

Beyond Inhabitation

Housing and Ordinary Desire at the Edge

MICHELE LANCIONE
& ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE

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Introduction

Nita and her eight children squatted for over a decade on the outskirts of Jakarta in a marshy plain scattered with makeshift shelters, lean-tos, outdoor kitchens, hammocks, and platforms built in the three tall trees that inhabited the plot. They were all covered, especially during the rainy season, with an assortment of tin sheets, tarpaulin, and plastic covers. The household constantly circulated among these multiple sites and structures, moving through them each day in shifting constellations and activities. The sounds of repair, of boots squashing through pooled water, and of children's play were constant. On the surface there seemed to be a sense of spaciousness, even as everyday life in such an ecology could veer toward the unpredictable. When the land was eventually sold, Nita was offered a relocation grant that enabled her to rent a small two-room house of about 36 square meters. Household activities were substantially constrained in such crowded conditions. Yet Nita could imagine nothing that would dampen her excitement: "We finally, after all these years, have a 'real house'; we are finally able to live free and be someone."

Rosa and her four children, now thousands of kilometers apart, once lived in a rented flat in the deindustrialized eastern periphery of Naples. One day the landlord raised her rent; her husband lost his job; and within a few months she was confronted with the impossibility of retaining her flat. In a working-class context where, for many years, formal jobs, opportunities, and help from the state were inversely proportional to those on

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offer by Camorra gangs, Rosa and her family were at a complete loss. So when she overheard that a flat in a big public estate not far from where she used to live was becoming available because of the passing of the previous occupier, she moved in through the kitchen window and changed the lock on the door.

Throughout the years, she worked hard on the place. "I turned my flat all modern white [but not] the children's bedrooms; the boy's is gray and blue; the girl's, gray and pink and white. The bedroom plays with the colors of shiny black with a split-stone effect—just an effect made by a husband being a bricklayer." Yet the building is in ruins. The salt coming from the Bay of Naples has eroded the seals holding the prefabricated cement modules; water comes in; and mold is everywhere. So now, as the municipality begins working to offer dwellers like Rosa a new place to stay by demolishing and rebuilding the block, the dream of another habitation vibrates throughout. "My expectations . . . imagination flies, it floats. I think it will be much more beautiful than this one, much larger [. . .] All I want is serenity first of all. Tranquility. And then to see my children grow up. Full stop."

Confronted with the possibility of "real" houses, potentially offering freedom and tranquility, belonging, and reproductive terrains for one's own body and those of loved ones, Nita and Rosa are seeking a way to hold onto such a promise, a search that demands constant struggle. It also requires a kind of holding that disperses into a myriad of calculations, attempts, extensions, and thresholds of opportunity, grounded in the racist and classist histories of their respective places. In these places, housing looms on the horizon as the edge of a promise of belonging that may never materialize, or whose edge may prove to be nothing more than the horizon of a black hole, a cliff beyond which lies an indeterminate fall. It is a form of housing that pulls everything toward it with its own gravitational force, a "magnetic field" (Mbembe 2021) requiring inhabitants to expend tremendous effort to arrive still standing and still holding onto the idea that one might finally be "at home."

But what is this magnetic field of housing? What kind of terrain—epistemic, material, imaginary—does it touch on, and how? What does housing engender by standing there in Nita's, Rosa's, and everyone's life, such that it provokes an entire assemblage of becomings and unbecomings, the production and destruction not only of doors, walls, and plans but of entire desired worlds and their possibilities of habitation and uninhabitability?

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In other words, what is the power of the house—that which lures, cajoles, berates, and commands? How does it compel an overarching attention? One way to think about this is in terms of how the house operationalizes the position and experience of individuated subjectivity, demarcating a terrain as a collection of individual bastions, of bodies programmed to stand alone amid other experiences of relative isolation. Like any collection, an array of houses is both a particular way of gathering up purportedly discrete histories and experiences within a shared arena of viewing and a way of exhibiting them. The array serves as a means of housing what is assumed to already exist as something discrete and separate, and thus operates as a technicity that occludes its own process of individualizing.

If a city is viewed as an expanding (or shrinking) collection, a myriad of stories are collected that must be accommodated within prescribed modalities of reading and viewing. These stories are to be self-contained, repeated, and shaped with particular intensities of integrity, referring primarily to their own internal logics and past as a way to attain a future. They may indeed touch those with whom they share a sense of contiguity, but they are expected not to intersect in ways that might lead to their dissolution or merger. In most instances, this collection of individualization is defined and buttressed by regimes of property, in which the house is situated on land that becomes a fundamental property of the house, and the house the materialization of the property of the land. Here both land and house mark the obligation of inhabitants to tend to their "story," to commit to a narrative of self-attainment and self-development. To register an urban story, to have that story recognized within the predominant technicities of reading, is to engage with deeds, mortgages, certificates of occupancy, taxes, inspections, and renewals; in other words, the supposedly singular stories that are collected are concretely reinforced through occupying an infrastructure that steers inhabitants to tell the same story. After all, the production of individuated subjectivity, rooted to a classical physics of individual atoms, is fundamentally an impossible situation—not only in quantum terms of superpositions, invisible protons, and relations of locality for which distance is irrelevant but also in an urban life of incessant collisions, mutations, multiplicity, and rearrangement (McFarlane 2021; Waldman 2025).

Think of a city with all its simultaneously unfolding events, scenarios, and sites. How do we make sense of all these simultaneities and how they are related (or not) to one another? The infrastructure of the city—its metabolic pathways, grids, conduits, and material arrangements—constitutes a lens of prescribed connectivity, of what is reachable and salient. But

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consider the overarching importance of the house as cartography, a means of arranging bodies, activities, and events in discrete units that render urban processes apprehendable in specific ways. Consider the intensities and scope of investment in such categorization—a city populated by housing units that order otherwise inchoate and complex processes in digestible form, rendering the urban as a field of standardization, individualized entities making up a larger whole.

