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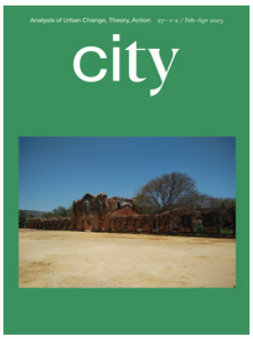

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Communal interaction and creativity as revolution: resistance to corporate landlords by regulated tenants

Sharda Rozena

This paper will chart the multiple ways that regulated tenants in my family home of Webb Place, a tenement building in Kensington, London, experience gentrification-induced displacement. I then discuss how community and creativity play a part in their resistance and survival. Landlords and property management companies have subjected regulated tenants, in this specific context, to a long process of 'slow violence' and displacement that has included negligence and harassment intended to stress, harm, anger, and ultimately push out residents. Not only does this 'slow violence' occur behind the closed door of the building but so does resistance to it. Communal interaction and creativity have helped regulated tenants to mock power structures and repurpose space while also trying to survive the gentrification of their home. While this displacement is not unique to regulated tenants, this paper adds to much-needed theoretical work that centres on regulated tenants—indeed, in-depth analysis of gentrification and displacement among this subfield is essentially non-existent in the UK, until now.

Keywords **regulated tenants, gentrification, displacement, slow violence, creativity, resistance, survival**

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Introduction

The motivation for this paper comes from my own experiences—and that of my family and neighbours—when dealing with landlords and property agents who have attempted to displace us—regulated tenants living in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea—both physically and symbolically. My parents became regulated tenants in the late 1970s in Webb Place,[1] a five-floor tenement building above a shop on Kensington High Street. The gentrification and displacement of regulated tenants described here is not unique to our home (as my wider doctorate research on regulated tenants across Kensington has proved). However, I zoom in on Webb Place to show how displacement is experienced, and the importance of creativity and shared community in its resistance. Using a series of in-depth interviews and autoethnographic/ethnographic experiences among four regulated tenants, I firstly discuss the ways that tenants experience gentrification at the hands of corporate landlords and agents. Secondly, I detail how we use creative and communal resistance to survive. This is also the first auto/ethnographic study of regulated tenancies in the UK, incorporating interviews, photography, and poetry. I also explore the temporality of displacement experienced over a lifetime. Gentrification and housing scholars have examined many different groups, encompassing the experiences of the landowner, the private renter, and council-estate tenant, yet in-depth research on regulated tenancies in gentrification literature in the UK is non-existent. Here I intend to address this gap by detailing the resistance to gentrification and displacement among regulated tenants at Webb Place.

In 1965, the Labour government introduced a landmark housing policy that aimed to offer much-needed security to tenants in the private rented sector (PRS). The Rent Act gave residents in privately rented properties protections against eviction and used locally administered rent controls to prevent large increases in rents. By 1979, over 40% of households had a secure tenancy (Hodkinson 2019, 23). Yet while the Act's central provisions were vital to providing security to millions of households, they were regarded as an impediment to market forces by many on the political right. In 1988, the Act's central provisions were reversed by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, who removed rent controls and decreed that from 15 January 1989, no new regulated tenancies could be issued (Minton 2009, 117; Wheatley, Arnold, and Beswick 2019). Today, there are fewer than 75,000 regulated tenants left in the UK (Swinburn 2019). Another reason for these dwindling numbers is that regulated tenancy by succession (transferring the home to a partner or family member) can only happen once and only if the inheritor is already living in the property. Instead, consecutive governments have favoured assured shorthold tenancies (AST) with 'no-fault' evictions that enable landlords to increase rents or remove tenants without court proceedings. Despite their legal securities (and indeed partly because of them) landlords and property managers treat regulated tenants as a nuisance, since the homes they inhabit are worth far more on the unregulated private rental market. Consequently, landlords in this context often neglect their tenants or use harassment to attempt to push them out, or otherwise wait for them to die

before repossessing the property, renting it at market value, or redeveloping it for sale. Intrusions and negligence are axiomatic of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011; Springer and Billon 2016). In comparison to the slow violence of gentrification found on estates whereby landlords advocate the demolition of a whole estate (see Lees and Hubbard 2022), here it is directed towards the selling of individual homes.

Regulated tenants in my research discussed their frustration, anger, and uncertainty that characterises these processes, which can be understood as a form of gentrification and displacement. This gentrification is discrete, occurring over a long period of time within a tenement building and is therefore less likely to attract public interest or political mobilisation than the wholesale demolition of council estates, as seen on the Aylesbury Estate in South London for instance (see Lees [2014] and Sartori [2021] for the struggles among homeowners on this estate). Slow violence and displacement are not alone in proceeding covertly: so too do the acts of resistance and survivability made in response. I highlight the importance of communal interaction and creativity to manage, confront, and survive, for space to be reclaimed and for residents to be visible in their struggle.

These specific experiences may not differ significantly or at all from the gentrification experienced by council tenants or private renters (for example, in the managed decline of the home) but making distinctions is not the purpose of this paper. Instead, I am (re)focusing our attention on regulated tenants in the UK, and the need to include them in housing literature, policy, and activism. Indeed, the relative obscurity of such tenancies has meant there are fewer legal and social resources to help regulated tenants protect their homes. Furthermore, given the rules of inheritance and lack of new regulated tenancies, the average age of regulated tenants is usually older than those living in private tenancies. The age factor is something that property companies like Allsop capitalise on; an 'ageing tenant pool' is likely to 'see discounts to vacant possession narrow further in the coming years' leaving rent control properties 'highly sought after' (Swinburn 2019). Consequently, many of these residents have experienced landlord harassment over a lifetime, have increased vulnerabilities, and often have to suffer displacement pressures on their own. Kensington and Chelsea's position as one of the richest boroughs in the UK makes regulated tenants especially vulnerable because of the potential profits that can be made from their homes. For example, Webb Place is on Kensington High Street where the average rental price is £2232 per week and one-bedroom flats sell for well over £1 million.[2] The rents from regulated tenants cannot compete with such rates.

I begin this paper with a review of existing literature on regulated tenants and tenancies and discuss how my work contributes to emerging themes of survivability, resistance, and slow violence. After analysing the methods used to research the home, I provide an overview of the building, Webb Place, and the impact that landlord management has had over time. The first half of my empirical research explores the neglect and persecution that contribute towards the displacement of regulated tenants and the second half of the paper uncovers how creative resistance and communal interaction are paramount to their survival.

