

After the eviction: Navigating ambiguity in the ethnographic field

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On a warm day in November 2014, I showed up, with a flyer in my hand, outside the offices of the nonprofit company which managed the social housing on the housing estate on which I lived. The ‘Caldwell’¹ estate was made up of hundreds of homes, in looming tower blocks and in rundown terraces, the majority of which were once social housing – that is, housing owned by the local council and allocated to citizens on low income at low rents. Citing the age and deterioration of these buildings, however, over the past decade the council had spearheaded an ambitious ‘regeneration’ programme, replacing the old buildings with newer ones. To fund this, they had adopted a strategy of selling off the land and development rights to private developers, presenting this as an investment opportunity. Having discovered that the area was much less dense than the London average, the council offered the developers the right to build a 50/50 split of socially rented and private housing. The developers,² would take over from the council in providing social rents – receiving public subsidy to help them do so – while they were free to retain the full income from the rental or sale of private units.

By that time, I had been conducting ethnography in the London neighbourhood of Kilburn for five months. Encompassing the Caldwell, alongside some of London’s most affluent streets – and with everything in-between – Kilburn for me was a site for trying to understand how Londoners imagined and built particular forms of community in the midst of growing ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007). As part of this work, I had been following a large group of activists who mobilized around ongoing cuts to national social services, and who recently spun-off a housing-specific campaign group. Several of my interlocutors from this group were involved in planning the housing demonstration, and had urged me to show up.

To my surprise, however, I arrived to find a group of around a dozen unfamiliar faces, and was almost immediately pitched into a series of confrontations. As I nervously introduced myself, Zoe, a senior employee of the housing management company subcontracted by the council to manage the estate, emerged from the locked-off offices, annoyed at the disruption. Zoe had been introduced to me a few months prior, and up to this point had been warm and helpful, talking me through the politics and policies surrounding the regeneration. Seeing me among the protestors, however, she shot me a look of betrayal, and asked me what I was doing there. I tried explaining that as a researcher, I simply wanted to understand these issues from all sides. She responded sceptically, turned and retreated into the office.

Realizing that Zoe and I knew each other, the protestors turned to question me: what exactly were the motives of my research? This time, I had a bit more of an opportunity to explain myself. After some back and forth, it was decided that I could stay and talk with those who were happy to share. By my third conversation, however, I hit resistance. A pair of protestors resented what I had said to Zoe. I was ‘overcomplicating’ things, they said – this was a straightforward matter of injustice, and there were emphatically *not* multiple sides to the issue. They would only consent to take part in my research if I acknowledged this.³

In the midst of this exchange – which was threatening to boil over into an argument – I heard someone call me by name and took the chance to extricate myself. Sitting in a corner of the occupied office lobby was Jane, whom I knew from previous meetings of the housing campaign. At some distance from the boisterous protestors, in a nervous hunch, she seemed keen to withdraw from the protest. Yet she was arguably the main reason everyone was here in the first place.

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In her younger days, Jane was a professional athlete, and as she grew older she shifted into making a living from freelance fitness instruction – yoga, dance and general-fitness. In Kilburn, demand changed quickly and studios, gyms and community centres were often unreliable hosts. So, when the offer of a permanent fitness-instructor job at a spa resort in the Philippines came her way Jane was thrilled but wary. She was used to things falling through, and the job had a six-month trial period followed by a stringent evaluation. As she packed her bags to set off, she decided to hold off on saying anything about possibly moving abroad to the local council, who owned her socially rented flat.

As a 'secure tenant', Jane had the right to hold onto her council flat during her six-month stint abroad.⁴ Ever since the regeneration project had begun on the estate, however, rumours had swirled about social tenants suddenly losing their tenancy rights, or being forced to move outside of the area, or even outside of London, in order to remain eligible for social tenancy. During my research, I was never able to confirm those rumours that suggested social tenants were being systematically displaced. However, I did encounter a number of instances where tenants who wished to remain in the area had to first endure a range of convoluted and disruptive procedures. For instance, tenants whose buildings were being demolished were sometimes told that they would need to move away for a period up to two years before there would be space available for them to return. Against this background, Jane herself was apprehensive as to what might happen if she informed the council that she would be away for an extended period – and so she remained quiet. To keep an eye on things while she was away, Jane took in one of her friends as a subtenant. Again, this was within her rights. However, in this case, subleasing was only permissible with advanced agreement from the council.

