

**Crisis Intimacies:
The Dialectics of Shared Housing**

**by
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Abstract

This project explores the formation and negotiation of shared households among renters in the City of Vancouver as a response to the ongoing housing crisis. Building on previous scholarship which emphasizes how structural and contextual forces can shape housing choices and conditions, the study offers a glimpse into the lives of roommates as they navigate and cope with living in households that are often formed out of necessity, posing interesting challenges to the experience of housing and being-at-home. Roommate renters are made to dwell in spaces built and designed for nuclear families, further complicating the experience of living together, in addition to grappling with insecure tenancies due to the lack of recognition of these types of households in city bylaws and provincial residential tenancy laws. Using urban ethnographic methods and interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, shared households are revealed as spaces of both crisis and intimacy, containing within them contradictory encounters and tensions, while at the same time laying bare moments of skillfulness, creativity, and care as roommates engage in a constant process of learning how to live together.

Keywords: crisis, intimacy, roommates, shared households, urban ethnography

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Acronyms	ix
Preface.....	x
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Setting the stage.....	1
1.2. Plan of the Project	2
1.3. Defining Shared Households.....	5
1.4. Policy and Legal Contexts.....	10
1.4.1. British Columbia Residential Tenancy Act	11
1.4.2. City of Vancouver Bylaw #3575: Defining household as family.....	12
1.5. Statement of the Problem.....	14
Chapter 2. Methodology.....	15
2.1. Participants, Recruitment, Sampling	18
2.2. Data Collection.....	21
2.3. Data Analysis	25
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework.....	27
3.1. Crisis	27
3.1.1. Making Do.....	30
3.2. Intimacy.....	34
3.3. Crisis Intimacies.....	37
3.3.1. Ontological Security and Residential Alienation.....	38
Chapter 4. Encounters in Shared Housing.....	40
4.1. Spatial Dimensions.....	40
4.2. Temporal Dimensions.....	42
4.3. Digital Dimensions	44
Chapter 5. Shared Householding.....	47
5.1. Cleaning, Chores, and House Rules	47
5.2. Privacy and The Bedroom	54
5.3. The Lease	59
5.3.1. The Quasi-Landlord	61
5.3.2. I/Mine.....	61
5.3.3. We/Ours	66
5.4. Degrees of Advantage among Shared Housing Residents	68

5.4.1. Potential Homeowners.....	71
Chapter 6. Alternative Domesticities.....	76
6.1. Pavel's Case.....	77
6.2. Greg's Case.....	83
6.3. Learning How to Live Together.....	89
Chapter 7. Conclusion.....	93
References.....	95

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Shared housing typologies, created by the author.....	7
Figure 2.	Can someone do an official study?	15
Figure 3.	In Vancouver, we don't say 'I love you'	15
Figure 4.	For Rent: Room Share Bath with Kitchen, photo by author.....	16
Figure 5.	Map of approximate participant households, created by the author.....	18
Figure 6.	Interview guides for three in-person interviews.....	22
Figure 7.	Craigslist keywords used: roommate, shared, room for rent	24
Figure 8.	Craigslist images chosen may suggest shared household characteristics.	25
Figure 9.	Good vibes roommate wanted.....	31
Figure 10.	Looking for a roommate in a 2-bedroom apartment.....	32
Figure 11.	New York City subway advertisement.....	37
Figure 12.	Who gets to use common spaces? Illustration by the author.	41
Figure 13.	Kitchens are sites of serendipitous encounters, illustration by the author.	43
Figure 14.	Generation Share.....	46
Figure 15.	Roommate ad offering lower rent in exchange for cooking services.	85

List of Acronyms

CMHC	Canadian Mortgage Housing Corporation
RTA	Residential Tenancy Act
RTB	Residential Tenancy Branch
TRAC	Tenants' Resource Advisory Centre

“Chance, free will, and necessity – no wise incompatible – all interweavingly working together.”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 47 “The Mat-Maker”

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Setting the stage.