To insist on the individualized body as the model and locus for a self-sufficient life, a homeorhetic system, or responsible subject becomes an infinite work in progress that never progresses beyond its defining conceit—that urban life can be governed as an amalgam of individual citizens who belong, through either birth or application, to a specific territory, a territory that never really becomes their property, but rather functions as an essential property of their existence. Far beyond the obvious proposition that such human bodies can never really stand alone, ensconced as they are in multiple relations of dependency and obligation, the house is designed as a condensation of the social order, where the management of the house is to mirror the generalized practices of rule and authority.

As such, the city is not only a collection of bodies and their stories in the present but also their dispositions toward a future—stories reproduced in specific ways according to the domain in which they take their place. Even if urban territories are replete with districts where the houses all look the same, or where the surface appearance of the house confirms mandated aesthetics, or where what takes place in its interiors conforms to specific rules of physical and social maintenance, the house is designated as that place where a person can truly be themself in the enactment of some psychic singularity, where the way they eat, fuck, shit, dream, and waste time is truly their own; where they are free to say and do what they want. Of course, the fulfillment of certain societal inclinations and duties are also relegated to the house, as in most instances the house is the setting for shared experiences, for example, the institutionalization of heteronormative expectations, the raising of children, the care of kin, as well as a repository of aspirations, traumas, suspicions, and affections. Here the house attempts to reconcile the exigency that bodies stand alone, associate with a specific identity, and engage in an interminable process of self-reflection, even while acknowledging that such separateness is impossible.

This does not, of course, preclude houses being occupied by single individuals, extra-kin groupings, or nonheteronormative orientations. Cities are certainly replete with a heterogeneity of occupancies and compositions,

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all of which stretch the categorical boundaries of the house and the uses to which it can be put. But the power of the house remains largely anchored in the dream of individuals assuming responsibility for their own lives. To become someone is still largely tied to homeownership, to the acquisition of a dream house as both an aesthetic realization of an idealized self and the possession of a fungible asset, where the house is used as the basis through which to acquire and consume other objects and experiences.

As a retreat from the world, it is the arena in which one need not spend energy considering the conditions of others, where one can protect those they love, and accede to the possibilities of surveillance that allow inhabitants to scrutinize the looks, demeanors, and sensibilities of household members' exchanges with the world beyond. In other words, the house becomes the domain of regulation, ensuring that those individualized stories in need of housing enact themselves in exterior worlds in ways that contribute to the viability of the house—extracting from them the affordances and experiences necessary to endure—while not endangering the stability of relations within the house.

Here, the house contains its own liminal qualities in a series or sequence of thresholds from room to room and in doors that open to the outside. Its insides are to be both projected and not projected outward, just as the outside is to be kept from entering the front door without crossing this threshold in order for the interior to be sustained. As such, the house is an instrument of incessant filtering, a place of both purification and transgression, of expressing and containing private or intimate functions and desires, of an entire series of practices that are to be "left at home" even as they constitute driving motivations for the pursuit of specific objectives and practices in the worlds of work, the street, and the city at large.

Of course, these thresholds vary in shape and intensity. For many of the world's population, an incessant conundrum is where to pursue erotic life, as houses are crowded with household members, and privacy is either delicately improvised or nonexistent. In many situations, the house is not big enough for all of those who belong to it, and shifts must be taken to use the available beds for sleep, such that being in and out of the house do not necessarily demarcate a fixed boundary for a discrete household.

AbdouMaliq can recall a brief time living in Alger when large numbers of youth used the cemetery as the primary place for sex, or when individual apartments used rooftops for sex according to a tacitly understood schedule shared across the building. At times, inordinate uncertainty marks the threshold between the house and the larger outside world. In Kinshasa,

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AbdouMaliq had a friend, Vitale, who every morning on his way to work hesitated for some minutes at his front gate, scrutinizing the surrounding neighborhood, looking up and down the street, taking note of a general atmosphere before proceeding on his way. When asked about his motivation, Vitale indicated that this was crucial for his safety, for one never knew what might have transpired during the night, what consternations or acts of bewitchment might have taken place, or how the accumulation of small traumas within the multitude of surrounding dwellings might impact the collective behavior of the neighborhood. Vitale had lived in this house his entire twenty-five years and knew every household on the block. It was a place of bountiful micro-solidarities and reciprocity. Nevertheless, the efforts each individual household made to always "do the right thing" was insufficient to guarantee anything more than a modicum of security, for each was exposed to forces beyond its control, often compelled to accommodate the traumas of distant kin, and sometimes rocked by the inexplicable passing of a family member or the incursions of renegade police bereft of their salaries and on the hunt for something, anything.

This is precisely the point about the impossibility of an individualized subjective life separate from their fundamental entanglement in the lives of others—others who may or may not assume human form, entities that may take on different modes of being, virtuousness, or toxicity. Although Vitale might have experienced his house as something solid and enduring, it was situated in an environment that was volatile and available for incessant change, even if that change usually occurred only in small increments. How many times have inhabitants talked about the need to move, to change houses because the neighborhood had changed and was no longer recognizable? How many neighborhoods are now designed to ward off such change, to modulate the acts of inhabitation in such a way that everything that occurs outside the house in its immediate vicinity is available for monitoring and modulation?

Here Vitale is describing something that is at once both context-specific and universal. On the one hand, how people negotiate the promise of *the thing of the house* (its material and structural existence), and the subjectivities and desires arising from such a negotiation, is situated (and must be understood only as situated). The incessant desire for change to be found in that neighborhood of Alger, or the swirling moves of inhabitants of Jakarta using houses as a placeholder, as storage facilities for a future yet to come, is specific to those places and those people. In these pages, however, we are interested in exploring what the thing of the house has to do at those junctions

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where a "doing" acquires specific forms in a specific context but also takes the form of an operation discernable across geographies. For the thing of the house is not simply "there" to contain and to promise containment; it is part and parcel of how containment and its promise are imagined, planned, and enacted—processes that often cut across geographies.