Things came crashing down following a plumbing leak. When her friend called to tell her of the leak, Jane phoned up the council to arrange a repair. When doing so, she mentioned that she was abroad and was having a friend look after the flat. Unbeknownst to her until later, following that call, the council immediately opened an investigation. A few days later, Jane's manager called her into her office and informed Jane that she had just received a call saying that Jane was under investigation for benefit fraud and that, unless she was able to resolve the matter immediately, she would be terminating Jane's contract. In a panic, Jane phoned the council herself and, after navigating a maze of redirections, finally spoke with the caseworker assigned to her investigation. The caseworker accused her of exploiting her social tenancy for private gain, and informed her that the council would be pursuing eviction. Insisting that she had done nothing wrong, Jane argued that she was simply having a friend tend to the flat while she was away. With the council unwilling to drop the case, and with her job already in peril, Jane quit and returned to London a few days later to tackle matters herself. After a long struggle, which started out as a procedural battle but eventually went to a court tribunal, a final decision was made: Jane would be evicted.

What sort of home was lost on that day? And what would it mean to reclaim it, or begin anew? In this chapter, I offer an account of Jane's shifting hopes and plans in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, her eviction. At the same time, I

present this as an account of some of my own ethnographic practice, dilemmas and ethical struggles, in miniature. As Jane grappled with what it meant to lose or rebuild a home, her story prompted me to reflect on what it meant to build relationships and commitments – both personal and analytical – in the ethnographic field.

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Jane had never really accepted the verdict of her tribunal and was determined to fight. Reaching out through friends and local charities, she was directed to the housing campaign group as a potential source of help. Despite this, from the first time she attended a group meeting, she seemed to radiate palpable discomfort at particular moments; while she was comfortable sharing the details of her story, she seemed much less so discussing tactics and questions of how to apply pressure on the council. After getting acquainted over the course of several meetings, Jane agreed to meet me for coffee. Over a few hours she shared her story, but also her anxieties for the future. She had lived in her flat since her early twenties when it became clear that whether as an athlete, a teacher or some combination of the two, she had an uncertain financial future ahead of her – prompting her to apply for social housing. For the past seventeen years, her council flat – affordable, comfortable, hers – had been a source of security against more changeable fortunes. And, despite the insistence of the council and the verdict of the tribunal, she was certain she had not done anything wrong – not really. Throughout our conversation she paraphrased several instances where council officials, and even the presiding judge at her trial, acknowledged that she had violated the letter of the law much more than the spirit. She had made a mistake, it was true – and she emphasized her own willingness to admit this – but it was not made with malicious intent. Nor was it significant: had she simply informed the council of her travels and sublet in advance, she would have been fine. With the eviction grounded in her failure to perform this simple act, she remained hopeful that an exemption might be made.

The roots of this hope seemed to reach in different directions. As she told her story, she also recounted what she had learnt about the recent shifts in council policy over the past two decades. Despite many of these changes being ones she disapproved of, the fact of changing policy and practice over time gave her hope that there could be other shifts yet to come. She argued her case in the language of current policy, citing the council's desire to be seen as 'building community' in the midst of the regeneration. Surely then, she insisted, it didn't make sense to

evict and displace those people who knew the area best – who, like her, had been a part of the community their whole lives.

Jane also seemed to find hope in being able to tell her story, and in seeing others respond. As we talked, she frequently quizzed me as to whether I understood and agreed, and when I responded affirmatively, she would light up: ‘So you see!’ she would say, talking excitedly about how things might still change. My affirmation seemed to stand in for the potential affirmation of others, including council caseworkers, who were also people after all. Right up until her eviction, Jane would insist on trying to arrange face-to-face meetings with different officials, in the belief she might convince them, if only she could meet them individually. She saw the autonomous judgement of officials, hidden behind a façade of ostensibly inflexible rules, as a sort of ‘black magic’ and recognized its double-edged potential, to both save and condemn. Nonetheless, she held out hope. Following her eviction, Jane was barred from re-entering her flat and collecting her things. A few days later, we found ourselves outside of her building’s front door, strategizing. Glancing at the frowning guard planted at the entrance, she remarked: ‘Maybe I can sweet talk him into letting me go up, you know? If they’re keeping an eye on me?’

