

Looking into my Window: Negligence, Obsolescence and Neoliberal Housing Landscapes

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## ABSTRACT:

The purpose of my portfolio “Looking into My Window: Negligence, Obsolescence and the Neoliberal Housing Landscape” is to bring forth an assessment of the housing landscape in the City of Toronto from my perspective as a 20-year resident of Canada’s largest social housing provider, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC). In situating my experience within the broader and more dominant narratives around housing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), I highlight the limits to neoliberal practices in urban environments with the aim to have a generative output for community response to these limitations and the ways they impact neighbourhood change. This work engages diverse research modalities to explore, analyze and articulate the closure of social housing units throughout the City Toronto.

The core question guiding this major research portfolio is:

*How do Toronto Community Housing Corporation closures advance the legacy of neoliberalism, and how are residents located in these closures?*

My major research portfolio is organized into three distinct outputs, each of which lends critical insight into the central research question guiding this work. These incorporate distinct research methods, and engage varied discursive entry points and perspectives. They remain grounded in a commitment to make legible and render visible the realities of marginalized people.

### 1) Policy Memo and Resident Based Planning Strategy:

This output takes the form of a policy memo that profiles Toronto Community Housing Corporation’s relocation policy and challenges this policy for its lack of resident focus. My analysis of the relocation policy and procedure is grounded in the challenge by myself and a small group of residents who formed a resident advocacy group, Grow Our Grassways. It identified gaps in the “customer” service provision from the relocation team and in response, created a petition with a set of demands that would ultimately work to fill in service gaps and support the transition and relocation process of the tenants being moved out of the Grassways. This policy memo will treat the petition and set of demands from Grow Our Grassways as an autoethnographic document and will consider this document in relation to international approaches to relocation. Further, this output will detail the work of Grow Our Grassways to highlight how the community responded to the relocation. Resident-based advocacy initiatives are fertile ground for new, community-focused perspectives on urban planning in marginalized communities. The resident-based planning strategy is a document that captures the efforts of Grow Our Grassways during a five-month period in 2017, between the May and September months.

### 2) Research Paper:

The purpose of this output is to analyse the dominant narrative that exists about social housing in order to determine the ways that it is situated within the neoliberal imagination. This output will consider neoliberalism, housing and race and space as important discursive themes to be extracted from mainstream media reports about the closure of Toronto Community Housing Corporation units across the city. I merge auto-ethnography and a critical discourse framework in order to incorporate personal experience with analysis of media and policy outputs to consider what is omitted in the delivery of

these texts and how the issues that ail the social housing sector have been framed. This will include reports from the Toronto Star and The Globe and Mail within the last five years as this time period best reflects the trajectory of recent housing development and sentiments about the housing landscape that are relevant to the context of the Firgrove closure.

3) Deputation and Photo Essay:

Critical discourse analysis also provides room for visual image as a unit of analysis (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002), therefore the photo essay will provide a visual narration of the ways in which I have felt like an outsider in my own home as a consequence of my being relocated. It will provide a space for catharsis- I will be able to explore the ways I felt let down and absented by the practices of TCHC through the imagery that is produced. I will be able to create a living archive with the photos because my claiming of the now dilapidated and condemned structures also signify home and a site of place-making for generations of racialized people in the City. Further, this form of essay allows for an evaluation of the neglect of the structures in Firgrove and therefore an analysis of time/space and what that means for racialized low-income people. This is significant in the context of an over-developed but starkly uneven cityscape – the affective landscape is jarring and telling and adds to the narrative of racial politics in the city. This photo essay will be prefaced with a deputation that I presented to the Toronto Community Housing Board of Executives on July 14, 2017 which challenged the shallow efforts of the housing provider to engage with residents around the closure of their housing.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:**

This Major Portfolio is dedicated to my now displaced and fragmented community of CONNECTIONS, C-SIDE, the GRASSWAYS, FIRGROVE located on the SOUTH SIDE of the JANE STRIP. I am humbled to share my narrative and know that it is not complete until it is assembled with the narratives of those who also had to depart as a result of the relocation.

I want to Give Thanks to the Most High (and I, and I) and to all those around me who wrapped me up in a cocoon of love and encouragement which was so vital to my survival over the past two years. The displacement of my community shattered me completely and left me disoriented in many ways. It was such a relief to have the safe space of love and friendship provided by funnybone Shannon, my courageous Gemini Moya, my first phone call Shenikqwa, my partner in rage Charlene, my unregistered therapist Alex, and my same Oyan. I am so happy to complete this project knowing that I can spend more time with my Brown Chick and littlest sister Khaliah and my Black and Proud Nephew-Son Micah. I am proud to be my mother's Mouth Piece as she is slowly retiring from that role, I am valuing every day the new ways we are beginning to know each other and loving the friendship we are building. I take pride in the fact that I am my father's daughter- those long Saturday afternoons watching those conspiracy documentaries are definitely where I became radicalized. I am blessed to be a sister to my sisters: Shimeika, Veneicia, Jahnicia, Abena, Nanyamjah, Adia and Miracle; I am blessed to be a sister to my brothers: Jahdonis, Walter and Enoch.

Thank you so much to 'Grow Our Grassways' - Alisha, Lisa and Talisha: it has been an amazing opportunity to share strengths with you ladies.

Dr. Jin Haritaworn- Thank you for sharing space with me- You reminded me that my voice is valid and that my experiences count.

I am grateful for the patience of my advisor. Dr. Jennifer Foster- In a short period of time you have certainly become a friend to me. I was not expecting to spend as much time as I did laughing and having genuine conversations with you. I appreciate your confidence in me. I feel in my heart of hearts that you were meant to help me get to the finish line.

I would like to extend a 'Thank you' to Graduate Program Director, Dr. Liette Gilbert. Thank you for being so supportive of me during my time in this program. Each time that I came close to failing there was an email in my inbox from you with directions about how I could get back on track.

## **FOREWORD:**

The work contained in this Major Portfolio is a culmination of my lived experience and is based on my efforts to fulfill the learning objectives established in my Plan of Study. Upon entering this program, I did not anticipate that my research would intertwine so deeply with my personal life. I initially wanted to establish an inquiry into the social housing landscape which would reveal the ways that residents of Toronto Community Housing engage in advocacy work and place-making practices that positively impact the lives of residents; this was to be fulfilled through the component 'Advocacy as planning in marginalized communities'. I wanted to say things about how racialization functioned in urban spaces to produce social inequities and I wanted to reflect on how this was manifested through the housing landscape; this was to be fulfilled through the component entitled 'Racing housing tenure'. I wanted to interrogate the nature of displacement and dispossession in the housing landscape as a result of neoliberal economic restructuring- this was to be fulfilled through the component 'Neoliberal Housing Landscapes'. I could not see or articulate, during the early stages of my research, the correlation between these components. I just had an understanding that they did relate. It was not until my housing situation collapsed that I understood these factors in relation. 'Advocacy as planning in marginalized communities' saved my life and helped me to become grounded during the process of Relocation that my community endured. 'Racing housing tenure' allowed me to engage scholars of the Black experience who validated my experience. 'Neoliberal housing landscapes' helped me understand the foreground to the closure of my housing. Again, this portfolio is a culmination of these understandings.