We are not simply saying that the house mediates the relations among specific enactments, imaginations, policies, boundaries, and bodies but that it is part of their life. For the house exists as a working image in all of them—the body as housing the soul, the policy housed in compelling language, the house as the image of boundary, and so forth. As such, the power of the thing of the house rests not in what it accomplishes, for the subjectivity to be materialized by it is always found lacking, always constituted from either lack or excess, but rather from an act of *promising* that depends neither on actualization nor on repeated acts of postponement. It doesn't matter if the house is a dream that never comes true. Its power rests in its indifference, situated in a domain where everything seems to matter beyond any realistic assessment, yet in the end doesn't have to count for anything. It is something that is indifferent to its own failures or attainments.

Such a power is there even when the house is not—not just in the evident sense that if one does not have housing, one will desire housing. One of Michele's acquaintances in Bucharest, whom we'll call Adrian, often reported that he was just waiting for his grandma to die and then things would get better. Adrian loved his grandma, but he saw in the house she owned and occupied the solution to his numerous problems. There were betting debts to be paid off and a broken-down car permanently parked in one of Baicului's alleys, where Adrian used to buy and sell methadone pills. There was the dream of getting out of his mum's home, a socialist flat of two rooms currently holding Adrian's parents, his brother and his partner, plus a small dog named Codrin. It was not a given that once his grandma passed her house was going to go exclusively to Adrian. Quite the contrary: Most of Adrian's enlarged family would have fought for the inheritance, considering that the house was located in the old Jewish neighborhood of the city—a sought-after location close to the city center, where the few historic building not knocked down by the 1977 earthquake or by Ceaușescu were still standing.

But that was not the point. Grandma's house was a floating signifier channeling all of Adrian's desire, for the power it had to potentially translate his current trouble into a "fix." The thing of the house provided for a fold of solutions granted, at times, by the exchange value associated to its

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location, walls, and doors, and at times by its use-value too, because Adrian dreamed of living there with his girlfriend, of setting up a legitimate online clothing retail business in the spare room and a gym in the cellar. Little matter, once again, that the house was never going to materialize in either way for him. He knew all of this, but he needed the power of that house to exert its force on him, to push him forward, to grant him the promise that he was going to hold on to, for his grandma would eventually pass away, and the house would disclose a new realm of the possible right in front of its steps.

The surfacing of the house is a process of sheer repetition. Sometimes it does lead to unexpected scenarios, and its collapses are marshalled as evidence for other processes. Sometimes it doesn't, and its presence, announcement, or collapse does not lead to anything except a buttressing of its own necessity and identity. In any case, however, it is as if the house nurtures an attitude whereby the inhabitant can claim that it doesn't matter what happens in the "outside" world so long as they have their house or as long as they can aspire for one, and that whatever transpires in the house has nothing to do with what takes place in the "outside." The demarcation of inside and outside is marked by this indifference, even if such a chasm cannot be sustained. For whatever complementarity exists between inside and outside is constituted in part by foreclosing a more significant indifference—an indifference to the usual relations between location, position, identity, and endurance. For it is indeed possible to think of a trajectory of living that simply "moves on" from one place to another, one relationship and livelihood to another, unimpeded by border regimes, national sovereignties, or geographies. It is theoretically possible to right now leave one's house and simply keep going, stopping and recouping while one can, and then moving on to the next "thing." Of course, there are all kinds of practical logistical reasons why this is difficult, even inconceivable. But it is this very prospect that is foreclosed by the notion of the house, as the house becomes the medium through which inhabitants are made to care about where they are situated, care about complying with the terms of belonging, willingly adapt the markings of variegated forms of belonging, buy into the notion that they are sovereigns within their own house.

But what kind of violence is entailed in propping up this belonging? What kind of violence is riven into the house, with its tensions, sins, dependencies, depressions, withdrawals, and intrusions? Where an indifference to boundaries foreclosed generates indifference to the implications of actions performed within the house—actions that potentially compromise

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its very sustainability—as expressed by its everyday gendered violences, its over- or under-management of childhood, its overreliance on pizza deliveries and entertainments, its tables of gathered members silently scrolling their smartphones, its spiteful reactions to various dimensions of the world outside, its careless consumptions of excess, its incessant tensions around appointments, required acquisitions, family rituals, jealousies, and exhaustion. Here, overarching objectives may have long vanished, superseded by an endless supply of compensations, quick-fix temporary solutions, where whatever passes for the structural conditions are never paid attention to, and instead the focus is on making sure there is a voluminous supply of Band-Aids and painkillers.

For what holds the house together; what is its household? To what extent is the house ensconced in a permanent "holding pattern," never fully able to land anywhere? To what extent is the hold of the house the hold of the ship, transporting its occupants through a liminal space where they are neither here nor there but suspended as captives in an experience from which they will never recover a defining story, a genealogy, nor fully embrace a destination, always caught somewhere in between, and where the walls of the house do not so much mark a distinctive, integral territory as a permanent ellipses, something always incomplete, hidden? To what extent is the hold of the house a warm embrace, an infrastructural support for forays across a larger world always tentative, always provisional, but where that embrace veers on suffocation, and the constant reproduction of the constraints the house otherwise attempts to exceed? There is the house that holds some of its members down—for example, all the youth who never can seem to move out and situate themselves in a house of their own. There is the house that weighs down its occupants with excessive debt and endless repairs, that harbors too many demands. But the house always harbors too many demands, even when it all seems to work well, everyone's happy, and no one is oppressed. For the thing of the house is nothing more than an accommodation of multiple demands, localized in this accepted form of dwelling, as a connecting tissue transversal to an infinite domain of livingness. The question is then to ask what the active role of the thing of the house is: to mediate, to perform, to adjust, to exceed the arrangements of these multiple domains of life?

The demand for the house is often reduced to a demand made from inside the house, a demand for what is already there; a house that seems to always fall short of being a "real house." But at all times, such an inside demand is just an extension of things that are coming from out there, things

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that are folded into the house as a thing of promise and also that which promises. The occupants of the house may want specific wall colors; the kids might want a specific cereal for breakfast; a family member might want to be left alone in their room without interruptions; one family member might want to sing in the morning; someone else might want a child of a particular assumed gender; a child might want to ride their bike beyond the eyesight of a parent; another might want to watch a specific show on television. What is practiced is an overall economy of wanting where the house seems just to be a container to all desires, but it is in real terms intercepting all of those and playing an active role in defining that which is desired.