These tempered forms of hope, in the malleability of policy and in human recognition, were cross cut by a different sort of hope in organized political pressure. For Jane, the housing campaign group embodied this hope most clearly. At meetings, she would ask veteran activists whether they thought this was a winnable campaign – whether it was embarrassing enough for the local council, or capable of generating enough public attention to prompt a reversal in the decision to evict. At times she would grow animated through the talk of protests and placards, obstructions and slogans. In other instances, however, she seemed to withdraw uncomfortably, as plans were made around her. After one such meeting, as we walked back to the Caldwell together, she gave voice to this anxiety. After the protest at the local council offices, another was being planned in the lobby of the central council building. Jane fretted as to whether this public spectacle would serve to apply effective pressure, or only cast her as unsympathetic and bothersome.

As Jane moved between both possibilities, I found myself at a loss as to how to respond. If my fieldwork had taught me anything, it was that her odds were slim, regardless of approach. Sweeping budget cuts, emerging from the British government’s programme of austerity, had left council officials scrambling to find savings and remove claimants from the benefits ledger. Against this context, I had seen protests and other disruptive challenges break through the routinized

logics that were used to squeeze out claimants, and I had also seen disruptive behaviour used as an excuse for caseworkers to refuse to deal with claimants. 'Ought I to share any of these stories?' I wondered. 'What good would they do?'

Before this second protest could materialize, Jane found an envelope through her door giving her a date for when the bailiffs would show up to evict her. Rapidly, energy shifted to organizing a barricade outside of her flat. Within the campaign group, as plans were discussed, members shared stories of past anti-eviction actions, as a way to reflect on tactics and drum up optimism. And yet, with talk of eviction in the air, members also began talking about the costs of such actions. In the past, such actions had led to some members winding up in police custody, while others incurred financial debts that were never repaid. Ribs were bruised and friendships were strained. While no one suggested that the protest at Jane's ought not to go ahead, a few did explicitly question the efficacy of such tactics overall, given both their personal costs and their failure, thus far, to create more systemic change.

On the day of the eviction, a large crowd gathered in the hallway of Jane's tower block. Members of the housing campaign group were joined by friends and supporters from other left-wing and anti-austerity campaigns across North West London, and by members of other Kilburn community groups. In the hall, protestors chanted and sang protest songs. They set up a table with tea, chocolate, fruit and cake, and invited Jane's neighbours to join them and to discuss questions of housing. Meanwhile, both Jane and I found ourselves shrinking away, hoping not to be seen by whoever eventually arrived. Recalling my earlier encounter with Zoe – who hadn't spoken with me since – I had begun to worry whether today would involve burning another bridge with another one of the few council officials happy to talk with me. I wanted to support Jane – who I personally believed had been treated unfairly, and who had become a friend in her own right – but I found myself anxiously making excuses to stay away from the front of the barricade. Jane too spent much of her time with a small group of personal friends, also towards the back, or in her flat itself.

I can't speak for Jane, but my own anxious ambivalence bubbled up from a series of demands and desires that seemed impossible to reconcile: I wanted to maintain access and trust as a researcher working with the council; I wanted to show solidarity and commitment towards the activists and community figures gathered outside Jane's flat, and to continue conducting research with them as well; and I wanted to be able to offer Jane, who seemed to be nervous about both the impending eviction and the boisterous barricade, some semblance of reassurance.

The source of our feelings may have varied, but my anxiety seemed to mirror Jane's, perhaps even to feed off it; when the bailiffs showed up, and were halted in the barricaded hallway, Jane was nowhere to be seen.

