

Affective Problem of English Renting Future(s)

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'For rent' signs on a wooden floor.

In lieu of presenting my work in an academic way, I'm going to start by telling you a story. It's not my story—actually, it's from Vicky Spratt's excellent 2023 book simply titled *Tenants*. It takes place from 2017-18 in the London neighbourhood of Peckham. Our main character is named Limarra, a late 20 something year old. Like many of my generation, she has been renting for numerous years. Before Peckham gentrified, Limarra was able to live in the same flat for nearly a decade, having initially benefited from low rents and family support that really made Peckham her home. As the years ticked by, rents increased—and Limarra worked long hours to provide a stable and fundamentally secure home for herself and her daughter.

She didn't know it then, but Limarra was working against the clock. By 2018, Peckham was becoming *really* cool. Rents for a flat like Limarra's hit nearly £1500 per month that year [according to RightMove](#) – just over 1.5 times what she was paying for her and her

child. In December 2023, [Foxtons reports](#) that the average monthly price is nearly £2400 a month.

While Limarra may not have seen her home as tenuous, the instability of her tenancy made her life one of, in the words of Lauren Berlant,ⁱ “animated suspension” in which her “circumstance [is] embedded in life but not in [her] control.” Rather, control was in the hands of the landlord, who could terminate her tenancy through a Section 21 notice at any time.

And then one day, disaster: Limarra eventually received a Section 21 notice—something a renter like me will always fear—indicating that her landlord was moving to evict her. Limarra simply “crumbled,” began to feel “trapped” and “claustrophobic” as her home became “purgatory,” so much so that Limarra declined to celebrate holidays because of the anxiety.ⁱⁱ Once she was formally evicted, Limarra was temporarily housed in Croydon. In the end, Limarra moved back to her family home—to her mother’s sofa, more accurately—and is as of the book’s writing “dwelling in uncertainty” brought upon by her eviction.ⁱⁱⁱ

Austerity and affect

What does Limarra’s story tell us about austerity and affect? First, this is really a story about both austerity and neoliberalism. If we take one step back, Limarra’s story is one about the fraying of the fantasies of the good life, those that are central to Berlant’s theories of affect and ‘cruel optimism.’ Limarra suffered the same “anxiety, contingency, and precarity” that Berlant^{iv} says has replaced “upward mobility and meritocracy.” While I’m not trying to present a total theory of neoliberal affect here, I am linking affect to post-austerity renting in England in hopes of understanding our present as “a series of barely coherent, amorphous backgrounds that people adjust to, live with and dwell in.”^v

Austerity plays an integral role. In England it has meant the death of the welfare state. Limarra moved to a temporary home, for instance, because councils have privatised so much of their public housing instead of repairing it. Both the size of the private rental sector and temporary accommodation both owe themselves to austerity. Yes, blame Thatcher but also Blair, Brown, and others who steadfastly refused to fix it.

And so: one of my central claims is that English renters suffer those austerity-caused currents of loss, fraying, and deflation identified by Berlant as well as others.^{vi} That is, the present of an insecure home has been damaged—and the faith in a future secure home has been foreclosed—by a ‘renting trap’ in which many renters are ‘press-ganged’ into the sector against their will.^{vii} The current state of the rental sector, then, reflects the cancellation of homemaking futures.

Are homemaking futures cancelled?

How does renting cancel homemaking futures? First, we need to recognise renting in England is unstable, stigmatised, and virtually forced (i.e., renters often prefer not to rent but have no choice).^{viii} These disadvantages mean that homemaking as a renter is incredibly difficult. English renters simply don’t have the stability and control to engage in vital homemaking practices. Yet, as “home *un*making is part of the lifecourse of all homes,” all homemaking practices are couched in the expectation that a home will eventually be *un*made.^{ix} Eviction is one form of home unmaking and so Limarra’s life was structured around the suspension of the possibility of a home unmaking. While Section

21 will be banned under new legislation, it has been [indefinitely delayed](#) after [pushback from landlords and Tory MPs](#).

Second, and on the flip side of suspension, is interruption. Unable to move forward until the eviction process was completed, Limarra was prevented from continuing homemaking practices. Spratt describes her state as being in an “unpleasant waiting room.”^x In this manner, being a tenant is ultimately a state of interrupted and suspended future(s). Unable to be secure at home, tenants are merely suspending the future of being made to move and interrupting their practices through constant negotiation with the landlord.

Interruption/suspension cancels homemaking futures, or the expectation that one will be able to continue to make their own life on their own terms and plan for the future. It is my contention that this cancellation reaches the status of crisis, especially because, for tenants like Limarra, the ordinary has become ‘crisis ordinary’. Berlant casts a ‘crisis ordinary’ as an “impasse shaped by crisis.”^{xi} Being a tenant is living in the impasse. The reality of renters’ lives shown in Limarra’s experience is in Berlant’s words, a “holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety.”^{xii} So, where is the crisis? Defined by Berlant as a genre that “rhetorically turn[s] an ongoing condition into an intensified situation,”^{xiii} the crisis for renters is the interruption/suspension of homemaking practices that cancels homemaking futures. To conclude, renting in England remains both incurably unstable and a status that perpetually closes off the future for renters—who live in the impasse of a permanent and ordinary crisis.

ⁱ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716>. P.195.

ⁱⁱ Spratt, Vicky. *Tenants: The People on the Frontline of Britain’s Housing Emergency*. London: Profile Books Ltd, 2023. Pp.52–53.

ⁱⁱⁱ Spratt, p.59.

^{iv} Berlant, p.19.

^v Anderson, Ben. ‘Neoliberal Affects’. *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (December 2016): 734–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515613167>. P.741.

^{vi} Berardi, Franco Bifo. *After the Future*. Edited by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn. Edinburgh, UNITED STATES: AK Press, 2011. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/durham/detail.action?docID=927841>.

^{vii} Watt, Paul. “Press-Ganged” Generation Rent: Youth Homelessness, Precarity and Poverty in East London’. *People, Place and Policy Online* 14, no. 2 (27 August 2020): 128–41. <https://doi.org/10.3351/ppp.2020.9998563363>.

^{viii} See: McKee, Kim, Tom Moore, Adriana Soaita, and Joe Crawford. “‘Generation Rent’ and The Fallacy of Choice”. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 2 (2017): 318–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12445>; McKee, Kim, Adriana Mihaela Soaita, and Jennifer Hoolachan. “‘Generation Rent’ and the Emotions of Private Renting: Self-Worth, Status and Insecurity amongst Low-Income Renters”. *Housing Studies* 35, no. 8 (13 September 2020): 1468–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1676400>.

^{ix} Baxter, Richard, and Katherine Brickell. ‘For Home *Un* Making’. *Home Cultures* 11, no. 2 (July 2014): 133–43. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174214X13891916944553>.

^x Spratt, p.56.

^{xi} Berlant, p.8.

^{xii} Berlant, p.199.

^{xiii} Berlant, p.7.