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## **Introduction and Problem Statement**

This policy memo provides a summary of the key issues and challenges of the closure of residential units in Toronto's Firgrove community. The policy memo profiles recent decisions about Firgrove by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), how these decisions affect residents, the policies and regulations that are pertinent to such change, and how these changes relate to similar circumstances in international settings. The memo situates the closure of units within a climate of fear and frustration for residents who often feel powerless in relation to their landlord, as well as the ongoing work of the Grow Our Grassways group to help inform and organize residents in the face of community relocation. The policy memo includes a set of demands by residents that reflect needs and rights, as well as recommendations for best practices in relocation processes.

Recently, TCHC has been dealing with challenges to the physical integrity of many of the structures in their housing portfolio. The nature of this challenge has been narrated by city led reports, TCHC reports, and the mainstream media. These reports commonly cite a lack of consistent funding from the three levels of government for social housing in the shadow of devolution practices that have seen social housing become a responsibility of overburdened municipalities. They have also determined that internally, TCHC is dealing with a “fundamentally broken” business model and a lack of clarity in its mandate (City of Toronto, 2016). This has resulted in the dramatic closure of Toronto Community Housing units across the city, 132 of which are located in the Firgrove community which is located South of Finch Avenue West on Jane Street. While the City of Toronto has asked for TCHC to hold off on closing more units until the 2018 budget is approved, 600 units are expected to be closed by the end of 2017 and there are 400 more at risk of closure next year (Pagliaro, 2017).



In December 2016, 108 families in the Firgrove community received letters notifying us that our units were subject to closure and that we were to be relocated from our homes by September 2017. The terms of the relocation were urgent, it was stressed by Vice President, Resident and Community Services Angela Cooke, that she could not bear the thought of us enduring another winter in our units. The physical integrity of our blocks of housing, and specifically, the exterior wall system was described as “failing” by third-party engineers (TRAIP, p 4). The official process of Relocation began in late April 2017, where tenants received their official eviction notices from their landlord, Toronto Community Housing (TCHC) after City of Toronto councillors voted affirming that the units will be closed on April 26, 2017. The process of relocation sparked many community concerns, and one group of residents decided that there needs to be more community engagement to ensure that the relocation process is oriented toward the needs and rights of residents. However, there were many signs that the process was in fact, not resident oriented, as the lines of communication between TCHC’s Relocation and ReSet team and residents of Firgrove were overwhelmed with imbalanced power hierarchies that stifled opportunities for community engagement and in effect, delimited transparency and accountability to the community. In response to the tone of the Closure and Relocation, we formed a resident advisory/working group called Grow Our Grassways (GOG) dedicated to the residents living in Dune, Marsh and Blue Grassways, and all other parts of Firgrove. Since April, Grow our Grassways has done numerous advocacy pieces including a deputation at the Toronto Community housing board, a community petition, hosted a community farewell bar-b-cue and the created several workgroups. The intention of Grow Our Grassways is to advocate for ways for the lines of the communication between residents during the period where residents were undergoing relocation while also determining ways for community members to keep a relationship with

Firgrove after they have moved to different parts of the city. The latter is a significant goal because the promise of return established by TCHC, and without community input, expires in 7 years and that is only if there is a development opportunity between now and the year 2024.

## **Methods**

The strength of this set of recommendations lies within the fact that it is derived from the demands of the Grow Our Grassways petition, a small team of residents who took an uncertain step forward to challenge the relocation process. The energy that this brings enriches the stated goals of both TCHC and the City of Toronto to encourage evidence-based research and community collaboration. This does not only serve the City or TCHC's aims but importantly addresses how hierarchies are imbued within the relationship between residents of social housing and their landlord, producing a situation where residents did not want to push the envelope to disturb the relocation process because they did not want to jeopardize their housing situation. Many residents were worried that any demonstration of non-cooperation or challenge posed to the Relocation team would deepen the bureaucratic processes that undergird the Rent-Geared-to-Income tenure arrangements in social housing. Residents did not want to provoke an investigation into their finances or their household in terms of how many family members are within the household. These kinds of investigations would potentially result in a loss of subsidy and Rent-Geared-to-Income status, change the amount of rooms you're eligible for, or prompt an eviction in some cases. Therefore, this set of recommendations works to also empower residents in a situation that produced a lot of powerlessness.

In considering the significance of a resident-centric practice, we as a grassroots group and now network, are calling for an enlivening of, or animation of a top-down process that isolated

residents into one which considers how residents can be included in each step. The demands of GOG were assembled by myself and another community member, Alisha Ali. The demands can be looked at as an autoethnographic document that produces a cathartic release and an account that can be taken up as in that contains a series of “epiphanies that stem from ... possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et. al, 2011). In writing these demands as residents and community members and reflecting upon how congruent they are with TCHC’s relocation policy we are working towards radicalizing the procedure. Literature on autoethnography describes that it is a method inclusive of using “research literature to analyse experience”, where personal experience is compared and looked at in contrast to existing research and serve to fill gaps in existing storylines (p. 277, 2010, Ellis et. al). Relying on the demands of GOG allows for an interdisciplinary methodology that responds to the personal in ways that, as bell hooks says, heals and contributes to developing theory as a “liberatory practice” (hooks, 61, 1994). For the purposes of this memo, I integrate literature that compares relocation from an international perspective against TCHC’s relocation policy and conclude with the demands made of TCHC to better understand where the gaps in service exist for residents of Firgrove.

In response to the revitalization of Regent Park in Toronto’s downtown east side Public Interest (PI), a social enterprise that develops outreach strategies for public sector and non-profit organization, conducted a review entitled “Relocation Policies and Processes in Public Housing Redevelopment: Selected Case Studies” (2004) where they analysed “the processes and policies of eight redevelopment projects by public housing providers in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada” (p. 5, Public Interest, 2004). Contained in this report are a diverse set of practices that are employable because they are practical. Specifically, “Relocation Policies and Processes” is concerned with the context for relocation, practices for large scale

relocations as it reviewed the process for the relocation of one hundred to two thousand residents, and also considered resident advocacy and how some resident groups worked to challenge practices that were out of touch with the needs of community and the manners in which these challenges were incorporated to create a more respectful relationship between housing providers and tenants.

Writing this memo through the medium of autoethnography, I am reminded to “acknowledge the importance of contingency” and to understand that it is “impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how these events were lived or felt” (p., Ellis et. al, year). While GOG was advocating for better practices in the relocation procedure, TCHC’s relocation team could not comprehend what we found problematic about the process. In their eyes, they had done their best with the circumstance they had to deal with. It must also be considered that residents that were a part of the case studies used by Public Interest might not have felt one-hundred per-cent satisfied with the relocation procedure they experienced. While reading this report I was frustrated at the simplicity of the interventions made by social housing providers to enliven the relocation process in their attempt to center the residents. The report covers many aspects of a relocation but for the sake of brevity, I focus on the following pieces because they explore best practices for outreach and resident engagement: Tenant Involvement in Planning, Staffing, Tenant Education, Identifying Tenant Relocation Needs and Connecting Residents to Community Services.