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It wasn't until five months later that another attempt was made to evict Jane. Occurring without any warning, official or otherwise, this time it was successful. I found out a few days later through a text message. Along with a (mutual) friend from the housing campaign group, Jane was coming to see if she could get some of her possessions out of the flat – beyond the single case she was allowed to leave with at the time. Although the council promised to deliver the contents of her flat to her forwarding address, the set delivery date was far away. Jane was also worried that the council-hired movers would fail to collect some of her less-obvious belongings – the mounted bathroom mirror, the carpet she had bought and laid herself, or her slow cooker, which had leftovers in it at the time of the eviction. She hoped to recover a few items and to do an inventory herself. I lived in the next tower block over from her former flat, subletting a room in one of the two privately owned flats in the building. When I called her up in response to the text, she asked me if she could keep some of her possessions at my place, until she settled somewhere else. I quickly thought through how I would negotiate this with my flatmate, and then tentatively agreed. Jane's old building was due to be demolished, and had been emptied out. When we arrived outside, the guard watching over the empty property refused us entry, and we left empty-handed.

After we parted ways, I paced around the estate with a feeling of anxiety. During our excursion to recover her furniture, Jane had spoken hopefully about finding a place nearby. With the building due to be demolished, moving back to her old flat was no longer an option. But the eviction had made her officially homeless, and she thought there might be a chance for her to be rehomed nearby, still on the estate. Her asking me to keep hold of her furniture – near to her old flat – seemed indicative of this hope. While Jane was explaining this I responded encouragingly but afterwards I found myself with an uneasy feeling, wishing she would let go of the idea of returning – which, although I couldn't bring myself to say so to her, had come to feel increasingly unrealistic – and make a fresh start. When fighting her court case, she had incurred a significant debt, and now the council wanted to charge her for unpaid rent for the months between the first eviction attempt and now. These debts made it feel unlikely that the council, or anyone within it, would suddenly turn helpful. More than this, however, they

felt menacing: a reminder that you could lose your home, be denied access to almost all your possessions, and still have further to fall. I wanted to tell Jane to cut her losses before things got worse. Walking back and forth, I fiddled with my phone, turning it over and planning what I would say to her – but I couldn't bring myself to call.

Several weeks later, Jane texted again, asking if I was at home. She explained that she had managed to negotiate with the council to move her possessions herself. She was still prohibited from entering the building, but the hired workers had brought the furniture to the tower block's front door, and from there she and a friend had loaded it into the friend's van. She felt that this arrangement would give her a greater ability to try and ensure everything was gathered. She had dropped most of her possessions off with other friends, but had left a few items of furniture on the street for me to hold onto.

Meeting up a few hours later, we found the furniture still where she had left it, and we began to dismantle it, to make it easier to carry. With what felt like endless trips back and forth, we managed to move it, piece by piece, to my flat, placing some into storage, setting other items up in my bedroom. As we did so, Jane mused on what she might do to find a new, long-term place to stay, and recounted her frustration with the movers emptying out her flat. They seemed insistently unable to find certain items, no matter how careful her instructions were. The worst of it, she said, was they claimed they did not see her slow cooker anywhere. She wondered if it had been thrown out.

That evening, I sat down, exhausted, to write up my field notes. Under my bed was the old, folding chair I had previously used. Now, instead, I perched on the edge of the sturdy office chair Jane had entrusted me with, hunched over my notebook, reluctant to fully settle in. It felt like an emblem of a stubborn hope – one I did not know how to handle.

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While still in the field, I remember struggling with these events, both personally and as an ethnographer. How was I to make sense of them? Where was I to follow them? What stories could I tell? What could I do? Incensed by the seeming injustice of what had happened, and familiar with how other ethnographers had confronted exclusion and displacement, I could feel a tug towards the municipal archives. In those documents – and perhaps also in talking to officials and in observing how others encountered them – there was the promise of assembling a critical account of power and interest, of liberal governmentality and late

capitalism, which would expose this story not as a case of personal wrongdoing, or of rotten luck, but as symptomatic of a deep and systematic inequality. This story was compelling, resonant with so much else happening on the estate that pointed to how the estate was transforming from being seen, managed and experienced as a concrete social safety net, to a high-risk, high-potential investment. I knew as well that this sort of story – of how the privatization of public goods shaped new forms of exclusion, conflict and subjectivity – was one that was familiar and valued within the academy; it was not just a narrative I found compelling, but one that others would recognize and respect. When writing up my field notes in the evening, I often found myself musing about what I could do – how I could search for documents, whom in the council I could talk to – to capture this narrative.