Literature on regulated tenants, survivability, resistance, and slow violence

In exploring literature on contemporary housing policy, I identified a need for more empirical research on existing regulated tenants, which can then contribute to debates on rent controls in the UK. A recent policy paper by the New Economic Foundation, for example, identifies the problems of a market-based PRS that incentivises evictions and rent increases (Wheatley, Arnold, and Beswick 2019). While these authors make the case for greater PRS regulation based on European models (see Kettunen and Ruonavaara [2020] for another example), they overlook the experiences of existing regulated tenants within the UK itself. Other recent academic research on rent controls looks at purely economic evidence for and against (see Marsh, Gibb, and Soaita 2022; Wilson 2022), leaving the everyday experiences of tenants marginal to the debate.

The second set of literature I contribute to centres on regulated tenancies and gentrification. While this subfield is essentially non-existent in the UK, research in New York City (Accornero 2021; Fields 2017) highlights how tenants in rent-controlled properties suffer from the threat of eviction and harassment despite the protected status of their tenancies. Fields (2017, 2) discussed how the financialisation of rent-regulated housing subjected regulated tenants to harassment and unsafe conditions in order to 'extract financial yield'. In comparison to the UK, rent controls in New York City are generally in buildings built before 1947 with tenants in continuous occupation prior to July 1971. The global financialised housing market, however, means that housing ideology is similar in both contexts—the ideology promoted by governments is that owning a property is the 'key marker of personal success' (see Sartori [2021] for a more comprehensive analysis) and therefore regulated tenants have ultimately fallen behind. Accornero (2021) also described the slow violence meted upon regulated tenants by landlords who want to remove them; this includes the refusal to carry out maintenance works and repairs, which had serious consequences for the safety of the building (8). This creates insecurity, fear, and displacement pressures and therefore makes regulated tenants more vulnerable to attempts at eviction and buyout offers. Much like assured shorthold tenants and council tenants, it is possible to see how regulated tenants experience gentrification when transient communities enter their buildings via the 'platform capitalism' of Airbnb (see Aalbers 2018), through the declined management of homes and the sanitisation of community spaces outside homes. Accornero's (2021) and Field's (2017) findings bear strong parallels to my own research, where I found that alongside the generalised pressures of gentrification, landlords and property managers continue to treat regulated tenants as irritants, often waiting for successions to run out or for the residents to leave or die.

My research also draws on many emerging themes in geography. The first is survivability (see Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso 2018; Lees and Robinson 2021). Given that gentrification has become part of the daily struggle in life for many people, the literature on everyday resistance to gentrification has begun to grow (Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso 2018). Some scholars have focused on planning and policy as part of the fight back (see Newman and Wyly's [2006] work on community planning and tenant protections and

Hubbard and Lees [2018] on legal geographies of resistance), whereas others have explored everyday resistance as part of the lived experience of threatened displacement, leading Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso (2018, 352) to argue that gentrification scholarship would benefit from research on the everyday survivability of people affected by gentrification. Studies of gentrification resistance should include the 'value of survivability as a practice of resistance' both visible and invisible, and on a collective and individual scale (347, 351). Gentrification scholars tend to examine resistance at the larger city-scale rather than writing about small individual actions and the literature fails to closely consider the invisible practices of resistance that are rooted in everyday life (Soymetel 2014). Resistance is not always, nor should it always be, a 'storming the barricades' action (Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso 2018, 349). Drawing on Koopman (2015), Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso (2018) explore resistance to gentrification through 'critical engagement with the politics of everyday life' and argue that the notion of 'staying put' in response to eviction is a 'matter of survivability' (350). Yet, it is important to question whether survival is enough in terms of resistance. The invisible, or everyday experiences of survival, may have to be politicised to enact any social or political change. Nevertheless, enabling people to share their everyday experiences of survival when confronted with gentrification is arguably the first phase to politicising survivability as resistance, and making it visible by naming and sharing it as I am doing here. In-depth research into marginalised populations' experiences of survivability in relation to gentrification are in their infancy, and this paper seeks to add to that emerging work.

Secondly, I am contributing towards the extensive global literature on art and resistance in the housing activism context (see Dinardi 2019; Vilenica 2021). Vilenica (2021, 7) has spoken about resistance art as an 'outlet of self-expression' and a way of expressing 'disagreement, solidarity and call to mobilisation' in response to housing struggles. Resistance art in housing struggles is often visualised through public urban art (graffiti) and its role in social movements (see Bruce's [2020] work on 'visual noise' in Bogota for one of many examples of this)—graffiti being an artistic method that helps marginalised groups to be visible and reclaim space. Artistic resistance also comes in many other formats (see Kolioulis [2017] for music as a method against the gentrification of South London neighbourhoods and Sartori [2021] on films that show how social housing tenants repair, maintain, and re-imagine their homes). The existing literature on art and resistance in housing studies largely explores these public acts of resistance and the musicians and artists that make them (Dinardi [2019], for example, talked to people who worked in art factories and then social movement groups) whereas here I am discussing informal acts of artistic resistance that occur quite spontaneously, and behind the façade of the building (i.e. not intended for public space). While the meanings of the art may be the same (to claim space and give residents a voice), its public impact is certainly not as far-reaching and until now, the art was never intended to be seen by people outside of the building. Consequently, I am contributing to the literature on art as an act of housing subversion but in this very informal and specific context.

Finally, I explore 'slow violence'—the actions or decisions that are taken by authorities which are designed to distress, harm, and ultimately displace

residents (see Kern 2016; Springer and Billon 2016). Davidson and Lees (2010) state that violence of displacement pressurises over time and the unmaking of one's home and the symbolic loss of community all contribute to the everyday lived experiences of gentrification for lower-income residents. Violence is both material and emotional (Barnwell 2019, 1114) and plays out 'across a range of temporal scales' (Nixon 2011, 7) as neighbours, community, and home can be lost incrementally. Kern (2016) was the first to consider slow violence in housing studies by looking at non-events in Toronto (a removal of a bench/no loitering signs) that represented a 'violence of delayed destruction … that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon 2011, 2). Others have identified more violent acts, including Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008, 14), who described the tactics enacted by Southwark Council on the Heygate Estate, including turning off electricity and gas, preventing mail deliveries, and physically removing the last remaining resident. Survivability, unhoming (Baxter and Brickell 2014), and slow violence are not just concepts, they are experiences that are 'intensely felt', and by utilising these ideas, my work is contributing towards literature that looks at the destruction of the phenomenological attachment to the home (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020, 498; Davidson 2009). I also show how the temporality of displacement and 'slow violence' (especially enforced waiting over time) is also a violation of dignity. In dealing with temporality, it has been useful to look at work from anthropology on the unpredictability of eviction (see Harms 2013; Herzfeld 2009). This staccato temporality creates more uncertainty and anxiety and is planned to create more disturbance for residents and to move them out; within this context, residents never know when something will take place. Waiting as a tactic has been written about in regard to housing resistance; this includes, Fernández Arrigoitia (2014) on an anti-demolition group in Puerto Rico and Auyero (2011) on waiting as an opportunity for mobilisation. I therefore contribute towards work that looks at how temporarily both create displacement anxiety and act as a form of resistance.