### **Issue analysis**

GOG demands are listed in the table below and serve as an anchor to reflect on the missing aspects of the closure of the Grassways in tandem with TCHC’s noncommittal relocation procedure. The

demands call for a strengthening and enlivening of the procedure for relocation. In particular, they focus on measures for greater transparency from staff, accountability to the community which includes community collaboration, equitable distribution of resources throughout the community and a call for TCHC to not facilitate the erasure of the community.

<b>Demands from Grow Our Grassways</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consult with the Grow Our Grassways Tenant Board for any new developments proposed for the Firgrove neighbourhood</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite there being no current development opportunity, a genuine Promise of Return must be established for current residents</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We demand that the relocation procedure be made accessible to tenants so that TCHC establishes greater transparency with residents.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given that our relocation is being deemed "unique" to TCHCs normative procedural, planning and policy standards around Relocation, we demand that policy is reviewed, revised and developed to address situations like ours and that Grow Our Grassways is part of the redevelopment of such procedural, planning and policy standards. Existing procedures, plans and policies must be amended to include resident feedback.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community arts (ex. Photograph series, arts and crafts, farewell BBQ) must be held to give space for community members to say goodbye to their neighborhood, the Grassways</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grow Our Grassway's must be involved in each community meeting held by TCHC as an autonomous entity and be given space at said events -Towards A Higher Journey Mural (currently located on 7 Blue Grassway) must be preserved and have a space in</li> </ul>

any new development plan. The Mural will not stand in place for any cash-in-lieu of parkland dedication provisions outlined by the City of Toronto's Official Plan.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equitable distribution of resources throughout the community: tenants that are not being relocated must have the same level of access to resources being provided to impacted tenants.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Grassways needs to be memorialized by the City, there is a long and rich history of community mobilization that must be archived and made accessible to the public - Welcome Packages or Tenant Handbooks must be made available to all tenants being relocated to better help them become acclimatized to their new neighbourhood</li> </ul>

In order to support the demands, GOG submitted deputations to TCHC's executive board on June 29th, 2017, where they presented the board with the petition, were successful in advocating for a community farewell barbecue, and consistently urged for the relocation team's presence to be greater than occupying a space in the office, and following through/creating opportunities for social procurement within Firgrove. The final ask would have meant that they attended community events and hosted information sessions for residents where they provided updates and gave more information and mapped out prospective communities for residents. The Relocation team was noticeably absent from the farewell barbecue- they initially agreed to be in attendance but at the last minute, cancelled. They also denied a request to hold any follow-up/regularly held community meetings.

There are circumstances that made the Relocation of Firgrove residents particularly swift and created a climate of urgency for TCHC staff. However, that reality should not countermand the duty for TCHC to be accountable and transparent with tenants. Essentially, the state of disrepair

in Firgrove was too far gone and the decision was made, at some point between 2015 and 2016, to close the units that did not have aluminum siding. To go over a timeline here:

- Late December 2016: Firgrove residents received a notice in the mail that their units would be closed the next Winter
- A community meeting was held in January where residents were introduced to the Relocation procedure and were told that, pending an approval of the Tenant Relocation and Assistance Implementation Program by the city, we would be subject to a relocation
- A community office was established for residents who had questions in the interim. Office hours were held from 9 AM-5 PM on Monday's, Wednesday's and Fridays- this did not change while the Relocation was underway
- In mid-April residents were invited to a random selection draw which would determine their rank in unit selection, April 26th, 2017 City Council voted to close 134 units in Firgrove
- Firgrove Residents received an official 5-month notice of closure with an eviction notice that would be in effect upon September 30th, 2017.

In going over the above timeline, there is a noticeable gap in communication with residents. What can be assumed is that between the months of January and April 2017 TCHC's relocation team had been in the process of drafting and submitting the TRAIP. The TRAIP is a communicative document which from my view serves the purpose of informing the City of TCHC's plan on how they will support residents during the relocation, informs residents of their rights during a relocation and sets out standards for what residents can expect from TCHC during the process (p 5, TRAIP). However, my understanding of this document is limited because while

the document was made available to the City in the month of April, it was only made available to residents very late in June, in response to adamant requests from Grow Our Grassways that the document be made available to tenants. Alongside providing information for tenants about their rights during the relocation process, the TRAIP is one of the primary tools for resident engagement in a Relocation and Return process.

In their communication with the City of Toronto regarding the closure of the Grassways and the Relocation, TCHC says the following of their community engagement efforts,

“To date, TCHC has held two community meetings, on December 19th and February 2nd to announce the need to relocate and to answer questions. Approximately 75 residents attended each meeting. A document listing questions and answers about the relocation have been distributed to each affected household. An on-site relocation office has been set up where tenants can drop in or call to get questions answered” p 4, City of Toronto

At those meetings, residents were introduced to the relocation policy, learned that Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) was to be holding space for Firgrove residents in the newly established relocation office, and were introduced to employment opportunities from Springboard Employment Services. The involvement of these agencies in the Relocation was meant to establish social procurement strategies for Firgrove residents and to sync residents up with relevant social services. These engagement programs were meant to mitigate the level of exposure to undue hardship as a result of the move or provide an opportunity for residents interested in trades to attend pre-employment training workshops. Unfortunately, TESS was unable to work out of the relocation office citing safety issues and the fact that they were opening



up an office in the nearby Jane and Finch Mall. The employment opportunities offered from Springboard for the community were described by TCHC staff as “not well-fleshed out” and the project also fell through.

Besides those two unrealized commitments to the community, the issue that I see with this, as a resident who attended the meetings, is that while TCHC can say that they held two meetings and a certain number of residents attended each, there is not a mention of the ways that communication broke down between TCHC staff and residents. While residents had plenty of space to voice their concern and frustration with the closure, there was not an actual mitigation or outreach strategy in place to support those kinds of predictable responses and lessen the confusion. Staff that were present at the meeting got into a shouting match with residents, trying hard to speak over a loud crowd of residents. In this case, I am imagining that an initial meeting where residents were engaged rather than spoken to could have yielded far more positive outcomes.

Measures taken by other housing agencies show how important it is to strategize each outreach efforts. For example, I was very taken aback by the simplicity of how for example, in Dublin they supplemented the larger community meetings with breakout sessions where residents were engaged in a facilitated discussion about the relocation process (p. 31, PI, 2004). Many other housing providers, in Birmingham, Seattle, Chicago for example, also took the step to offer community meetings or clinics at various times to support the diverse schedules of residents (p. 32, PI, 2004). In the case of the Firgrove relocation, while the relocation office was set up in the community, the office was open three times a week and during regular business hours. There was no effort from relocation staff to meet residents where they were at; many residents facing relocation had to take time off of work to attend one-on-one meetings. Based on the steps taken by other housing providers, I am imagining an initial community meeting where breakout sessions

happened and a survey was distributed to determine the best times for residents to engage in follow-up meetings as well as any services they might need access to in their new community. Also, a sense of trust would have been established with the staff, which would have also helped for a more streamlined process. Unfortunately, many residents were not well-informed by staff, which led to unnecessary confusion and frustration amongst residents. Despite the fact that this was communicated with TCHC staff on more than one occasion, they really harboured their control over the process.