Here we are discussing the household as a collective subjectivity constantly violated before it ever begins to congeal. Yet it is always expected to be congealable to the masses; and where the thing of house demands the bulk of attention but provides little of its own. The house continuously props up individual and social life; it functions as a life-support technology that, in the end, often interrupts or forecloses a "living-with" a larger surround, of being one element in an ecology of heterogeneous relations. It forecloses a living-with the environs where actions are not undertaken to buttress a "self" but to contribute to a machinic operation of mutual calibrations and flourishing.

The House as Operation

Take the house you see on the other side of the road: its walls and its infrastructure of provisions; its cement blocks, architectural features, engineered calculations. So far, we can position it clearly, assign a location. Now take in its caresses, the bags with groceries, the runaways and hidings; its being a nodal point in networks where resources are rendered marketable after their extraction. Take the geography of that housing, the writing or constitution of its world, with its mirrors made of sand, its crackers and pillows, its modes of reproduction, metabolic functions, and gendered distribution of emotional and material labor. Take such geography not as the expression of an intricate ongoing assemblage but as the ongoing existence of the house itself, as a constant permutation, with the maintenance, repair, and shifts needed to keep it going. Consider the geography of that housing as the tumultuous (re)surfacing of arborescent networks, not lingering just right below the surface of its "damn walls," as Mandelstam put it, but running horizontally throughout such surfaces.

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The house is the immanent instantiation of all these networks but also, at the same time, the device that, by design, exposes only a fraction of those networks. After all, our respective cultures have largely asked us to treat the house as a "shelter from the storm"—a place of respite and stability amid conditions difficult to read and control. We are to treat it as a locus of stability, or more importantly as materializing the capacity to exert some kind of effective authority over a circumscribed space of our daily operations. So, in this respect, the house cannot "give everything away." It is both designed and authorized not to reveal the full extent of its operating procedures.

Yet at the same time, as it resonates with the volatilities of exterior events and sites, it must also become the storm itself, in a play of both dissimulation and accommodation, as it "storms" its way onto the scene. For the inhabitants of the house cannot simply settle into fixed arrangements and practices, no matter how these might abound. They must also proliferate points of exposure to all those matters the house might otherwise deflect in a universe more complex and expansive than anything on the "outside." This is because the house does not have the luxury of an expansive spatializing of its external articulations; they must be represented in a condensed form that overdetermines or overcodes what each word, gesture, or behavior might mean. In its tumultuous geography, the thing of the house is as truthful as an exposed image can be, and therefore—again following Mandelstam's poetry—"unfaithfully thin," because there is always, at any time, much more going on than what one sees.

The house is ridden with various symbolic freight. It differs in its material and symbolic composition from culture to culture. There have been long houses, houses on stilts, portable houses, houses that provide a roof overhead and nothing else, houses that are a part of larger courtyards where the household performs essential functions, houses that are permanently incomplete or that always point to the prospect of expansion or revision, houses that are not only houses but workspaces and production centers, houses whose occupants are spirits and ancestors, houses where people and animals cohabit, houses built within houses, houses that float on the water, houses situated within other built environments, houses of vastly varying durability.

Speaking of housing as an operations means focusing on the multiplicity of processes its gets involved in. For the thing of the house is not one thing. Paraphrasing Mezzadra and Neilson, like other operations in contemporary racial capitalism, "there is always a back story, a drama of frictions and tensions in which the efficacy of the operation appears far

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more fragile and elusive than might otherwise be assumed" (2019, 67). But regardless of its heterogeneous forms, functions, and symbolization, the house, once designated as such, operationalizes a particular set of rehearsals, repetitions, and affective registers. Our goal is to stay in some of the numerous in-betweens—or intervals, to use Mezzadra and Neilson's wording—"that brings into relief the combination of social activities, technical codes, and devices that make an [habitational] operation possible" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 67). In getting closer to the operativity of housing, we also aim to illustrate how the thing of the house promises to be the manifestation of a coherence even as, in its relative degrees of detachment from exteriors and other houses, it cuts itself off from the possibility of coherence, since by standing alone it removes itself from the signifying systems and economic articulations that provide the resources for and visibility of its coherence.

Some have looked at the ways in which the thing of the house plays, mediates, and affects definitions and understandings of "housing" and its geographies of lived experience. A call for such intersections has been issued by several scholars who, in recent years, have insisted on the need to expand the remit of housing studies to include a renewed attention to grammars of relationality, topologies, and infrastructure. Early contributions in this regard include the works of Hazel Easthope on homing (2004) and her later relational call—with Power, Rogers, and Dufty-Jones—to query "the extended spatial, material and affective ontologies of housing and home" (2020, 1495). The work of Power and Mee on housing as an infrastructure of care (Power et al. 2022), and Power's recent collaborative work with Tegan Bergan on conceptualizing housing as infrastructure (Bergan and Power 2025), expand on similar directions. We agree with these authors that housing can be conceived as "a powerful infrastructure—relational, generative, with dynamic socio-material patterns—that furnishes possibilities for social life" (19). Yet we are less interested in seeking new definitions for and of housing, and more in understanding what is the promise behind such a "furnishing" and its "possibilities," and how these come into play in forming desires of habitation.

We think that an important antecedent contribution in this sense lies in the edited volume curated by Nicole Cook, where several key insights were provided to "unbound" the relationship between housing and home. Unbounding, for Cook, helps to interrogate "the coproduction of the materials, meanings and practices of dwelling and worlds of finance, nature and power," among other intersections, and to unpack what one considers

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housing and home to be (Cook et al. 2016, 1). The volume's authors interrogate "the boundary between what lies inside and what lies outside the house and home" in order to ask "what housing and home would look like if all that is currently evacuated from traditional, formal, and dominant modes of housing—all that currently constitutes its outside—were incorporated into the policies, practices and structures of dwelling" (7). As illustrated also in our respective works (Lancione 2023; Simone 2022), we find these questions important, perhaps not necessarily in the sense of what it means to incorporate the outside into policy but of looking at the ways in which the outside and the inside operate as bordering regimes, with their own thresholds of operability (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), through which housing engenders histories and spaces of habitability and might provide edges toward an elsewhere (Grazioli 2024).