In this paper, I contribute towards these established themes, but I do this by introducing a new context: the gentrification of regulated tenants in Webb Place, and their resistance against these corporate landlords.

Methods used to study the home

This is an in-depth case study of gentrification as experienced among four existing regulated tenants in one building on Kensington High Street, and two former regulated tenants, using a mixed methods approach of in-depth semi-structured interviews, autoethnography, photography, and poetry. Mixed methods were used to collect and analyse this qualitative data, and in so doing have sought to capture the multifaceted, material, and sensory experiences of displacement among residents at Webb Place.

I write about my own home, and therefore this is partly an autoethnography, a 'self-narrative' that places the researcher within the world they are writing about (Reed-Danahay 1997, 9). Autoethnography in human geography and gentrification scholarship is slowly emerging with recent work by Bloch (2020, 712) who stresses the importance of this method for allowing the researcher to *tell* rather

than show or discuss concepts such as eviction, unhoming, and displacement. Indeed, Fasulu (2019) does just this by using autoethnography to recount their experience of growing up and experiencing gentrification in Hackney, London. More recently I used autoethnography to tell researchers about my experience of 'Airbnbification' (see Rozena and Lees 2021). This method is still being developed within the field of urban studies and there is certainly a need for more detailed analysis of autoethnography and its relevance for geographers studying their own lifeworlds. Autoethnographies can feel highly emotional since the researcher is constantly critically reflecting on their behaviour and role in the community and how others influence their position. This can be stressful, frustrating, or depressing and puts the researcher in a vulnerable position: 'often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering' and this can 'generate a lot of fears and self-doubts and emotional pain' (Ellis 2004, xviii). Yet sharing these experiences with a 'sympathetic audience' can also be therapeutic (Lapadat 2017, 592–595). I found it to be an effective way of conveying the lived realities of gentrification. In 'doing' the autoethnography I also considered my positionality, being researcher, resident, and participant, and thought about how best to describe the everyday experiences of ruthless landlords in my building. This could be difficult, especially as my father passed away during the research, causing me to reflect on my home even more. His death, and the run-up to it, also changed the places and ways in which I conducted autoethnography. I wrote down stories in the hospice and interviewed family in the local park, recollecting memories of the past. While autoethnography may be criticised as being a too descriptive and self-indulgent method, ultimately, it is an honest one, and provides a deeper understanding of how people live their lives while dealing with the gentrification of their homes.

Of equal importance was ensuring that residents of Webb Place (both former and current) were heard throughout the research process. Here I used in-depth semi-structured interviews. A popular research method in gentrification literature (see Imrie, Lees, and Raco 2009; Williams and Needham 2016), interviews not only enable us to understand the lived experiences of regulated tenants but also the meanings they attribute to their own experiences (Adams 2010). Interviews are one of the best ways to understand an experience or culture, but they rely on having access to people: 'at the heart of interviewing practice is the assumption that people are willing, and able, to comment on their experiences and articulate their feelings and values, thus allowing culture to "speak itself" through individuals stories' (Davies, Hoggart, and Lees 2014, 205). Despite being time-consuming and requiring preparation, the discursive nature of semi-structured interviews allows for spontaneous exchanges, shared knowledge, and for more themes to be introduced (Valentine 2005, 111). I also collected in-depth ethnographic data (photos and notes) with Zahira, a regulated resident who has lived in the building the longest, to describe a lifetime of anxiety, frustration, anger, and uncertainty in this one building in Kensington. Unless stated otherwise, the interviews all took place in 2020, but I continued to contact and speak with each participant in person or via phone messages to clarify details or expand upon their experiences. This triggered memories, thoughts, and reflections that they wanted to share with me. These multiple interactions and interviews occurred over one year, giving the participants time to reflect upon their stories.

I considered how best to interview neighbours and family in ways that are both ethical, impactful, and even therapeutic (Lees and Robinson 2021) to them. Friendship (which in this context included family) as method requires being compassionate, understanding, and self-reflecting. However, the dynamics of a friendship-researcher role can be interrupted by the formal aspects of methodological practice, including asking for written consent (see Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Blake 2007). Similarly, Oakley (1981, 41; 2005) found that the best way to discover more about her female participants' lives was 'on a basis of friendship', rather than using formal and objective interview techniques (Oakley 2005, 228). Tillmann-Healy (2003, 741) discusses how we navigate these formal methods, including spending time talking about research ethics over a coffee. For example, an interview in the park transformed into a largely informal conversation whereby distractions were frequent:Researcher:'I wanted to ask you about … '

Interviewee: 'Oh look, three of them sitting' [points to pigeons on a tree]
Researcher: 'Four … there's a fourth one, he just turned around.'
Interviewee: 'Is there … oh yeah I can see his tail. Isn't it funny how they're sitting?'
Researcher: 'Anyway I was going to ask you, you moved into Kensington High Street how many years ago?'
Interviewee: 'I did.'
Researcher: 'Do you remember?'
Interviewee: 'I try not to.'

Inevitably, friendship as methodology often means turning off the recorder and having dinner or going for a walk, and this level of informality was a feature shared by all the interviews conducted (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 746). Consequently, these exchanges helped build up a rapport through mutual understanding and genuine trust allowing for more detailed stories to be shared. Arguably this rapport may be disingenuous because data is still required, but the relationships I describe were not created for the purpose of research—they were and are strongly held relationships with family and friends. Furthermore, instead of set questions I used general themes (tenancy, community, gentrification, displacement, and resistance) to steer the direction of the interview. I found that most residents felt comfortable enough to talk about very personal experiences of displacement. This is how I measured the success of the interviews and found that they were the best way of really engaging with the everyday lives and behaviours of the residents.