The breakdown in communication was an unfortunate trajectory during the Firgrove relocation. In regards to tenant education around the relocation, this would have been a crucial step in building a bridge to the community and deepening their understanding of the nuances of the relocation which are myriad and include protocols for Community Engagement, Physical Development, the Moving Process, Moving Supports, Tenant Obligations. Despite the critical role that the TRAIP played in the relocation process, it would not have been made available to the community without GOG advocating for tenants, learning about the document, requesting access, and asking for it to be circulated. Copies were eventually made available in the Relocation office and were distributed at the ‘Humans of Connections’ farewell barbecue by GOG on July 14th, 2017.

Traditionally, the TRAIP is a document that is created with the community and the community is able to identify what kinds of supports they need throughout the process. However, in operating with a perceived sense of urgency given that the exterior wall system was failing, TCHC’s relocation team neglected their obligation to invite the community into that process of building a ‘Relocation Agreement’.

This process stands in contradistinction with relocation processes reviewed in the

Relocation Report. In much of the cases examined by Public Interest, the tenant education process began six months prior to the physical relocation began (p. 33, PI, 2004) and looked like relocation plans and policies being developed with the community. For example, in “Seattle, Chicago and London, the housing providers and the residents, through their residents’ councils, created written arrangements outlining all aspects of the redevelopment processes and policies” (p. 21). Chicago’s Housing Authority held a “relocation rights contract training for tenants and also held monthly information meetings with tenants once relocation is underway at a development” (p. Interestingly, in Don Mount Court, one of TCHC’s first revitalization efforts, there was a relocation working group established and a “relocation agreement was negotiated over five weeks, and included the details of what expenses would be covered by Toronto Community Housing, how temporary housing units would be allocated and offered and what types of tenant improvements would be reimbursed” (p.20, PI, 2004). There is no telling of whether or not the TRAIP was borne out of the Don Mount and Regent Park cases, but in their consideration of a best practice for the Regent Park case, PI identified that a “comprehensive written document that sets out the policies and processes agreed on and ensures that agreed-on policies and processes exist for all areas of concern” (p. 21) be created for relocations. The lack of consistency in the implementation of tenant involvement in planning is unfortunate and a missed opportunity for greater transparency and open communication between staff and residents. More carefully planning and thorough tenant involvement could have also yielded far better outcomes for both tenants and TCHC.

This is evident in the TRAIP as well, where they posit a very top-down approach to the relocation of residents of the Grassways. This is exemplified in sections 1.0 Tenant Communications, 1.6 Access to Services and 6.2 Amendments and Additions. Throughout these sections, there is a hands-off approach regarding these aspects of the relocation. For example, the

communication to tenants is described as being dispersed through writing in letters, emails and TCHC's website and verbally through one-on-one meetings (p. 6, TRAIP, 2017). The lack of diversity of outreach opportunities is unmissable. There is also a cursory approach to providing residents with greater access to available services in the vicinity of relocation units selected, citing in parentheses that *if any* services are available TCHC staff will offer to meet with tenants to go over such services “if the Tenants so choose” (p. 7, TRAIP, 2017). The main query that arises here is that *if the TRAIP was withheld from residents well into the onset of the relocation process how would they be able to make this ask of the relocation team?* Transparency around access to social services is another feature of other relocations and is considered a part of tenant education process. The Seattle Housing Authority had a Community Support Services staff that would “would collect social service data to incorporate into the central database” (p. 26, PI, 2004) that would then be used in one-on-one meetings with tenants. In Don Mount, there was at least a binder with neighbourhood profiles and information about services available to residents which assisted tenants in making their final choice of unit selection.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The ways that Grow Our Grassways have problematized the Relocation process has put into question the policies and procedures that guide the closure of units and the relocation of residents, most notably the procedures outlined under the umbrella Capital Repairs program, specifically the Revitalization program. Contained in the Revitalization program are the following: Affordable Home Ownership through the Foundation, Relocation and Return, and the latest pilot project ReSet. Of concern here is Relocation and Return, because it is a procedure that becomes obscure in the context of unit closures in that it is limited to only a process of Relocation. Currently, there are no procedures in place to support residents that are only facing a Relocation. The fact that there

is a contrast between supports for residents only facing a Relocation versus those undergoing a Relocation and Return demonstrates that there has not been a consideration of a best practice for residents who are being displaced indefinitely. What follows is a set of recommendations based on the above issue analysis which is based on demands heard by TCHC's executive board during my deputation, a merging of the demands of GOG and best practices from the relocation report by Public Interest, and based on a vision of a more respectful relocation process that I imagined each time GOG demands went unrealized.

- a) Respectful community engagement procedure which is defined as greater efforts to collaborate with and learn from residents, beginning with design
- b) Initial meeting:
  - Introduction of staff
  - TCHC staff educated on Relocation policy and procedure are prepared to engage residents.
  - A part of the knowledge that TCHC staff bring to the space is an understanding of the community demographics, in particular languages spoken in the neighbourhood
  - Breakout sessions where: materials are dispersed (and later mailed out), residents can ask questions/ talk back; TCHC staff collect surveys to learn the best ways to connect with residents that would help to structure future meetings and office hours and where residents can identify supports and services they will need access to in the Relocation community
- c) Host office hours that coincide with tenant's availability: While TCHC established a community office, services were only offered three days a week during business hours (9:00 AM through 5:00 PM). Many residents had to take time off of work in order to meet with staff. Meetings held during the evening or larger interim resident meetings with drop in sessions where residents could submit their unit selection would have been supportive of residents' time and needs. The hours would be based on initial survey collected
- d) Host a Relocation Open House once relocation is announced and host community meeting at interim points in the relocation process where the following is addressed
  - Visualization of Relocation process: Map of City of Toronto and prospective Relocation communities are mapped using different coloured pins which would represent the varying unit sizes offered. This map could also be placed in the Relocation office and could supplement and the spreadsheet of vacancies that residents received
  - Follow-up information shared regarding unit selection preference and relocation timelines: There were many households who, after making unit selections, were told that they were not matched and they could not understand why. Therefore, the Relocation Open House and interim meetings would help to provide more information insight and clarification on challenges residents will experience during

the relocation. Group settings would decrease isolation residents feel during displacement and create a safer space for residents to voice concerns with the process

## **Conclusion**

Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) works to fulfill an ambitious set of values- the mission statement of the social housing provider states that alongside the provision of clean, safe, well-maintained and affordable homes, TCHC claims that respect, accountability, community collaboration and integrity are definitive values guiding the operations of the housing provider. TCHC explicitly states that it is “through collaboration and with residents needs at the forefront, we connect residents to services and opportunities, and help foster great neighbourhoods where people can thrive” (<https://www.torontohousing.ca/our-mission>, accessed May 2017). The notion of community collaboration is, from the perspective of community and equity planning, a strong and integral value. It helps to bring the community in, empowering them to make informed decisions and to develop their capacity as stakeholders. However, without a strong commitment to the practice of community collaboration, there becomes a misalignment of values which leaves residents without any measures for autonomy. Further, this misalignment produces a condition where the inalienability of these values are realized- put simply, the failure to uphold one value results in the diminished capacity to fulfill any of the other definitive values.