Many are using the thing of the house to question the structural violence of racial financial capitalism, including important work done to rethink the methodologies of housing justice research. Others explore more nuanced and speculative questions that pivot through but do not end with housing. Indeed, under the umbrella of "radical housing scholarship," and "housing justice scholarship," a new form of doing "housing studies" has emerged (Lancione 2026). In problematizing a reading of housing as an issue to be fixed or as a solution to a dwelling problem, scholars are more concerned with three intersecting questions.

The first has to do with the wider foundational problem of housing regimes not only as the prime "fixer" of capitalist flows but also of longstanding forms of racial and gendered dispossession, and how those are fundamentally accelerated by contemporary financial capitalism (Fields and Raymond 2021; McElroy 2020; McElroy and Werth 2019; Rolnik 2019; Roy 2017). Second, a renewed attention has been posed on notions of "home" (Lancione 2023; McCarthy 2017) and on experiential narratives of homing (Nassar et al. 2023; Vasudevan 2015), including when homing is uprooted in eviction (Baker 2021; Brickell et al. 2017; Cacciotti 2024) or queered (Bryant 2015; Gorman-Murray 2017; McKeithen 2017). These notions and narratives are read processually and genealogically connect to historic processes of coloniality (Handel and Kotef 2023; Nethercote 2022; Porter and Kelly 2023; Rusenko 2020; Wilhelm-Solomon 2021), state violence (Brickell 2020), planning and regeneration processes (Fawaz 2017; Ferreri 2020; Porter 2010; Wang 2020; Watt 2021), extended forms of urbanization (Bathla 2022; Castriota 2024), sex work (Morpurgo 2024), radical approaches to housing politics (Thompson 2024), and matter of race

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(Quizar 2022; Ramírez 2020; Rodriguez 2021; Summers 2021). In these readings, housing is a starting point to question wider forms of injustice, in a move that recalls what radical housing justice activists have practiced already for decades. Third, a certain kind of methodology for housing justice research has emerged that advocates the need to focus study as part of acting, and to do so by staying with a problem and a place rather than simply deliberating about it. This is a crucial aspect of a certain committed or emplaced, to use Ananya Roy's term, kind of housing justice scholarship. One that works with the communities and the struggles it is concerned with, not to replicate an activist posture but to serve a commonly defined purpose (Roy et al. 2020; After Echo Park Lake Research Collective 2022).

Of particular interest to us are those speculative interventions directed at queering the acceptable parameters of how one thinks about housing, homing, and habitation. This kind of work can help unpack questions about the salvation offered by housing when housing and its promised care are part of the problem (Lancione 2023). What are "the caring limitations and possibilities of housing systems," and can scholars raise "new and striking questions about what it means for housing and broader urban systems to care"? (Fields et al. 2024, 743). The work of scholars such as Elsa Noterman on speculative cartographies of property (2023); Nassar on urban glitches and habitational urban politics (2023); Nethercote on coloniality, racism, and unhoming (2022); McElroy on translocal histories of technofascim, urban and housing planning (2024); or Summer and Fields on Black speculative urban worldmaking (2024) are all excellent examples of conceptually driven quests to renew understanding of housing, habitation, and urbanity. Yet such a speculative terrain of thinking has often been lost in favor of other kinds of structural analysis, which have to do with the object of housing but rarely are centered from the house itself. We argue that thinking from the house, in trying to understand how its material and affective presence engenders the relations it is made part of, could bear significance for other experiential and structural analyses concerned with the (un)just geographies of housing in contemporary racial capitalism.

Another way of asking these questions would be to query, as it is conventionally done, the affective and political economy of housing in contemporary capitalism. In seeking an answer, the instinct is to evoke the asset of the "house," its financial backings and channelings, ownership titles and permissions, exchange values, equities, and opportunities. One could consider these parts of the conventional "political" side of the problem. Then, there is an embodied side, which includes the atmospheric,

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emotional, and cultural economies of housing and homing, in their emancipatory and oppressive facets. Taken together, and simplifying further, the problems of exchange and use, and their relative values, are arguably the entry points through which the affective and political economy of housing in contemporary capitalism is currently studied and, in terms of the grassroots, confronted.

As we will evoke in the following pages, much has been achieved through these frameworks, and their specific importance is not the direct subject of this book. Yet we think that something is amiss. Something else is going on in the "political and affective economy" of housing than what is currently registered. It is not a "something" adverse to the anti-capitalist approaches fighting the marketization of housing and the dispossessions foundational to it. Rather, it is a "transversal something" that occurs within and beyond the capture(s) of capitalist logics, in operations that are done to housing but are also operated by housing itself. If capitalism is reproduced through operations encompassing a variety of social, economic, and political practices that are often obscured by dominant narratives (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019), what does it mean to consider the thing of the house as one of these operators? What is the thing of the house in Nita, Rosa, Vitale, and Adrian's affective and political economy of habitation? It is encircled, moved around, pinned down as an object of study or contest. It is an object of social utterances where the subject is invariably something else: Capitalism. Justice. The Right to the City. Ontological Security. Home. Insofar as we are convinced of the validity of considering housing as an end to attain, comprehend, or illustrate something else, we believe more can be said and done around the *thing* of the house. Far more is said and done in the ordinary experiences of holding things together—entire geographies and histories of things—that do not seem to want or need being wrapped up through the thing of the house. A house is always already not a house, and other domains that appear not to be a house turn out to embody the house in the character of their operations. What to make of this inverse of emptiness and plenitude? Are there ways out of this binary that is reiterated in its very disappearance? At the edge of a working language, of available images, are perhaps other transversals as indifferent to the conceptualization of the house as the house is indifferent to its own materialization.