In 2016, *The Georgia Straight*, a local Vancouver-based newspaper, published a series of essays called *Renters of Vancouver*, described as “an intimate look at how the city’s millennials are dealing with the housing crisis.” The series makes evident that the housing crisis is particularly hard on renters, highlighting the concessions people have had to make, the shifts in the housing priorities deemed necessary in the face of economic constraints. The series features over 500 individual stories, each unique and yet held together by a common thread: the near-impossibility of finding an affordable and appropriate place to live in Vancouver.

For instance, one of the featured Renters of Vancouver recounts her decision-making process when she went to check out a shared house: “There was mold everywhere, and the plug sockets were practically falling out of the walls. On top of that, there was a gaping hole in my bedroom door. But I had to weigh up the fact that it was so cheap (\$650/month), and I would only have to share with one person. It seemed like too good of a deal to pass up financially, so I decided to take that place.”

Another common thread in the *Renters of Vancouver* series is the highly variable experience of living with roommates. Two stories particularly exemplified the range of possibilities that might arise from roommate arrangements.

The first story, “I’ve Been Put Off Roommates for Life,” recounts the anonymous writer’s experience living in a house with four guys who hosted frequent house parties. Desperate for an affordable place to live, the writer let things slide, at least in the beginning stages of living together. But things came to a head after a house party gone wild caused enough property damage that all tenants had to pay exorbitant fees, in addition to going to court to settle legal disputes with the landlord. The aggrieved writer ended up searching for a place he could live by himself, even if that place might be as far away as Surrey.

The second story, “I Had 61 Roommates,” shares a rather different experience. The writer describes her time “house-managing” a six-bedroom house in East Vancouver. Over a four-and-a-half-year period, a total of 61 roommates came, left, or remained. “There are so many advantages to living in a shared house,” she says. It was a house where people did things together – they ate together, grew vegetables and raised chickens in their backyard, and cycled to the beach together in the summer. While the woman was a tenant herself, she was the primary tenant whose name was on the lease, and thus had some modicum of control over the roommate selection process. “I chose not to have contracts with people because I wanted a home with good energy. I didn’t want to force anyone to stay, because I thought it was important that people elected to be there.” She offers a piece of advice for folks who are struggling to find one- or two-bedroom suites: “Find a big house and fill it with amazing humans.”

These two stories exemplify two poles of the experiences of shared housing with roommates. The first writer leaves repulsed and is put off by roommates for life. The second writer endorses living with roommates with a glowing and delightful review. I begin with these anecdotal accounts in order to touch upon the complex nature of shared housing uncovered in researching and writing this thesis. In the course of interviewing 15 different roommates in the city of Vancouver, I’ve also observed, in participants’ accounts, these two experiential poles of repulsion and delight. But mostly, the stories existed in the middle, in the mundane, quotidian spaces of everyday life.

But these individual stories do not simply stand on their own. Taken together, the patterns in which roommates find themselves in shared housing speak to a larger economic problem transpiring within the city of Vancouver, and indeed, in many other world cities: an affordable housing crisis.

1.2. Plan of the Project

To structure the rest of this thesis, a brief overview of each chapter is presented here. This first chapter details the contextual background in which roommates find themselves in shared housing. Here, shared households are defined and contextualized in terms of different shared housing typologies found across Vancouver, such as cohousing. A discussion of the Residential Tenancy Act and City of Vancouver Bylaw

#3575 will provide the provincial and municipal policy contexts under which shared households operate.

Chapter Two discusses the methodologies used in pursuing the research question posed in the previous chapter. There we will meet and profile the 15 participants in the study, outlining their respective ages, occupations, the number of roommates they lived with, the rate of their monthly rent, and the type of housing or dwelling unit they inhabited. A discussion will also follow concerning the urban ethnographic methods primarily used for data collection and analysis, providing the bulk of materials for this research.