Nonetheless, as Oakley (1981) suggests, I have been self-reflective about the subjective nature of my research. In response to calls for a post-structural feminist reflection of power relations within the interview space (see Rose 1997; Bondi 2003), I have outlined the ways that interviews with friends and family changed the nature of the questions and the way interviews were conducted. Furthermore, sometimes friends may not want to confide in a researcher in a formal academic way, and therefore by forcing an exchange we can damage the trust and rapport we have for each other (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014, 298). For example, one resident preferred for some of her conversation to be redacted,

so consequently other residents' narratives dominate. Indeed, in writing this paper I am limited with the quotes and empirical data (including photographs) I can use because there is a real concern about the security of tenants and their ongoing interactions with landlords. We must be careful as housing academics that our published research does not compromise the security and safety of our participants who in most cases are still living through the issues we are writing about. It is also important to be reflective about how to protect the confidentiality of participants. Nonetheless, my participant-friends are always *actively* involved in the research, asking questions and sharing information and therefore they were heard at all stages of the research (see Hutchinson, Wilson, and Wilson 1994; Tillmann-Healy 2003, 737).

Finally, I have incorporated creative methods for carrying out research because they speak volumes about the experiences of residents, and they do so in interesting and engaging ways. Human geographers are interested in the everyday, mundane activities of life (Clayton 2018, 1; Hall and Holmes 2020, 1). But the everyday can still be exciting or shocking, which is why this field has expanded to incorporate a wide range of interdisciplinary methods that may capture both the mundane and/or the emotionally charged (Hall and Holmes 2020, 2), including textual analysis of poems or short stories. In this research, photos and a participant's poem are crucial for understanding the material, emotional, and sensory aspects of living with gentrification over a long period of time. Art-based research is often more accessibly disseminated to a wider audience. This fusion of arts and social sciences is arguably a richer approach which can make the wider public aware of the inequalities and cruelties that exist in the UK housing system. I hope that by incorporating some of the creative methods from my participants I will make this work more accessible.

Webb Place

A terraced building on Kensington High Street, Webb Place is comprised of five flats above a shop and has been my family's home for over 40 years. From the 1690s to the 1860s, the stretch of large buildings along the High Street was known as 'The Kensington Terrace' (see Figure 1). They were leased short-term and lived in by elite members of Kensington society, including Jubal Webb, a cheesemonger and property developer.[3] Renewal of the leases expired in the late

Figure 1: The Terrace shortly before its demolition in 1893 (Walker 2015).

Figure 2: The Promenade in 1978, around the same time my parents moved in (Walker 2015).

19th century and the freehold of 'The Terrace' was sold for £170,000 to Jubal Webb (Starren 2006, 120). Webb redeveloped the land (demolishing his own house in the process) and by 1894 created 'The Promenade': a range of shops with offices and flats above, built in late Queen Anne style, with red brick and copious stone dressings (see Figure 2). In the 20th century, the shop owners took hold of the freeholds for their individual buildings and rented the flats above.

For years the flats were predominantly occupied by those who worked for the businesses below (as my father did), with most people obtaining regulated tenancies up until the 1970s. Isla, who lived in Webb Place in the 1980s, described how there was a 'community of people, some wealthy, some working class, for many generations all living alongside us'. For a long time, we lived in the building with little physical intrusion from the landlord. There was one routine inspection per year, for which we were given advance notice. In 2015, however, there was a corporate takeover of 'The Promenade' with global real estate firms such as Allsop and Cushman and Wakefield, among others, taking over the management of entire buildings. Many regulated tenants were either 'bought out' or forced to move because of the harassment they experienced, including threatening letters and noise from the renovation of flats. Our long-time neighbour, Lucy (interview 2017), described the experience of being 'bought out':

> *The landlord told us initially in a letter and as soon as I got it, I knew the game was up. I became extremely distressed and alarmed. That was followed by a visit from a property developer who basically said if we didn't cooperate, they would take us to the High Court, and that everything has more or less been sold ahead, and we would have to come to some negotiated settlement fairly quickly. They also said they were under no obligation to rehouse us in the same run of buildings. I told them what my situation was. I hoped it was relevant that my family had lived and worked there for one hundred years: surely that gives me some say in what happened to me? They just wanted us to go out as quickly and quietly as possible and obviously it was in their interest to shell out as little as possible. We all knew we would not be staying in the same borough and unless we took the gamble of going to High Court, we were all told it was best to negotiate a third of the value of our homes and that is what we did. For us it was like death and for them it was just another deal.*

After Lucy left, the rubbish bins began to pile up with historic furnishings, old bannisters, and furniture from her flat. I remember my mother's eyes tearing up as she watched the destruction of her friend's home. Watching the demolition

of a home, not least the multisensory experience of hearing the noise of scaffolding going up, or coughing because of dust and debris, is a reminder of the demolition created by gentrification, and which contributes to the feeling of impending displacement pressures (Baxter and Brickell 2014, 137).

The flats of the regulated tenants on Kensington High Street were demolished from within and turned into private studio accommodation and short-let holiday flats. New neighbours were transient young professionals and overseas students. Today there are five buildings from the original Promenade that still have regulated tenants living in them, and in Webb Place there are four flats with regulated tenancies. Our landlord is among one of the largest commercial real estate companies in the world; it manages over 4 million square feet of land and has an annual income of $9.4 billion. This landlord is one of many corporations which now have a stake in the building, alongside two British estate agencies, one of which manages the flats, and another the communal areas. The agencies also have a contract for a building management company that looks after the entire building. The presence of so many corporations in the building is understandably confusing, and at times overwhelming for residents, who often have little idea who to contact regarding issues, or who is accessing the building at any time, given the limited (or non-existent) notice they receive from the building's managers. Since the corporate takeover of the building, regulated tenants have been directly and indirectly (emotionally) displaced by the presence and treatment of the landlord and property agency staff who seem eager to get rid of them (without offering financial compensation) in favour of the greater profit margins offered by non-regulated tenants.

The intricacies of slow violence

Slow violence is not just a physical manifestation, but also emotional, and can be used to 'inflict or evoke shame and anger to manipulate and harm' (Barnwell 2019, 1114). This is something tenants, myself included, have continued to experience from property management agents. On one occasion, a property agent changed the locks, went through a resident's home to access the roof, and photographed the interior without informing anyone living there. Zahira explained: 'they always come when we're not there, spying really but never to say hello because if they say anything it means they are too involved personally'. Sometimes the building inspections would happen every few weeks and, prior to the Covid lockdown, every few days, with regular monitoring of the common spaces. Johanna explained, 'they have been around a huge amount in these stairways taking possession of them, the idea is "we own this space, it is not your space"'. There is an invasion of personal space within the home. Zahira told me, 'we often ask them to take off their shoes before they come into the flats but wearing shoes is a metaphor for who they are, what they represent'. Although they do remove their shoes when asked, this description alludes to the formality of the property agents. Rather than seeing our space as a home, they presume to enter the premises as if they are coming to a business meeting or office, and all interactions are emotionally detached. The building becomes a transactional place where decisions and deals are made without

the consultation of regulated tenants. Accornero (2021, 1–2) also described regulated tenants' collective struggle against the landlord who sometimes had private investigators coming to the door. The same happened in Webb Place when a private detective came round to find out whether there was any subletting. Such intrusion creates insecurity and fear and makes tenants more vulnerable to offers to be bought out.