There were other things, however, that tugged in different directions – towards different, competing stories. After Jane's eviction, there were other protests in her name, but Jane herself no longer took part. Throughout the time I had known her, she had been ambivalent about her case being turned into a cause for mobilization. Given this, I wondered, might it not be worth asking what motivated the activists themselves? Where and how did they see 'the political' and what did such readings neglect? Re-reading my notes from the day when the first attempt to evict Jane was successfully resisted, my writing now seems to bristle with irritation. While there, I moved through the crowd, asking those assembled about their lives, their histories of activism, about why they felt motivated to be there that day. Writing up these exchanges, I returned frequently to contrasting the confident, grand narratives of change and revolution, of people, power and community to the anxiety that I saw Jane as embodying (and which I clearly felt myself!). I found myself asking what it meant to believe – as I had been told by the protestors at the estate management's offices – that there was only one story about housing on the Caldwell to tell.

Then again, there was this question of recognition – this idea that Jane held onto that if she was simply able to tell her story, to make herself known as an individual and not as a case, then she may be able to effect a different sort of ending. This hope was tested against security guards and caseworkers, and even in court, and yet never seemed to break. It also seemed to be mirrored in the attitude of officials like Zoe, who seemed to believe that it was important to support individuals personally, even within the framework of a standardized system. I might have investigated how such beliefs in recognition were fostered, and how they came to sit alongside other political claims. Or, yet again, I might have kept closer to my original intentions for my ethnography as a whole and focused in on questions of community: how it was deployed as an ambivalent and

contradictory resource, by redevelopers and council officials as well as protestors and Jane herself, towards different trajectories of change and resistance.

Truthfully, I pursued all of these questions at different moments and in different ways. Yet I did not do so freely and without cost. The richness and complexity of everyday life that ethnography claims to capture does not exist *sui generis*, but emerges through the tracing of particular relationships and not others. In assembling ethnographic accounts, we commit to particular relationships, and modalities of relating, and discard or disavow others. These acts of assembly are never confined simply within moments of ethnographic writing and analysis. Rather, the social and ethical commitments that we forge in the field are already acts of analysis, and they inevitably constrain what we are able to see and speak about later on. Put simply, to tell different stories, we must first commit to actively following them, within our own lives as fieldworkers.

Jane's stubborn hope left me facing the question of how to respond: to account for Jane's eviction as a product of governmentality would parse Jane's ambivalent hope in a particular way – as partly captured by this governmental logic, and partly in excess of it; to focus on Jane's desire for recognition might instead suggest a focus on the intersubjective dimensions of hope; to focus on how certain matters were rendered political would be to commit to imagining a division between what was political and what was not, regardless of how much this relationship shifted and varied. Any one of these accounts would require me as an ethnographer to learn to recognize a particular relational logic, to come to embody it myself, and to follow where it led. And so, drawn by these different accounts at different moments, there were inevitably questions I did not ask, forms of 'evidence' I did not pursue, relationships I failed to recognize.

Each of these accounts tugged down different paths. I, meanwhile, committed to none of them – at least in this case. For months after leaving Kilburn, I would think through Jane's story, and the material I had collected on it, and feel frustrated that I had nothing more decisive to say about it: that I couldn't use it to tell a powerful tale of inequality in twenty-first century London any more than I could use it to work up a counterintuitive but revealing glimpse into the way the 'political' was constructed by activists. Had I failed to attend to this as a good ethnographer? What choices had I actually made in the field?

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Not long after helping move Jane's furniture, I got in touch with Phil. Phil worked for a Somali community group, as a full-time caseworker, helping people manage their bills, benefits and legal troubles. Facing language barriers and precarious

circumstances, within a context of ever-changing migration policy, it wasn't uncommon for Phil's clients to have incredibly complex cases. In Kilburn, Phil had built up a reputation as perhaps the area's most knowledgeable caseworker. And so, following a conversation with a friend involved in an anti-debt campaign, it was suggested that I put Jane in touch with Phil, as the individual with the best chance of seeing a way through the tangle she faced.