So, enquiring about the thing of the house entails canvassing a vast relational cartography. Paraphrasing Amin, it is about account for how the elements composing the geography of housing, "whether humans, machines, buildings, or material flows, are placed in a dual sense: first, as

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meaningful only in the full range of their interactions and, second, as performed through and by the composites of place" (Amin 2015, 243). The composite of those societal, economic, cultural, and ecological processes that converge onto the thing of the house and spill over. This is a convergence and spilling over that continuously (re)makes both its presence and its role in defining habitation and for whom. That a comprehensive knowledge of these processes is unattainable at any given time does not mean that the question of how such unattainability is mediated by human ways of constructing knowledge in relation to them is an irrelevant one. In other words, the epistemology of the housing question bears significance on the definition of the political horizon of that same question. How do we know what we know about the geography of housing? Especially as the operations of the house seem so obvious.

The Scope of This Book

What we do is offer a complementary epistemology of the thing of the house so that its capacity to convey and to ground struggles, as well as to structure the horizon of the political, can be enhanced or, more modestly, reassessed. This can be considered the goal of our contribution. It is not simply that housing in the critical social sciences is reduced to the end point or, in the best cases, the intersectional passage point of capitalist flows of accumulation, dispossession, and related forms of resistance or policy fix. It is that such reduction produces multiple erasures. Following Mezzadra and Neilson, to uncover the multiple layers and sites where capitalist power is enacted, resisted, and transformed, it is necessary to look within the connections between a multiplicity of operations (2019). A house is *planned, designed, rented or bought, occupied, belonged, evicted, resisted, marketed*. It is constantly moved across planes of existence, generating all sorts of affective and political economies in the spatiotemporal in-betweens of these operations. There is a constant turning, whirling, and scattering of the thing of the house, producing countless realities of "housing." Yet in treating housing as the object of another subject, and by rendering housing visible through one specific focus point at a time, its extensiveness, permanence, and duration get lost in translation.

Current lexicons that are used to superimpose a reading and explanation of the house with its multitudes as a manageable, if momentary, truth, elides its extended and emergent life. Mirroring the above list, the house becomes, in turn, a technical matter of zoning, a problem of renderings and

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aesthetic demands, an exchange value based on its being sought after as a consumable use-value, an organizational imperative, a locus for emotions that need grounding beyond the body, a violent loss, a terrain of direct action, or a reinstantiation of exchange value in the form of financialized asset. In each of these instances, the thing of the house is refocused, each time being retaken into account as that monolithic geometry within which every one of these maelstroms is rendered as a finite configuration to be looked at and, of course, experienced. This is a fine way of proceeding, since it tells us important stories around housing—but just some stories.

In this book, the house is not the object of study *but the operation you trace to study habitation*. For, as Achille Mbembe recalls, "a hot house is not only a place unfit for human habitation, or one in which many cannot dwell or breathe [but it is also] a house incapable of sustaining any form of life, a house where the human body [. . .] will be cooked to death from inside out, in an endless process of radiation, calcification, and petrification" (2021, 12). How such a slow death occurs transcends the house-as-place, the house-as-container, the house as "hot" only in terms of its atmospheric temperature and engenders the functioning of the house across planes of ecological lives. It has to do with how the house moves and it is made to move, or—to echo the lexicon we'll recall in a bit—how housing interrupts and arranges desires for habitation. Where "desire" is a matter of immanent processual stuff, neither individualized nor transcendental. To liberate the house, at least momentarily and conceptually, from the burden of being a fix, a problem, or the end point of a struggle, and to read it instead as an operational (therefore productive) cartography, means to read the affective and the political not as economies *of* housing but as the operations housing enacts in managing and reproducing lives in contemporary capitalism. This is because even when considered as just an object, or as a policy goal, among the many objectifications, housing is always an operation. It is a performance, not just in terms of what people do with it, and the politics associated with such a doing (Ward 1976) but also in the sense of being a form of operation itself, and one that is necessarily always collective. The house as a productive arrangement of affect and matter.

But what kind of operation is housing? In what follows, we argue that housing operates as one of the *ordinary grounds of desire* in racial capitalism—surely not the only one, perhaps not even the most important one. This combination of concepts describes what is produced out of the constant formation of housing, in other words, the workings of ordinary affects and politics, compromising with and rearranging the

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unstoppable (re)emergence of life into concrete experiences of habitation. Complementary to a focus on "capitalist" operations (Mezzadra and Nailson 2019), we work with notions of *ordinariness* and *desire* to account for those operations that might be aligned with capitalism, or might not, or might be everything in between at the same time, contradictory and nonetheless thriving, habitable and uninhabitable. Following Haraway, we argue that staying with the inherent contradiction of housing in contemporary capitalism can speak volumes to a radical care oriented toward another way of forming housing operations and assembling the related desires beyond what is currently given (Haraway 2016).

Building on all the above, we are concerned with the expansiveness of housing as a material, epistemic, and political matter of our time. How to think of the house both as a recipient of processes—a right, a struggle, a fixer, an asset—and as a process in itself? What kind of intersections can come to the fore by looking at habitation from housing? In asking these questions, we offer a lateral move from the canon of housing and urban scholarship, following the artist and curator Olivier Marboeuf in his invitation to read and feel the world "via the fluid parts of the map [. . .] rather than interpreting [it] from the solid perspective—the continents and frontiers" (Marboeuf 2020). When it comes to our concerns, this means to displace the centrality of housing as the unit of analysis, policy, policing, and belonging, and to forefront the fluidity of its multiple geographies via a reconsideration of some common sphere of housing interests around its spaces, visualities, and surfaces.