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## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this essay is to assess how the logic of neoliberalism as expressed through the mainstream media and housing policy produces a narrative of obsolescence for social housing and is meted out through negligent practices by various actors and administrative and jurisdictional scales. In order to do this, I will merge auto-ethnography and critical discourse framework in order to incorporate personal experience with analysis of media and policy outputs to consider what is omitted in the delivery of these texts and how these issues that ail the social housing sector have been framed. This will include reports from the Toronto Star, NOW Magazine and The Globe and Mail within the last 5 years as this time period best reflects the trajectory of recent housing development and sentiments about the housing landscape that are relevant to the context of the Firgrove closure.

## ***Context: Closures in Firgrove***

My name is Shannon Holness. I am a first-generation Canadian with roots in the Caribbean islands Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. I am the second of five children in a single-parent household headed by my mother. For as far back as my memory reaches, I have resided in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood and have been a resident of Toronto Community Housing. My earliest memories are a blurry recollection of my time living at 2999 Jane Street during the early 1990's with my family, which at the time included my mother, my older and younger sisters and my little brother. This high-rise apartment building is located one block South of Finch Avenue West on Jane Street. By 1995 we moved to the place I have called home for the last 22 years, a cluster of townhomes in a three-storey walk-up just one more block South of the high-rise, on Firgrove Crescent in Unit 108 at 11 Blue Grassway. We had been living at Firgrove for 21 years before my family, which

presently includes my mother, eight-year-old sister, and myself, received a notice in mid-December 2016 stating that 132 units throughout the Dune-Marsh-Blue Grassways complex were subject to closure. In a tense community meeting that followed, we were introduced to Toronto Community Housing's procedure for tenant Relocation and learned that we would not be living in our homes past the following winter. Toronto Community Housing staff explained further that we would not be moving until the City of Toronto approved a Tenant Relocation Assistance and Implementation Plan which was devised by City service manager Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and Toronto Housing's Relocation team. On April 13, 2017, 108 families were invited to a meeting by TCHC where we were given our draw numbers from the lottery that was used to determine our unit selection preference- this was a measure which would ensure that fairness was established throughout the process. The draw meeting was held before City Council voted on and approved the Tenant Relocation and Assistance Implementation Plan, on April 26, 2017. We received our official five-month notice of eviction shortly afterwards which cited that we had to move out by September 30, 2017 or be subject to eviction.

While we were shocked, my community should have seen it coming. There was a curious withdrawal of TCHC's ReSet team early in 2016. Briefly, ReSet was a pilot project introduced to three TCHC communities- Firgrove in Ward 7-York West, Lawrence Orton in Ward 43-Scarborough-Guildwood and Queensway Windermere in Ward 13-Parkdale High Park-by Mayor John Tory, then-CEO Greg Spearn, and Toronto's Housing Advocate Councillor Ana Bailao in September of 2015 to address the challenge the corporation had in securing funding for capital repairs. ReSet targeted "communities that have major repair needs where full-scale demolition and rebuilding is not economically feasible, and there is no redevelopment opportunity" (Reset, n.d.) and further, was a part of TCHC's "10-year, \$2.6-billion capital plan approved by City Council,

... will bundle multiple capital repair jobs in each community and deliver them as one project ...” (Toronto Community Housing launches ReSet, 2015). Shortly after Mayor John Tory held a press conference in Firgrove announcing ReSet, yellow construction gates were erected around the Dune-Marsh-Blue Grassways complexes and residents observed vendors beginning small-scale construction projects such as painting balcony railings white and removing the stucco that framed the buildings and replacing it with concrete mixture. However, as soon as the construction began, it stopped. For a year and a half after the announcement and the gates going up, we lived in a stagnant construction zone without explanation. And life went on. In fact, many people including my family, moved the gates out of the way for easier entry into our backyards and units and one family even wrapped Christmas decorations around the yellow bars of the construction gates. Ultimately, TCHC cited that the reasoning behind the Firgrove closure had to do with the decline in the integrity of our buildings. In the Tenant Relocation Assistance and Implementation Plan, the context of the closure is described in the following terms:

“The Toronto Community Housing development at Firgrove Crescent includes three blocks of 2-storey and 4-storey townhomes with a total of 236 units built in 1971, a high-rise tower built in 1975, and a community centre and pool. In two of the three blocks of townhomes, the exterior wall system is failing. These blocks are identified as:

- 1) 1, 2, 8 Dune Grassway (61 Units); and
  - 2) 3, 36 Marsh Grassway and 7, 11 Blue Grassway (73 Units)
- all within the City of Toronto.” (TRAIP, 2017, p. 4)

## ***Methodology***

In her interrogation of the discursive creation of homelessness, Celine-Marie Pascale (2005) draws on cultural theorist Stuart Hall who definition of discourse as “a cluster of ideas, images, and practices that provide frameworks for understanding what knowledge is useful, relevant and true in any given context (p. 251) in order to demonstrate how discourse shapes and determines dominant ideology. Discursive practices, then, “produce characteristic ways of seeing by drawing boundaries that define what we see and daily to see and what we accept and contest” (Pascale, p. 251) and is viewed as “an important form of social practices which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations” (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 2). In many ways, and to quote Black cultural theorist Christina Sharpe (2016), engaging in this work means to become “disciplined into thinking through and along lines that re-inscribe our own annihilation” (p. 13). It means understanding the ways in which the closure of social housing units in Jane and Finch is not unattached to the broader legacy of systemic racism in Canada that has always resulted in erasure and displacement for Black communities throughout history. It means understanding economic structures that upend black geographies in order to become rationalized spatially and investigating and becoming familiar the discourse as made apparent throughout the mainstream media that justify this upending. Therefore, I rely on the ways in which critical discourse analysis and auto-ethnography lend methodological practice to one another in ways that enrich and validate my personal narrative and lived experience.

Autoethnography combines autobiography and ethnography in order to produce “layered accounts” that “often focus on the authors experience alongside data, abstract analysis and relevant literature” in order to analyze experience (Bochner et. al, 2010, n.p.). I appreciate the manner in which “autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (Bochner et. al, 2010,

n.p.) because it allows me to make sense of my experiences. In “Essentialism and Experience” (1994), feminist theorist bell hooks reflected on power and knowledge production in classroom settings and expresses contention with the way in which “the discursive practices that allow for the assertion of the “authority of experience” have already been determined by a politics of race, sex, and class domination” (p. 81) and therefore insists on the value of lived experience as a “crucial” to “gaining a hearing” (p. 81). However, while hooks advocates for the amplification of marginalized voices, she urges this with the intention to produce theory that heals and contributes and serves as a “liberatory practice” (hooks, 61, 1994). Therefore, and within the vein of autoethnography, hooks privileges social location while acknowledging that it is “not the only or even always most important location from which one can know”. This conclusion drawn by hooks (1994) aptly highlights the goals of autoethnography as it is a method that uses “methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience” (Bochner et. al, 2010, n.p.). Moreover, Bochner et. al (2010) explain that personal experience is compared and looked at in contrast to existing research and serves to fill gaps in existing storylines (p. 277). Therefore, assessing the manner through which texts are produced (created) and consumed (received/interpreted) (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 2) allows me to intervene in the essentialism that is reproduced within the dominant narrative of the neoliberal housing landscape.