When regulated tenants first came to the building, they changed or added to the floor layouts to acquire more space,

> all of us made lofts, Larry even put in a spiral staircase, at the time nobody said you don't have permission to do that, it's only later when all that started happening … we made our own, we made it bigger. If we did that today, they would be on us. (Zahira, interview 2020)

Informal housing practices have been written about extensively in gentrification literature (see Lombard 2013; Ascensao 2015). Cummings (2015) writes about favelas in South America, originally made from wattle and daub to house migrants, and how they evolved to become a collective built-up urban village where residents installed modern fittings and furniture (81). The favelas have since been impacted by urban remaking and beautification which led to the displacement of many residents (what Lees et al. [2015] termed 'slum-gentrification'). Similarly, regulated tenants used to have far more autonomy in terms of physically changing and adapting their home, but landlords have since attempted to control and dictate how residents use the space. In my own experience, this occupation of space is best symbolised by *the cupboard*. Many years ago, my mother made a cupboard under the stairs to easily access the meter for her flat from the hallway and to store her art items, but the landlords put a lock on it and claimed that the cupboard belonged to them. We retaliated with letters and then posters placed outside the cupboard (see Figures 3 and 4). The landlord attempted to take space away and physically intrude on our everyday lives—in this case preventing my mother from being able to access items necessary for her work. Unlike the early alterations made by residents in Webb Place, management companies regard the building as their space, not our homes, and every encroachment gradually leads to space being taken away. Indeed, in terms of informal housing, temporality plays a key role (Lombard 2013, 816) since home is not fixed in time or space, but 'anchored through its constant reappropriation in social practice'. The landlord's governance in this context can destroy the informal, individual, and creative aspect of home-making that then results in new forms of displacement.

Alongside this encroachment of space, landlords have also subjected us to lengthy periods of building neglect. As seen in the managed decline of council estates, neglecting repairs or allowing for homes to go into decay contributes to a process of home-unmaking (Baxter and Brickell 2014, 137), the intention being to displace residents. This included a leak that, despite residents' concerns expressed to the landlord, caused the ceiling to collapse. Mushrooms grew on the communal carpet area because of the water. Neglecting tenants over a long period makes them feel worthless and unimportant; a reflection on how the landlord or property agent views their needs. The neglect of repairs drags

Figure 3: Poster from the cupboard.

on over months despite the substantial amount of time that residents spend writing emails, making calls, and consulting legal websites. Their time and effort is made to feel futile, and this becomes more than just home-unmaking (Baxter and Brickell 2014), but a violation of our dignity, based simply on the

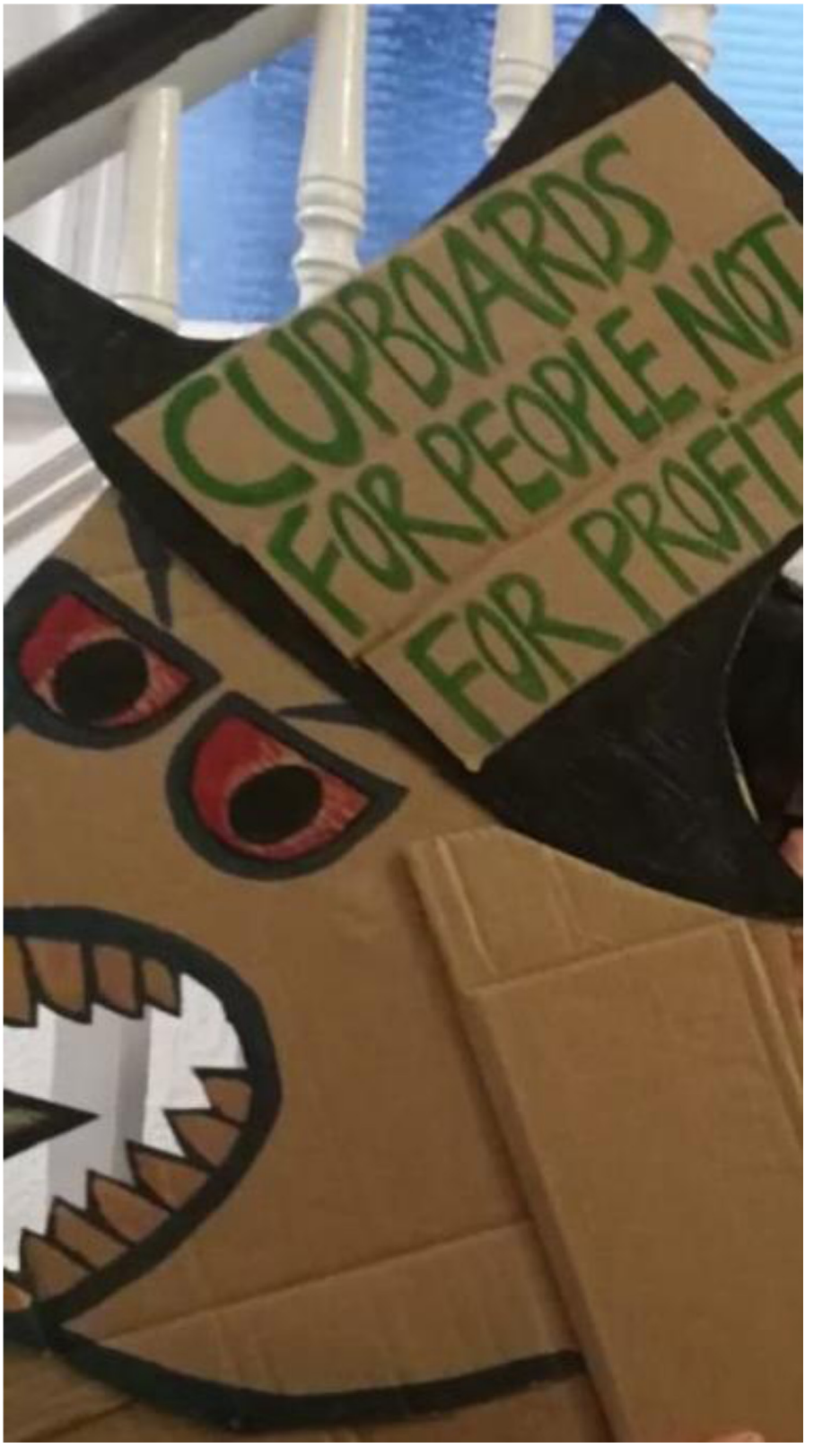

Figure 4: Poster from the cupboard.

status of our tenancies. Such attitudes contribute to this discrete but persistent slow violence of the home and of human dignity that occurs over time.

