenant laws?
  - a. As you've observed existing protections, what function do they play? What do they do? What can't they do?
4. In what ways do you feel supported as a renter? Who or what provides this support? In what ways do you not feel supported?
  - a. protections, by the government, or by tenant advocacy organizations?
5. I'm also interested in the role that tenant organizations play in affecting the life of renters. What do you know about tenant organizations that are active here in Seattle and what they do? If you don't know anything that's okay too.
  - a. Have you been involved in any tenant organizations? Which ones?
    - i. Why did you get involved?
    - ii. What was your experience?
  - b. [if involved] What role do these organizations play in the city? What role should they play?
6. Are there other landlord-tenant laws that you'd like to see implemented? Why?
7. What would an ideal housing future look like for you? What about for all renters?