Intervening in essentialism means to produce anti-essentialist narratives and to engage in discursive practices that do not rely on the subordination of freedom of thought and the reproduction of marginalization in order to claim power. Katherine McKittrick asks us, in “The Last Place They Thought Of: Black Woman’s Geographies” (2006), to consider black feminism as a spatial project, one that “works to rethink and respatialize structural inequalities” (p. 54). McKittrick’s insistence on this project of black feminism is a part of rethinking of “margin-

politics” which currently positions “the margin” as a metaphor, one which functions as a universal construct that is “applied to all sort of power relationships” (p. 57). Reading and taking in this offering from McKittrick in relation to urban practitioner Tim Richardson’s (2002) reflection on how discourse is reproduced it is apparent that discourse production relies on marginalization, or systematic exclusion. Richardson (2002) draws on Michel Foucault who identified a series of *mechanisms of exclusion* through which discourses are produced and controlled by institutions (p. 354) which includes creating prohibitions or taboos, the attribution of the weight of rational authority to certain individuals, and the production of knowledge and truth (p. 354,5). The consequence of this is the diminished potential of marginal places, experience and the narratives produced from this spaces are not rendered legible from both a geographical and discursive standpoint.

Using autoethnography and critical discourse analysis to interrogate the neoliberal housing landscape allows for a recognition of the way that housing landscapes exist as a social relationship. Critical discourse analysis is critical in the sense that it aims to reveal the role of discursive practices in the maintenance of the social world, including those social relations that involve unequal relations of power (Jorgensen and Phillip, 2002, p.4) and it is pivotal to use this method because more than reflect the form, stock and tenure a consideration of the social relationships that exist throughout these attributes that typically define the housing landscape. For one, they reflect spatially the manifestation of social inequities and further demonstrate shifts in economic and political regimes. Regarding the housing landscape as a social relationship allows for an understanding of how dominant systems such as race, gender and class domination are influenced by contemporary manifestations of colonization and imperialism. These are experiences through the manner in which notions of home and place-making are interrupted by top-down practices in

urban planning, governance and decision-making. Social housing and how it is situated within the housing landscape and uniquely designed to accommodate the most vulnerable populations in the City, disempowered by what Audre Lorde has aptly termed the “mythical norm” (whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality), low-to-moderate income households, aged, disabled, immigrants, victims of abuse and provides stable housing for people who experience homelessness, etc. However, its existence as a public site and city property means that it is ever-malleable to political and economic agendas. This has been made apparent by the deepening of neoliberal policy and how that has deepened class tension that characterize the physical space of the city.

### ***Race, Discourse and the Social Housing Landscape***

When I was growing up, Charnele, one of my best friends who I thought knew everything, told me an urban legend about Jane and Finch. They were lovers that could never be together and so the streets that were named for their sake were cursed sites. She explained that this curse of unrealized love was the reason behind all of the struggle we witnessed in our community. We were always cognizant of the fact that we lived in a neighbourhood that was perceived as rough. A lot of the time, we looked on as the matters that defined the public discourse about our community took place: gun violence, drug dealing, gangs, many of us were in households headed by single mother, etc. However, in spite of these issues, Jane and Finch has always elided the public discourse and signified for me a safe space- the neighbourhood has always been my home. As a person of the African Diaspora, this context of home is always contested, pinned against myths and non-fiction to invalidate how life exists within this space and legitimize the stigmatization and erasure of spaces of home for us. I learned from an early age that there existed a conflicting and tenuously structured narrative that shaped the social imagination of Jane-Finch from within and

outside.

Social housing has always been a part of vision for the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. This is evidenced in the original development plans for two communities that make up the neighbourhood, Black Creek, which is bound by Shoreham to the North on Jane Street and Driftwood Avenue to the East on Finch Avenue West, and Jane Glenfield Heights which is bound by Highway 400 to the West on Finch Avenue West and Grandravine Drive to the South on Jane Street. Found within the digital archives of JaneFinch.com, the development plans prepared by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) for Black Creek (North) in 1961 and the Borough of North York Department of Planning produced a Tertiary Plan for Jane Glenfield Heights (South) in 1964 similarly prioritized the development of communities that were mixed socially in terms of household composition and income levels of residents. In 1961, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto approved a resolution requesting Federal and Provincial assistance with the construction of 500 units of public housing and 174 units of elderly persons housing (CMCH, 1961, pg. 1) and would contribute to the housing stock and form of the community by complying with CMHC's programme which designated 3, 4, and 5 bedrooms designed as row houses and 1 and 2 bedrooms placed in a single tower (CMCH, 1961, p. 9). The Tertiary Plan contributed to the housing landscape through producing a total of 195 semidetached lots, 2050 apartment units on 128 acres (Borough of North York, 1964, p. 1). Apartments were to account for 84% of total dwelling units and were projected to contain 75% of population and was projected and designed to yield 7330 persons (Borough of North York, 1964, p. 1). Ultimately, these development plans identified communities that were created with "as much diversity of population and income as reasonably possible" (CMCH, p. 3). Today, the Jane and Finch



neighbourhood rests along the margins of the municipal Ward 7 and Ward 8 and the two communities that it is comprised of continue to reflect this vision.

However, this early articulation of a notion of social mix, the idea of diversity of populations and income co-existing, became undone quickly because its foundations ultimately rested upon nationalist ideals that could not be upheld as the diversity came to be understood in racialized terms. The collision of space and race overwhelmed the narrative of social housing and facilitated discursive transitions which rendered the housing projects unlivable and uninhabitable. This correlation is evidenced in Robert Murdie's (1994) statistical analysis of spatial segregation in Toronto's public housing units, then called Metro Toronto Housing Authority (MTHA), where he posits a definition of "near-ghettos" where the concentration of black households in particular communities of public housing is conflated with poor outcomes in terms of the social determinants of health for example incidences of low-income status, high levels of unemployment and drug abuse (p. 435). The study, which was done in response to concerns that were expressed by the Reference Group, a black advocacy organisation in Toronto, about the 'ghettoisation' of black tenants in what was then called the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority (p. 435) and was based upon data sets that were drawn from "a special tabulation of black visible minority population by census enumeration areas for 1986. ...the 1971 census, the 1986 Public Use Microdata File and the 1990 Unit-Tenant Master File of the Ontario Ministry of Housing" (p. 443). The conclusions that were drawn by Murdie (1994) demonstrate that there indeed was an overrepresentation of black households in public housing in 1986, a figure which grew from 4.2 percent in 1971 to 27.4 (p. 445), however it was determined that this figure did not have any spatial significance. Rather, a spatial variability of black occupancy throughout the social housing landscape was predominant. The dramatic growth of the black population in public housing is

attributed to changes in immigration policies in the 1960s where a majority of immigrants to the City came from the Caribbean and the later arrival of refugees from Somalia and Africa more broadly (Murdie, 1994, p. 439). However, the spatial variability that Murdie's findings demonstrate are underscored by the following:

Although there is no hard evidence, it is also likely that many black Caribbean families who entered the MTHA system in the 1970s remained there, perhaps moving to larger units as family size increased. These are families who likely had little opportunity to move into Toronto's high priced private housing market, either rental or ownership. At the same time, it is possible that white tenants, given the opportunity, moved away from developments that were becoming increasingly black. Evidence from the Ontario Ministry of Housing data file indicates that MTHA developments with the shortest mean lengths of residence also have high indexes of potential black occupancy. (p. 455)

Decidedly, Murdie also concludes that there was a flight of whiteness from the sites of social housing that had become blackened through the flows of globalization.