Displacement (physical or symbolic) does not happen suddenly, but has 'fits and starts' (Harms 2013, 349). The temporal uncertainty of displacement pressures is an important feature of these lived experiences. Waiting was a key aspect of tenants' experiences at Webb Place: waiting to be bought out, waiting for repairs, waiting for an email about an issue that needs to be resolved. In many respects, waiting makes the tenant subordinate and reliant on the landlord; they are being made to feel dependent on their authority, which is used as a form of control (see Auyero 2011). However, waiting can also be 'active and relational' (Auyero 2011, 15). Residents can use the waiting time to mobilise and plan their next form of resistance, discuss future challenges, and find legal aid. Tenants can also play with time as subconscious resistance (Harms 2013, 365). For example, at Webb Place, we often told the landlord when they could or could not come into the flats, we told them we were working and therefore, we asked them to wait. Enforced waiting can be an oppressive barrier (356) but when tenants sometimes respond with temporal nonchalance and indifference, they can destroy the timeline of the planners and therefore turn this uncertainty onto the landlords (363).

Art into action: creative resistance and shared space

Lees, Annuziata, and Rivas-Alonso (2018, 347) say that resistance can be invisible, and for the residents of Webb Place resistance is largely hidden within the physical confinement of the building itself, only seen by a few other residents and the people who enter the building, including the array of corporate managers to whom the resistance is deployed making this art public in some sense. Survivability, in this context, takes the form of both collective and individual actions that are rooted in everyday life (352). From the examples above, I show how residents use posters of resistance in the building to help articulate our frustration. These creative methods are also more accessible to us. Zahira stated, 'our way of addressing it was art into action, that's what I am about, and I feel good by making art, making drama. And that is far superior, I feel they haven't got one up on me.' The posters are there to help residents survive these intrusions and to ensure that they still have a claim to their home. This form of resistance also helps us because the business-like agents of property companies, who come into our building as suited representatives of a clinically corporate world, seem to have no idea how to respond when they see such creative signs of protest. They never laugh, nor do they show signs of anger—usually posters are ignored, occasionally they are removed. We use creativity in these contexts because it makes us feel more powerful. However, we also know that it makes the corporate agents uncomfortable, and this is how we feel we can gain advantage in these difficult situations, especially when the legal routes and avenues are often futile. Graeber (2007) explored the way that the authorities responded to artistic resistance in the form of giant puppets during mass anti-globalisation protests in the United States. He explained how the puppets are unique, individually painted, varied in shape and size, a

'multiplicity of spectacular displays of whimsical creativity' (Graeber 2007, 950) and they are not permanent, sometimes designed to be destroyed. In this way they represented anarchy and made a mockery of the status quo (20). Similarly, our property agents responded to creative protest with aversion because our art mocks the formality of power structures in the building; it repurposes the space and most importantly it makes us visible (Lionis and Efthymiou 2021, 54). The posters therefore symbolise our survivability, showing how we use creative methods to respond to corporate takeover, and reinforce our presence. Creative resistance takes time and effort, and therefore reinforces our personal value; this is particularly essential when our homes seem to have a great deal of worth to the property owners while we, the residents, are deemed and treated as worthless.

Creativity and togetherness have always been important for dealing with and responding to the dominance of landlordism and the pressures of gentrification at Webb Place. When the first national lockdown began in March 2020, inspections of the building by the landlord stopped. This led to the creation of Cafe OTD (outside the door), which at the time was a socially distanced 'cafe' in the communal corridors between the fourth and top floor of the building. Each neighbour put a table and chairs outside their door, communicating across the shared space. Zahira explained, 'we always had OTDs—outside the door—so we just had this idea, let's make a cafe so we make it with tables and made it socially distanced and put up decorations' (see Figure 5). While the cafe was a product of lockdown, the communal space outside our homes had always been used

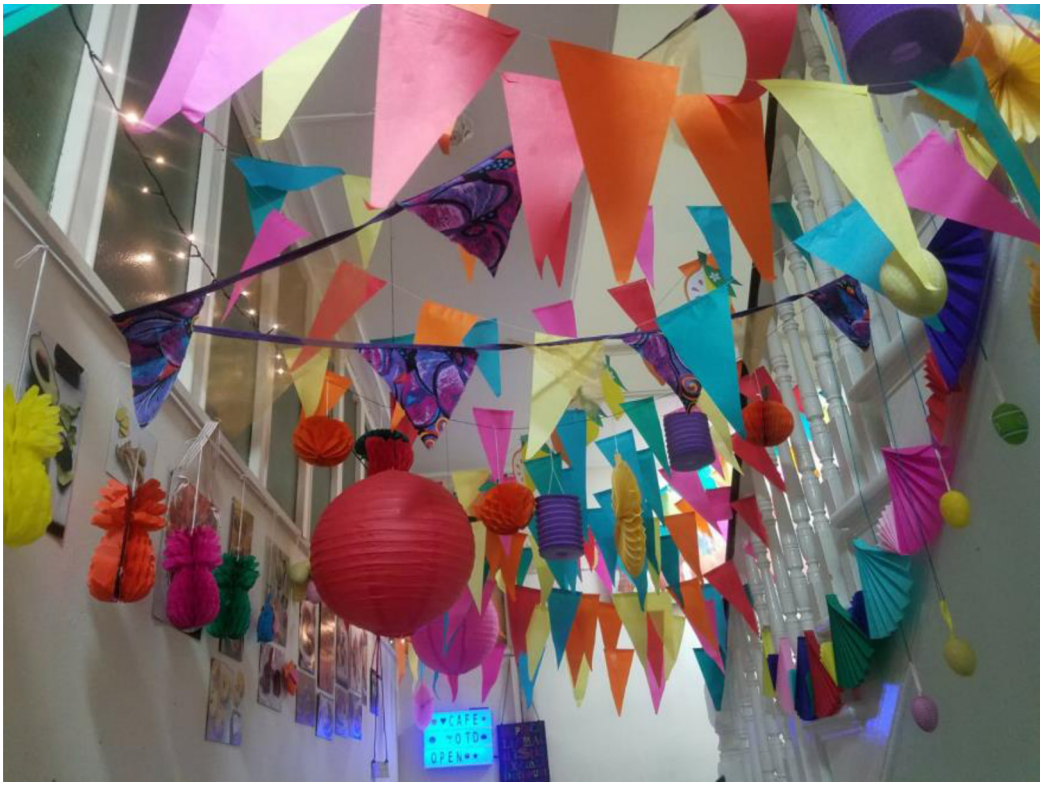

Figure 5: Cafe OTD opens.

for gatherings and celebrations—it was only after the increasing management of the communal area, that we started to use this space more. The cafe in the corridor was therefore not just about keeping sane during the lockdown, but it was also a way of resisting the threat of corporate management, as well as reclaiming our space.