After her eviction, and after staying with a friend for a month, Jane had moved to a squat in Holborn. Two months after we last met, we arranged to catch up over coffee at the British Museum, not far from her squat. During our conversation, Jane recounted the advice Phil had given her when they had met: her debt was a problem, he said, and the council would be reluctant to house her as a social tenant if she still had significant arrears with them. But if she could afford to at least start paying a little bit each month – she could, she acknowledged – then he felt confident he could make a good case for her being granted a new social tenancy. He warned her, though, that the location would be difficult to manage. Increasingly, new social tenants were being housed all over London and beyond. It was possible to eventually move back to a desired area by swapping properties within the council's allocation system, but making the right exchanges could take several years.

As we spoke, Jane confessed that moving elsewhere would perhaps not be the worst thing. Over the last two months she had let most of her teaching in Kilburn wind down. Facing a commute to teach classes in Kilburn, she had decided that either she would look for more work nearby – or else that if she were going to commute, there was no need to prioritize Kilburn, which had come to feel a bit trying and sad for her. Meanwhile, she continued to talk fondly about elements of the neighbourhood, and about her old flat. In fact, reviving the subject from our last conversation, she spoke in particular detail about her slow cooker: she had in fact finally located it among the possessions that had been returned to her, but it appeared to be missing its inner pot. Noting that there was food in it that would have gone off by the time the movers arrived, she speculated that the pot was likely thrown away. She told me how important it used to be to her to structure her day, enabling her to eat healthily while also maintaining the flexible schedule working as a freelancer often demanded. It gave her a sense of order and control. 'It used to be easy for me', she remarked, 'it's tricky now.'

That evening, I spent some time online while exchanging text messages with Jane. Unable to find a replacement pot from any vendor, I instead found a similar model of slow cooker to the one Jane had described and was pleasantly surprised at how cheap it was. I offered to order it as a pre-emptive housewarming gift for

wherever she settled. Jane thanked me for finding the replacement cooker and said she would order it herself.

Jane's eviction left me with a feeling of lingering guilt over not being able to do more. I had to remind myself that I was unable to take her in – that I already lived as someone else's subtenant, and that we already had my flatmate's brother sleeping on our living room couch. Likewise, although the two of us got along well, there was something about her situation that made my research feel exploitative; to me, it felt clear she looked to our conversations as a way to vent and seek reassurance, and I worried that these needs made for an unfair exchange, no matter how upfront I was about my presence as a researcher.⁵ Being able to connect her with people like Phil, better equipped to help her navigate her complex circumstances, helped take the edge off this guilt.

A few months later, when Jane, as a favour to a friend, agreed to teach a series of age-friendly fitness classes back in Kilburn, she suggested that we meet up a few hours before one of her classes. Before our meeting, I checked in with Phil to see how things were going with getting her back on the social housing list. With some bafflement, he remarked that while Jane had seemed initially enthusiastic about their agreed plan, she soon fell out of touch and had yet to send him anything on a debt plan that he might be able to use to persuade the council.

When we met, I tentatively asked Jane what had happened with Phil. She readily admitted that she wanted to sort out her income and secure some less sporadic work, before thinking about housing. Perhaps she wouldn't want to be under the local council at all but would move to where good work was, she mused. She wasn't sure. In the next breath, however, she confessed that she had also found herself reluctant to go look for new teaching contracts. She felt as if she wasn't ready and that she wasn't sure how to rebuild:

But I don't even have my mirror back, you know. And it's a full-time thing – building the contacts you need to be a freelancer. I've lost all these years of work that I've done in the area, and now I have to start again, you know, but it's only worth it if I know I can take it seriously. You can't do it half-heartedly ... and I want to move on but it almost feels like my head's in one place and my soul's in another.

As we continued the conversation, however, she seemed to shift perspective, and mused about potentially leaving London altogether – perhaps even attempting to move abroad once more:

Now's the time I should really be looking at some big things I've been meaning to do, because now's the time where I can make those changes, you know? Like

what have I got to lose? But then I've got to make time for them. I can't keep thinking about whether my solicitor owes me money or all these little things, you know? And I've probably got to stop teaching this class [in the area] you know? It's hard, because they're my regulars, and I know they won't go anywhere else, but it takes time, you know, every time there is a class that's for a couple of hours, and if it's only for a few people – it ties you down!