The trajectory of development in Jane and Finch does not stand out in any unique way when compared to development throughout the rest of the City of Toronto. In their discussion of how Revitalization transformed Regent Park, Canada's oldest and largest social housing project, Kipfer and Petrunia (2009) take a backwards glance at the social and economic climate that influenced the early urbanization of the City. They explain that, "The project blended the hopes of public housing tenants and redistributive reform with dynamics of Fordist urban expansion and what planners saw as a successful way of achieving social control through physical design and moral policing" (p. 116). What residents of social housing were subject to was a discursive practice that inevitably turned in on itself. It rested upon a notion of humanity and space that rendered

those sites as liminal and therefore uncivilized. In her discussion of gender and race in space, Sherene Razack defines liminal space as “the border between civilized and primitive space” (Razack, YEAR, p. 13). Social housing was relegated to this space through the urbanization strategies of the 1950s and 1960s and the eventual overwhelming racialization of this space deepened the determination of the social housing landscape as liminal. Kipfer and Petrunia (2009) demonstrate this by explaining further that “what was once considered by planners the best environment to regulate the lives of poor people — residential-only apartments and townhouses surrounded by open space and aesthetically cut off from surrounding blocks — is now seen as the environmental determinant of insecurity and deviance” (p. 125). The activation of a discourse around ‘insecurity’ and ‘deviance’ in social housing is a consequence of the racialization of the space and served as discursive tools which allowed for the evasion of the question of class stratification that inundated the social housing landscape.

Racialization is defined by sociologist Cherly Teelucksingh (2006) as “an interrelated component of numerous other political, economic, and gender discourses and epistemological inquiries”, a context which is emphasized through a class discourse as “conflict and stratification result in differential access to resources” (p.6). The flows of globalization that were cited by Murdie (1994), were carried through with undercurrents of social marginalization as the “majority of the racialized urban populations- particularly new immigrants ... are simply relegated and literally, spatially, shunned to the status of otherness in terms of their access to better paying jobs, housing, and other resources in urban centres” (Teelucksingh, 2006, p. 2). The notion of ghettoization that Murdie could not attribute to a fixed site was a result of how black spaces became a reflection of the function of racialization which, when referencing blackness “bleeds and expands to occupy space”, space which is then included as part of the “black problem” (Teelucksingh,

2006, p. 7). That the development of social housing was based upon ideological imperatives which were unreliable as a result of their moral overtone, it is not unexpected that the development and subsequent alterations of the social housing landscape occurred within a swift and compressed timeframe. Ultimately, the lives of black persons “demonstrate the common sense workings of modernity and citizenship are worked out through geographies of exclusion, the literal “mappings of power relations and rejections” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007, p. 4).

The contemporary Priority/Neighbourhood Improvement Area (NIA) status of Jane Glenfield Heights and Black Creek is a municipal tool which defines and locates these communities as sites of disparity and socioeconomic inequity. Figures from the NIA report which highlight how 34% of the Black Creek community spends 30 per cent or more of their household income on shelter costs while 26 per cent of the housing in this community does not meet national occupancy standards are punctuated by the fact that 81 per cent of the population of Black Creek identify as visible minorities with Black people dominating the representation of that group, reflecting 7,040 persons (Wellbeing Toronto, 2014). Figures which highlight how 24 per cent of the population in Jane Glenfield live below the Low-Income-Cut-Off are punctuated once again by an over-representation of visible minorities of which, and again, the population of Black people are the largest in terms of representation, reflecting 7,190 persons (Wellbeing Toronto, 2014). The ways in which this data is used to define and locate the community of Jane and Finch are weightless. They create what Katherine McKittrick (2014) describes as the ‘mathematics of unlivingness’ (p. 18), an archive of evidence that “puts pressure on our present system of knowledge by affirming knowable (black objecthood) and disguising the untold (black humanity)” (p. 16-7). This set of evidence is tone deaf to the realities of the embodied experiences of racialized poverty and renders the dispossession that black people experience a perpetual condition.

## *Obsolescence*

Over the last two decades, since the 1996 withdrawal of the Federal government and subsequent withdrawal of the provincial government, the City of Toronto and the Toronto Community Housing Corporation have had significant challenges securing funding for the day to day operations of the non-profit housing provider. The nature of this challenge has been narrated by reports by the City of Toronto and TCHC as well as the mainstream media. After learning about the closure, I became reliant on these sources to tell me more about the context of the closure. I pored over TCHC's website, snatched up every free daily newspaper I came across on transit, clicked every link that came across my social media feed that mentioned "housing", and turned up the volume on the news every time TCHC was in the by-line. During this time my anxiety could not be contained and it seemed like the saying, "*the more I learn, the less I understand*" was moving from a lyric imbued in cliché to genuine truism; I felt hopeless. Nothing was salient or protruded out uniquely about my situation. The only thing that I learned from this frantic ritual was that the closure of our homes was not an anomaly for TCHC or the City.

During this time, I became familiar with dominant discursive themes that were presented throughout the media. Closures of TCHC units were happening all across the City and could only be described as a consequence of some notion of 'failure'. 'Failure' was advanced as a critique of the operations of the City and the non-profit housing corporation. 'Failure' was also advanced to reflect empathy for residents whose housing became jeopardized as a result of a declining state of repair. Finally, 'failure' was invoked as a call for action, an urging from the municipal government and TCHC for the provincial and federal governments to intervene and support the flailing social housing provider. However, the notion 'failure' that was heavily used to construct the discourse of the social housing landscape was also being applied to the broader housing landscape, to reflect

the challenges that everyday Torontonians were having in accessing ownership and rental housing. The contemporary housing landscape of the City was generally described as a site of and being in a state of ‘crisis’.

Within the past year, the mainstream media has chronicled the challenges that TCHC has had in securing funding to address the state of repair for their very large housing portfolio which includes 2,100 buildings that are homes to 60,000 low- and moderate-income families. As reported by the Toronto Star by housing reporter Jennifer Pagliaro (2017), there are 400 homes that will be closed by 2018, adding to a list that includes Firgrove and is already 600 units long. As families in my community were selecting new units and moving out of our neighbourhood, City council voted 36-6 on a motion put forth by Councillor of Ward 20 Trinity-Spadina Joe Cressy to wait for the 2018 budget before the decision to close any more units is made. In introducing the reasoning behind his motion, Cressy stated that “closing even one more unit would be a ‘collective failure’” (Pagliaro, 2017). In a response to the motion, Councillor Mike Layton (Ward 19 Trinity-Spadina) said “the real test for council will come at budget time” and posed the query “Are we going to be willing to put our money where our mouth is and spend the money necessary to protect these tenants and put them first?” (Pagliaro, 2017).