The concept of defensible spaces (Newman 1973) includes areas just outside homes, often a shared space between neighbours that is claimed by residents. Cafe OTD represents a defensible space, as it reclaimed and shared, or 'placed under collective control' (Warwick and Lees 2022, 818), bridging the divide between the public and the private. Cafe OTD provided a familiar and welcoming area for residents to congregate, safeguarding residents from the anxiety so often caused by isolation (see Warwick and Lees 2022). Johanna said 'we leave things for each other outside the other's flat door. We talk to each other about what's going on and try to help each other if the other is in a difficult situation, this has kept us sane.' Residents leave notes of support for each other when encounters with landlords have been difficult or upsetting. The cafe also became an outlet of creativity, both during and after the lockdown. Residents discussed their personal lives, landlord issues, financial problems, and work, sometimes laughing, crying, or becoming angry, while also writing and reciting poetry, sharing recipes and food, playing games, doing quizzes, and making art. This space facilitates more creativity as the cafe is turned into makeshift art classes, led by the resident artists in the building (see Figures 6 and 7).

In some contexts, bohemian artist-led culture becomes gentrification (see Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020) but here it represents survivability and preservation when dealing with new forms of gentrification, more specifically the corporate takeover of the building. As Bourdieu (1993) reminds us, artists have highly valued cultural capital, which is sometimes seen as desirable in gentrified areas (see Zukin 2010), but they are usually low in economic capital, which, according to our corporate landlords, is the key failure. We therefore reinforce this creativity at home. The cafe is decorated for annual celebrations including birthdays, Halloween, St Patrick's day, Burns Night, Vaisakhi, and Chinese New Year. An important part of this shared defensible space is the sharing of home-cooked food with neighbours (see Figures 8 and 9).

Pride and care are taken in the appearance of the cafe, the activities carried out there, and the food served. This is juxtaposed with the dismissiveness and lack of care that residents receive from property management agents. These creative techniques say more about the affective losses of gentrification. They reveal the way residents come to 'know, care for and fight on behalf of, one another' (Thurber and Christiano 2019, 110). This collective action in opposition to the landlord's threats and intrusions was epitomised by the creation of OTD. Vilenica et al. (2020) have discussed mutual care and solidarity in response to the pandemic and protecting each other's physical well-being. Cafe OTD tells us about the role of mutual care for our emotional/mental well-being both during and after the pandemic.

After the first national lockdown ended, the landlords and property managers started to appear in the building again. One day they discovered OTD. Zahira said, 'I opened the door and two young men, professionals, were there with their cameras taking pictures and just invading our space and it was like an

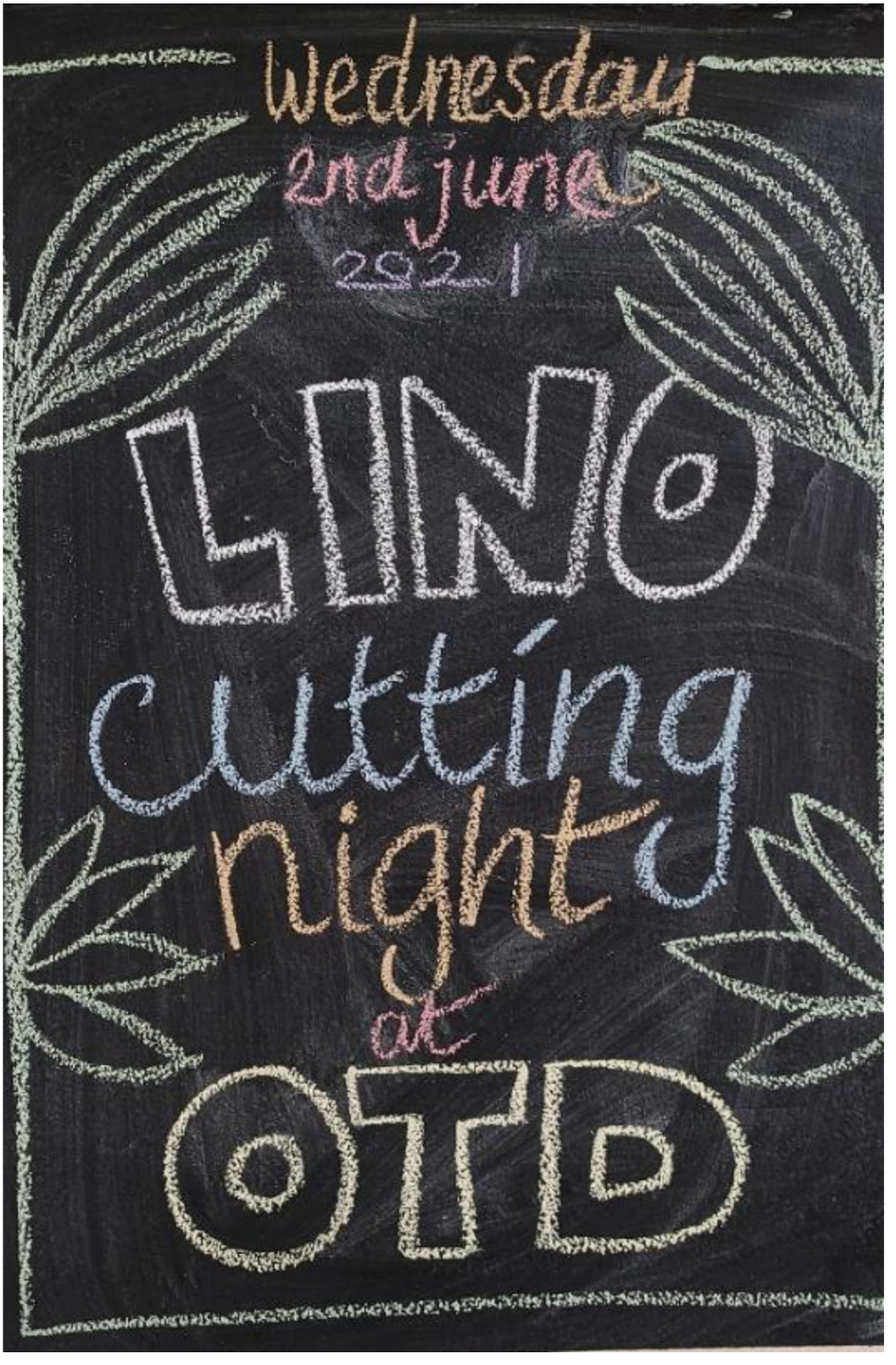

Figure 6: Lino cutting art class at Cafe OTD.