As we argued in the introduction of this volume, home is often imagined as an unalienated domain – as a place where one's essential self reposes. Home grounds who we are, within a world of flux. Ethnographers have problematized this image of home, through revealing the labour, imagination, tension and even violence that can make up the home, but they have also reproduced it through dominant conceptions where doing ethnography is equated with immersion into a particular social field, or set of lives. What happens though, when we look closely at a life and realize that there is no singular point, or trajectory for immersion? What happens, as in Jane's case, when home itself is a state of flux, characterized by cross-cutting doubts and uncertainties? How do we understand the meaning, the location, the feel or the materiality of home, when our interlocutors themselves face dispossession or social and material insecurity, and may struggle to imagine a present or future home themselves?

Michael Herzfeld, in developing his notion of 'cultural intimacy' (2016), argues that ethnographers ought to occupy a 'militant middle ground'. He develops this notion in relation to his analysis of how states construct narratives of collective identity. He argues that official narratives of cultural identity often rely on evoking everyday forms of resistance and creativity for the air of authenticity that they lay claim to. Conversely, these everyday assertions of identities that exceed the frame of the official, the national or the collective, are nonetheless voiced in reference to it. A middle ground emerges, then, between fixity and fluidity – which Herzfeld also traces as a space between 'empiricism and speculation, infinite regression and the most crass form of scientism, rejection of language as peripheral and its excessive adulation as the defining code for all human ways of making meaning' (2016: 187). Put simply, this middle ground is located between accounts of the social as settled and concrete, and those which cast the social as open, indeterminate and in continual flux. For Herzfeld, this is the space where ethnography ought to unfold – following everyday attempts to navigate between the given and the possible.

Herzfeld's vision is helpful, but he is also able to locate this middle ground in more definitive terms, because of his focus on the construction and contestation of singular national identities. The grounding becomes much more perilous,

however, the more we bring diversity into the picture. In Kilburn, throughout my time there, I encountered different narratives of British, Londoner and neighbourhood identity, which overlapped and tugged apart in different ways. These different visions not only were distributed across inter-group or inter-personal differences, however, but could be embodied by single individuals. Jane, with her competing visions of home – her contrasting, irreconcilable hopes and uneasy tensions, which proved animating in one moment and paralyzing the next – embodied this diversity even in the intimate domain of home. For her, home – lived or ideal – was far from a place beyond alienation, but rather a domain of competing possibilities that generated alienation and belonging simultaneously. For Jane, then, the middle ground between the given and the possible emerged not between the creativity of her own life, and broader, more structured narratives, but as a space of indeterminacy within her own attempts at holding onto or recovering a sense of home.

In the field, I did not think of this problem in terms of Michael Herzfeld, diversity or middle grounds. Rather, it emerged as an affective tug – a feeling of connection and commitment I struggled to name, but felt guided by nonetheless. I was stuck with a persistent feeling, a whisper which suggested that the fact that Jane had all these stories to tell about home – all these hopes, all these dilemmas – mattered more than just picking a singular account and committing to it. That was certainly the case when we talked. As much as she seemed to ask for reassurance or for my opinion, she did so in a speculative voice, and with a strong, nervous sense of the dilemmas she faced. Rather than closing down this speculation in any definitive way, there was a request here, to stay with the trouble, the indeterminacy, the speculation she evoked – to dwell in the difficult middle without resigning oneself to it. If for Jane, home was both hope and loss, both possibility and injustice, then as an ethnographer and as a friend, the best I could offer was to navigate this space together.

Notes

- 1 The name of the Caldwell estate is borrowed from Zadie Smith's novel *NW* (2012), which inserts the fictional estate into the otherwise true-to-life geographies of London's NW6 postcode – where I conducted my own fieldwork.
- 2 Or third-parties brought on-board as partners to manage buildings after construction.
- 3 This is the most I have, or will, write about these individuals.

- 4 For more on these regulations, see http://england.shelter.org.uk/legal/security_of_tenure/secure_tenancies/what_is_a_secure_tenancy#4
- 5 Of course, this level of ‘need’ on Jane’s part is likely not as marked as that between a great many anthropologists and their interlocutors. Although not the primary focus of this chapter, I would note that although much has been written about the political considerations and the considerations for reflexive writing that emerge out of such asymmetry, there are far fewer ethnographies where this hierarchy emerges as a clear and important detail within ethnographic accounts themselves.