One distinction that I was able to make almost immediately was that there was a tale of two notions of failure. There was a desire, through the discourse of ‘crisis’, to marry the challenges of the social housing landscape to that of the private rental market and ownership market and what makes up the broader housing landscape. However, the challenges that faced the broader housing landscape were able to be remedied; the larger discussion of the housing crisis is characterized by a set of binaries which have produced solutions to each of the challenges that have been identified. There were solutions that were proposed and strategies put in place by all levels of government in

order to resolve the challenges residents were experiencing in the private rental market and ownership market. To provide a brief but broad example, I have observed that increasingly unaffordable rents have been mediated by new rent control measures in the Rental Fairness Act, 2017 introduced in June 2017; low vacancy rates are resolved by plans to sustain and increase housing stock and encourage smaller landlords to create secondary units as evidenced by Tower Renewal and the City's newly established Open Door Investment Plan, 2016 which is a part of the Housing Opportunities Toronto: An Affordable Housing Action Plan 2010-2020 (HOT); red hot housing market/threat of housing bubble has been moderated by a mortgage "Stress Test" which will be effective as of January 1, 2018; and the province of Ontario has responded to each of the challenges through the Investment in Affordable Housing Program (2014 Extension) (IAH).

In many cases, these remedies were subject to critique because they did not always provide equitable policy responses to the issues they set out to counter. For example, the eligibility models that are proposed for IAH are comprised of requirements around income, citizenship, residency status in Canada. Housing policy analysts Cooper and Skelton (2015) situate their contention with the IAH on the reality that within this strategy rents are set at or below 80 per cent of average market rents and they caution that this still might not meet the standards for affordability because it ultimately becomes deduced to a scenario where "affordability becomes a proportion of income to a proportion of average rents" (p. 6). Hulchanski (2005) adds to this critique through describing Canada's housing system as incomplete as it relies almost completely on the market to supply, allocate and maintain housing stock, this obscures the question of who can afford to have a housing problem because households that are living in poverty do not contribute to the demand and therefore are left outside of the market or experience "shelter poverty" (p. 2). However, in spite of the limitations highlighted here, the implementation of these strategies demonstrates that there are

responses that can be employed to curb the impacts these challenges carried into the daily lives of residents.

As I watched the live stream of City Council's Executive Committee meeting on April 19, 2017 and took in the deliberation on Item EX24.8 "Closure of Toronto Community Housing Corporation Units as Firgrove Crescent" I felt my throat tighten and my body temperature rise. My face became wet with tears while I listened to Councillor Carroll-Ward 30 say, "The idea of relocation, the demolition, is a serious issue. The idea of relocation is not new for us on our end of the service. Through revitalization we have had to relocate a lot of tenants..." Councillor Carroll was speaking in response to a challenge from Toronto District School Board Trustee Tiffany Ford-Ward 4 in regards to the level of transparency that community members and stakeholders were given, which the trustee described as being shallow, as TCHC's communication around the closures was abrupt. Listening to Councillor Carroll stammer those words out was difficult and the statement "*the idea of relocation is not new for us*" did not sit well with me, it reverberated throughout my body and as I tried to swallow the disreputable messaging it made me physically ill, causing my anxiety to bubble over. I felt like my community and our livelihood were placed into the realm of disregard. While I found the Councillor's language and disposition towards the relocation and closure very irresponsible I also found her statement to be revealing.

Councillor Carroll's linking of relocation and demolition to revitalization should have been an obvious correlation to make- relocation is a procedure that has only been implemented in tandem with revitalization. However, the concept of closure has for the most part not been linked to revitalization. It is not a process that is supposed to. Closures are situated on the dark side of this. They reflect how uneven urban development has been in the neoliberal context, characterized by negligence that is set in motion by neoliberal practices of accumulation by dispossession



(Harvey, 2007). In her lack of citing the closures as a part of this narrative, Councillor Carroll reproduced the rationale of revitalization as a primary response to the perceived challenges of social housing programs throughout the City. There was a refusal to address the concerns of Trustee Ford as valid or even relevant. Trustee Ford's advocacy for greater transparency for residents and stakeholders was reduced as subordinate to the greater opportunity for revitalization that the closure of units in Firgrove represented for the City.

Revitalization is significant to the imperatives of TCHC and the City. It is a processes that is embedded in the renewed function of the city which was established during the neoliberal economic restructuring of the mid-1990s. Leher et. al (2008) explain that this renewed function is a consequence of 're-urbanization' a "(real estate) market and (local) state strategy to provide the proper residential, work and entertainment spaces that are allegedly bound to retain and attract the "creative class"" (p. 82). Leher et. al (2008) describe that the Official Plan for the City has provided a policy context that invites intensification of the urban landscape which has been responded to by developers through the establishment of dwelling spaces which "go well beyond height and density limitations" (p. 83). As a result, re-urbanization has contributed to significant interventions into the housing landscape and has facilitated the restructuring of housing stock, form and tenure throughout this process. Leher et. al (2008) conclude that "the new Official Plan, in combination with provincial planning regulations, is arguably promoting the current condominium boom as well as the privatization of public housing and public land" (p. 83). Kipfer and Petrunia (2009) explain that it is within this context that TCHC "adopted new public management strategies... legitimizing its corporate strategy with tenant participation schemes" and further "saw devolution and amalgamation as an "opportunity to create cost and service delivery efficiencies," "reinvent public housing," and "re-examine the possibility of redevelopment and regeneration" (p. 121). The

development-centric scope of the proposed housing policies addressed above do not exist outside of the vein of this context. Ultimately, these policies are ushering in a new era of affordable housing which is in alignment with the neoliberal ideals of the City of Toronto.

Closures demonstrate how social housing sits outside of the imagination of this trajectory of development and therefore outside of the neoliberal. This is not explicitly stated at any juncture but is within the subtext- the contemporary narrative of social housing- and is realized through revitalization which is a process that ultimately transitions the housing tenure, form and stock of social housing to reflect physically and spatially, neoliberal society. In “Extracting Value from the City: Neoliberalism and Urban Redevelopment”, Rachel Weber (2002, p. 253) explains that “uneven development sets that stage for the movement of capital in the relatively fixed built environment as new opportunities for value arise from the ashes of the devalued.” The process of devaluation is of particular interest throughout this piece as it introduces the concept of obsolescence which “implies something out of date- a product, place, or concept displaced by modernization and progress” (Weber, 2002, p. 522). Indeed, in the context of late modernity and the particular capitalist trajectory that accompanies it, social housing no longer makes sense- the lack of investment in social housing structures and social environments demonstrates that this form of housing stock is not in alignment with the transformation of the urban environment, rendering it closer to becoming economically and functionally obsolete. Therefore, besides the closures representing what has become legacy of neoliberalism- deepened social death and inequity- it also symbolizes the end of the concept of social housing.

### ***Inconclusive Conclusions***

At many points, it felt useless to engage in the mental gymnastics that see me preaching to the choir or appealing for my humanity. Wading through the literature, I was given opportunity to feel validated, seen, my community felt rendered. But, and to quote Bench Ansfield (2015), I could

not/cannot get past the “discursive pit” (p. 137) that my life and the life of my community has been cornered into. Therefore, wading through the literature also only affirmed the nature of the disregard that my community has experienced as de jure and symptomatic. This work is really never over. And I do not think that I can write through or away the feeling that has bounded my stomach up each time that I sat down to write. This past year has been numbing- the only moments that I had where I felt alive were in moments where I was overtaken by my anxiety, which was triggered by anger or deep sadness. I would say that these heavy emotional spaces provided the drive for my work but they were in competition most of the time and this caused me to run out of gas.

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