Figure 7: Lino cutting art class at Cafe OTD.

Figure 8: Samosas shared at Cafe OTD.

abuse, that sanctuary we had was no longer and it was hugely emotional'. OTD had to be taken down to avoid further confrontation. A few weeks later, and in complete contrast to the colours of OTD, the landlords plastered giant numbers on the floor levels (see Figures 10 and 11). This was the landlord claiming the space as its own, and again turning a home into a sterile, business-like space.

Gentrification scholars have not gone far enough in discovering the many ways, particularly these discrete ones, that landlords inflict displacement pressures on their tenants. While scholars have come to accept concepts such as 'unhoming' to describe the emotional, psychosocial, and material impacts of gentrification (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020, 492), we need to engage more deeply in discrete aspects of this symbolic displacement which reflects not just a decline of working-class culture but also an eradication of

Figure 9: Eccles cakes shared at Cafe OTD.

entire ways of being at home. Residents' experiences and interactions within these defensible spaces are being destroyed/monitored/removed so they are no longer able to hold on to the traditions, activities, and interactions that make these spaces homes. Slow violence in this context attempts to isolate regulated tenants and remove their attachment to home by invading and sanitising their personal space (498). In the case of Webb Place, the posters, drawings, and decorations add colour to the landlord's vision of a transient, dull space, without character and most importantly without regulated tenants. We residents are treated as a nuisance, and therefore rather than staying quiet, we reinforce their concerns that we are loud, visible, mark our territory, fight for our space, make a home, and, ultimately, that we are not leaving. By creatively using these spaces outside of our doors, adding colour and being individualistic in a

Figure 10: Floor number plastered in the building.

property world that prefers uniformity, we fight back against their attempts to gentrify the building. OTD in particular was an ode to the bohemian ways of sharing space in decades past. As Isla recalled, 'there were so many afternoons spent in that space, meeting up on the landing top for a chat and a cup of tea'.

Figure 11: Floor number plastered in the building.

OTD was therefore a continuation of our ability to share and reclaim semi-public/semi-private space outside our front doors against the gentrification pressures that surround us.

Conclusion

Despite legal protection from eviction (or indeed because of it), landlords and property agencies in Webb Place have subjected regulated tenants to a long process of slow violence, that has involved in the past both negligence and harassment, intended to stress, anger, infuriate, and, ultimately, displace them. These authorities are motivated by the financial prospects of housing,

especially in a wealthy borough such as Kensington and Chelsea. I have considered the temporality of these experiences among residents; waiting over a long period of time can create anxiety and uncertainty or alternatively provide time to mobilise. Extensive literature on the gentrification, displacement, and resistance of regulated tenants has not been explored in the UK until now and here I provide a unique context to explore well-established concepts such as slow violence, survivability, art, and resistance. While there is a sound case for reintroducing fair rent controls (see Hodkinson 2019), ultimately there must be more in-depth empirical data, like this, on the last regulated tenants in the UK who may provide insight into desirable models. By exposing just some of the lived experiences and resistances happening in this building, I hope to make these issues more publicly known so that legal and social resources can be established for other regulated tenants experiencing displacement. I am also excited about developing the housing and gentrification literature on regulated tenants—a subfield that deserves more attention, and protection.

I have shown how the fraught relationship between space and ownership has led to the use of art-based activities and collective gatherings to repurpose space, mock power structures, and infuriate landlords and property agents. Resistance was directed towards the landlord or property managers rather than towards the public or media. This provided a way of surviving the corporate takeover of the building and preserving a lifestyle that includes using defensible spaces and being able to freely modify your home. The conflicts described here are relentless and the landlord and property agents have continued in their persecution of regulated residents, including a recent façade retention development that has shrouded the building in darkness and permanently locked windows. The determination to survive, reclaim, and repurpose space, however, also continues. The residents at Webb Place still haven't given up on their shared communal space, and their resistance towards corporate landlordism. Despite the pressures of displacement, the residents still mobilise together to overcome the threats, intrusions, and feelings of loss; as Zahira stated, 'OTD is eternal' (Figure 12). On OTD's anniversary in April 2021, the residents gathered for an awards ceremony to celebrate the best moments at the cafe. The evening concluded with a poem highlighting the importance of OTD as not only a shared communal interaction but also a revolution, a resistance movement among regulated tenants against the powers of our corporate landlords.

Ode to OTD
Outside The Door.

O for Outside
As well as for Open
Opening the door
For giving and receiving
T for The Joy
Of the ethos of caring
D for the Door

Figure 12: Cafe OTD continues at Webb Place.

Left open for sharing.
Launched with streamers, banners, bunting
Splashes of colour across every wall
Glass painted jars, lanterns, plants, flowers
A complete transformation of a tenement hall.

With singing,
Poetry,
Play reading,
Making,
Quizzes,
Painting
And
Exceptional baking
Lunches,
Suppers,
Pancake breakfasts,
Wines with cheeses,
Afternoon tea
All served to perfection
At Tables 1, 2 and 3
Cafe OTD.

The mighty real estate company
That calls itself ********

With its base in Chicago
They manage our space
It's a fraction of
3.5 billion sq. feet
Of their global real estate.

They send in their men
Again and again
To snoop, to pry,
To boldly instruct us.
This is *their space*
They triumphantly say
You only get that for
Which you pay.
INSIDE the door
Is where you people stay
OUTSIDE is *ours*
We manage this space
Remove everything
Leave not a trace
You regulated tenants
Get inside!
Know your place!

We do.
It's resisting,
Regrouping
Not giving in
Punching those Corporates
Slap in the face
Claiming Cafe OTD
Forever and always
Our Space!

Whether paired back
And silent
A candlelit Zen
Or exuberant and noisy
Time and again
Our ethical cafe
Will rear its face
(the pop-up version
takes 10 minutes
to place)

Here we are gathered
24th April
A first anniversary

With awards ceremony
Birthday cake and tea
To say thanks
To sing praises
And cry
Viva Cafe OTD!

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Notes

1 Fictional name.
2 https://www.foxtons.co.uk/living-in/high-street-kensington/rentals
3 https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol42/pp99-116

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