How This Book Is Organized

In the next chapter we expand on the conceptual grammar of the book, and specifically on the notion of the *ordinary* and of *desire*. With these, we aim to look at housing in three ways. First, we take the thing of the house neither as the object of another subject nor as a container but as a thing composed by operations on its threshold, and operative moves done on itself and by itself. Second, expanding on the feminist critique of the household, we focus on the ordinary as that which spans time and place. This allows us to conceive who inhabits and is being inhabited as situated both in the here and the now of reproductive–productive forms of dispossession but, at the same time, elongated somewhere else—in a history, geographies, promises, in a project, a planning, a capture, and a fugitive move. Third, we situate these concerns in a processual and nonbinary reading of how housing

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comes to the fore, how it is operated on and how it operates. *Desire* as the powerful emergence and unfolding of life is key here, so we unpack how the ordinary embodiment of habitation is structured across constant interruptions and rearrangements within anti-capitalist, capitalist, noncapitalist, and beyond-capitalist terrains. What is the role of housing in organizing and socializing how desires for habitation get mapped and how a related subject of habitability or uninhabitability comes to the fore? What can be gained in probing housing not just as what is instrumentalized for habitation but as that thing that deeply affects the politics of habitability across intersecting registers? Something that has to do with more than form, function, and related values.

The constitution of this analytic and of its conceptual grammar is a requirement for us to study habitation in a manner that might contribute to other works concerned with how the world increasingly stretches "beyond inhabitation." If liberatory desires for habitation exist, only some are seen or accounted for. Reapproaching the affective and the political in the housing question might provide glimpses of their presence. So, the work we do in this book is both conceptual and empirical, and it is grounded in specific places for both. Conceptually, we are building on housing justice and radical housing scholarship, given its attentiveness to situated practices and histories of (un)just habitation. We are also in conversations with analysis of the contemporary political economy of global capitalism and with feminist readings of home and of productive and reproductive labor. Queer understandings of the liberatory politics of housing and home, as well as the queering of concepts (such as the "ordinary") are key to our work, especially in the way we end up reworking Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of desire. These conceptual strands are then made to work with other, situated, conceptual grammars, particularly around visuality, working class struggle, and Blackness. Here Blackness is a way to map out the temporal terrain of futurities as a time of repeated catastrophe, nonlinearity, incessant struggle. Of imagination, unbounded by developmentalism, a plurality of past futures, cities yet to come. It is a way to consider the making and unmaking of operational territories—not just those of geographies but of collective bodies and genres of being human, of modalities of expression and performance. So, when we use *Blackness*, we imply it both as a signifier of process of racialized dispossession engendered by the thing of the house and also as an interweaving of the disparate and contradictory, as well as to signify the extensiveness of place into a larger surrounds. For Black urbanism also considers how urban imaginaries are materialized beyond conventional form,

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constantly shape-shifting and obdurate, indifferent to subjecthood and proportionality, always more than one, less than two. Less ontology than a method of seeing, the intent here is not to attribute any special powers to Blackness, but rather to take up its "challenge": that something always remains just beyond wherever we attempt to grasp it; it is always already somewhere else, its traces, like fractals, pointing in all directions. It entails a factness that is both evident and beyond apprehension—a modality of existence subjected to repeatedly (diverse) incarceration, an emblem of the captive itself, yet always beyond it simultaneously as a dwelling in uncertainty, a leap, to use Fanon's terms, without guarantee or map; a virtual plane of what all of the struggles, compensations, sufferings, voicing of sufferings, and voicings of what Black people have experienced and done.

Empirically, the reflections contained in the book derive from our respective ethnographies of urbanity and our interest in matters of dwelling and its politics (Lancione and Simone 2021). The stories we present are self-contained, and we have tried our best to contextualize, ground, specify, and situate. The three most important ordinary grounds Michele is theorizing from in this book are related to the deindustrialized north of Italy, where they were born; Bucharest, where they lived and conducted research for several consecutive years; and Naples, where they are currently conducting research and politics work. AbdouMaliq has maintained a series of engagements in urban areas across an imaginary corridor that runs in wavy lines from Jakarta to Dakar, reflecting five decades of work in policy development, institution building, and research. Emphasis has been placed on deploying the collective logics and practices of an urban majority for judicious urban development agendas, as well as transurban coalition building. The perspectives arrived at, and the subsequent stories told, are grounded in what has largely been street-level work with residents of so-called popular territories, with spaces accessed on behalf of mostly very localized community associations and municipal councils. For both, shared experiences in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, and several cities in the Mediterranean region—as well as our work directing the Beyond Inhabitation Lab—contributed to the development of a conceptual grammar on issues of habitability. Crucial to these is also our love for films, the still image, and music—which contributes substantively to the illustrative material presented in this book. Throughout, when we report direct speech from the field, these are coming from audio-recorded or carefully noted conversations with the people we met, whom we thank for the time they have dedicated to us. All names are fictional.

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In no circumstance should the following text be read as an attempt at comparison. Following Jazeel (2019), these stories are incomparable singularities. They are so in themselves, and they are so to us. We arrived at these places with different trajectories and subjectivities, which evolved in the time we were there and have evolved, like the places and people we encounter themselves, since then. Yet, precisely in treating them as rooted in their ordinary histories and geographies, it might be possible to account for transversal resonances spilling over from one to the next. We don't claim each one of the operations listed in the book happens wherever the thing of the house operates. Nor do we think spacing, seeing, and surfacing are the only available analytics to reapproach habitation through the prism of housing. More modestly, we present some of those we have encountered, illustrated with respect of where we have encountered them. If generalization is possible, it is only at the methodological level, which we return to in the conclusion. To get there, we structured the remaining part of this book in four main progressions, focusing, respectively, on housing operations which we name *spacing*, *seeing*, and *surfacing*, and concluding with a reflection on the implications of looking at housing in this way, which we have named *edging*.

In the second chapter on *spacing*, we start by looking at the power of the house to fold, perhaps the most obvious and yet the one requiring a quintessential shift in the ways in which the "house" is viewed. The fold is the world "turning back" onto itself, not as a drawbridge over a moat but as the elaboration of a surface delivering a textured layering of apertures and closures; a specific methodology of putting things in touch with one another that are otherwise moving in centrifugal dispersal (Deleuze and Strauss 1991; Serres 1985). As we have discussed in our past work, it is about conceiving the violence of the homely as not opposed to or resolutive of the unhomely (Lancione 2023). Rather, it is about approaching such a stretched locality as a being or becoming within and beyond capture (Simone 2022). The thing of the house is operated in the fold, as Blomley puts it in discussing the territory of property—not as "an exclusive space of insiders and outsiders" but "as a relational technology that organizes forms of conditional spatial access" (2020, 1). To us, such access is *always granted*, and there lies the impossible possibility of the house. It invites you in, folds you in, even if just in an aspiratory sense, but it never changes the conditions by which it renders you as a subject fertilizing dispossessive forms of livelihood through habitation.

The workings of the fold could be discussed by invoking Harvey's notion of the "spatial fix," and to stretch it enough to expand "capital" to include

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variegated assemblages of desiring. But this would require decentering the primacy of structure, hence losing the specificity of that original notion, which works well to illustrate one specific form of how housing gets operationalized (Harvey 1982). By invoking Harvey's spatial fix, we want, however, to stay with the problem of how the house gets "fixed"—pinned down, grounded, and made to work—in order to get moved and to move. Hence our reference to attachments as a spacing of the household that requires a fixing to generate relations to other promises. The (re)productive ground of housing is here seen under a different light. For if housing contains the work needed to reproduce productive life, housing also works to produce the possible reproduction of its annihilation. On that threshold, forms of habitation emerge "on the edge" (something we go back to later in the book). Here, we want to pin down how the impossible possibility of the homely promises a fold but, in being constantly operated on, becomes a liminal threshold, where a structure of feeling for habitation emerges out of a fundamental compromise with the desire to arrange life; an arrangement or accommodation where housing constantly points beyond life itself.

Chapter 3, on *seeing*, refers to how the operation of the house is perceived. Here we focus mostly on forms of visual perception, given their primacy in being engendered by the operation of housing. This is speculative terrain but one that has received little attention by scholars and organizers. It is not just about how the house mediates social processes as a material and affective artifact but how it interrupts and rearranges flows and experiences of capital desire through perception. *Seeing* is not about defining what it means to see or sense for the house nor to say that the house makes sense but to argue that an entire nonapparent reproductive–productive terrain "vibrates," gets lively in its presence. Here the vibration of the thing of the house cuts through what is conventionally perceived but is nonetheless immanent, or cosmopolitical. It is about elicitations of meanings, discourses, and fantasies, which map collective cartographies of reference that must be faced, as Stengers reminded us, without attaching a priori moral value to them (2005). The thing of the house *does* things, and therefore it means that somehow it interacts with its environment as it recognizes, or *sees*, it.

We mostly focus on the question of seeing because if being at home is a colonial project (something we discuss in the fold), and if we can never escape the postcolonial circuitry of the gaze, then we need to ask how exactly the house sees and is seen. Here we build on the quintessential problem of the regime of the visible enacted by the thing of the house through a reflection on negative vision and computational capacity in Virilio (1994),

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Parisi (2012, 2019, 2021), and Ferreira da Silva (2011, 2014). In this chapter we explore also how simply being there, being present, is mediated in the near and the far by the thing of the house. We also think of attending as a way of bearing witness to a heterogeneity of situations, both spatial and temporal. Attending to what has never taken place but could; attending to what might be taking place right now but just beyond the borders of visibility; or attending to what is yet to come or what it is that we will have been sometime in the future.

Here, there is no specific object. Rather, there is an instrument, such as the house, which assumes both a specific position and capacity to affect and shape events, feelings, and possibilities in specific ways—and additionally, one which has no standpoint. These panoplies of details not only constitute a dissipation but also a future horizon, something out there, just beyond any capacity of an account, and for which dreaming operates as the medium of engagement and conveyance. We are also particularly concerned here with the bearing of racialized forms of housing, in their reappearing, at different historical junctures, to follow Best and Ramírez (2021). We read these as productive endeavors of a house that is never just about its materiality but also about the machination of its "abstraction." The thing of the house here operates spectrally, through plantation economies and planning but also through the (re)presentation of forms of capitalist virtue stimulating the mapping of deadly ordinary desires.

Chapter 4, *surfacing*, concerns how housing formations render habitation and for whom. Here, we want to stay close to how people navigate their relationship with the thing of the house through its surfaces, and also to account for the fact that housing is always surfacing in and out of planes of existences, in and out of desire-arrangements. In between the fold and unfolding of housing, the question arises of how humans are concerned with habitation, a matter that involves both how people make sense of things and how they struggle with its ordinary violence. In this chapter we discuss cases where the struggle does not take the form of the conventional housing justice organizing, and so stay close to our main interests on the ordinary housing political and its unannounced horizon(s). Drawing from elements of Black critical thought, we are interested in bodies that are not the subjects of inhabitation, but rather extend themselves across uninhabitable (conceptual, political, and physical) terrain in a form of diffraction that bends its way with and across unruly surfaces, that manages to elide all the common holds, including the primary promise of housing-as-hold.

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These three housing operations discussed in the book—*spacing*, *seeing*, and *surfacing*—are just some among possibly many other ways of reapproaching the epistemological question of what housing does and for whom. We are conscious that there is only so much words can do to convey some of the speculative grounds we are interested in. In chapter 5, on *edging*, we expand on the meaning and political significance of such an analytic. What does it mean to say that housing constantly unsettles habitation, pointing, in its ordinary and vast genealogies and cartographies, to something increasing beyond habitability? What is the meaning of habitation at such edge, and what is required to think a more affirmatory beyond?

We offer this book as a prism to ask inordinate and subordinate questions around housing's promise, around how sense is constructed with it, and around what it means to inhabit its unsettling surfacing. The idea is to invite readers to complement questions of just housing and just habitation with an expansive geographical, temporal, and affective imaginary, to better account for the variegated economies at play in how one relates to and deals with the extensive and shifting formations of the thing of the house. For if a comprehensive view of all of this would be unattainable, a predisposition to sense how things do not fit and are not fixed might be. We think the latter is the prerequisite to reimagining what a collective concern beyond the current fold of habitation might be.

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