Chapter Three presents the conceptual framework which serves to shape the rest of the thesis. First, the concept of “crisis” is discussed along the lines of how it relates to and applies within Vancouver in multiple and overlapping ways. A brief history of housing financialization in Canada is provided in order to trace how renters have disproportionately been affected by the housing crisis. Connected to this will be a discussion of precarity in Vancouver, specifically the problematic phenomenon of wages not matching up to housing prices becoming endemic within the city. Next, intimacy will be defined within the ‘world’ of this research. Intimacy is discussed as an observable quality of connection untied to any specific form of relationship, disputing normative associations around family and romantic love. Brought together, a discussion of “crisis” and “intimacy” will illuminate how economic necessity can facilitate and impact the organization of roommate relationships in complex and dialectical ways.

Chapter Four enumerates the forms of encounters observable within shared housing arrangements. Spatial, temporal, and digital dimensions are identified using corresponding examples generated through participants’ accounts. This section illustrates the ways in which residents of shared housing navigate household spaces (where boundaries are often blurred), their roommates’ schedules and ‘biological clocks’, and methods for communication which are increasingly mediated through digital technologies and social media.

Chapter Five outlines the different everyday practices of householding encountered within shared households. This section includes the common themes and generalities that arose across multiple participant interviews. ‘Mundane’ aspects of

householding, such as chores, monthly rent payments, and the negotiation of privacy and alone time become pertinent sources of information in dissecting the ways in which roommates learn to organize and navigate a living arrangement typically entered out of financial constraint. The chapter also discusses how varying degrees of social advantage (e.g., class) can disparately affect the experience of shared householding, leading to power differentials within the household, such as the presence of a “quasi-landlord” exerting more control over their roommates in householding matters.

Chapter Six presents two case studies which did not fit ‘neatly’ with the rest of informant accounts. Conversely to Chapter Five, which highlights common themes across the stories, this section presents two stories that proved to be “exceptions to the rule,” illuminating the vast range of experiences possible in shared housing arrangements. For instance, one of the accounts details the shared housing experiences of an older roommate on welfare, revealing how certain roommate arrangements can turn fraught in the face of structural barriers and difficult personal histories. The role of emotions in these arrangements, such as weariness, will also be discussed.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis, summarizing the main insights gleaned through the similarities and discrepancies among participant stories.

The subtitle of this thesis builds upon anthropologist Daniel Miller’s 1998 book *The Dialectics of Shopping*, with particular reference to his second chapter, *The Dialectics of Kinship*. The experience of shopping, according to Miller, highlights how relationships in question are posed between a series of normative models and the particular relationship of concern (2001, 23). A mother not only shops for her family based on the family’s actual preferences, but also based on ideals of “motherhood” or “wifhood,” presenting a tension between “what is” versus “what ought to be.”

In shared housing, this appears through the ways in which roommate experiences are compared to certain normative models regarding housing and home. Throughout this thesis, a number of normative models will be discussed alongside participant accounts. Throughout the interviewing of roommates for this project, participants commonly referred to certain cultural assumptions and norms regarding householding which are compared and contrasted to their own experiences, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

1.3. Defining Shared Households

Shared households are defined in this thesis as *informal households in the private rented sector comprised of two or more unrelated adults*. Anecdotal data suggest that these living arrangements can be fraught and conflict-ridden. Falling outside of traditional domestic arrangements, shared households composed of roommates have elsewhere been referred to as “more complicated and unusual” (Lauster 2016, 216). The demographic growth in roommate households is clear, but “academic research has failed to keep pace with this growing phenomenon” (Clark et al. 119, 2017).

In November 2019, a report from Metro Vancouver’s *Regional Affordable Housing Strategy* committee reported that shared households comprised of unrelated individuals skyrocketed by 41% between 2011 to 2016. The report was concerned about the rise in low-income renters, and noted that low-income renters are “more likely to seek roommates to reduce costs.”¹ This trend has been observed in other contexts, too. In Australia, Maalsen (2020, 108) found that the number of roommate households (locally called ‘share houses’) grew 0.2% from 4.1% in 2011 to 4.3% in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). In the UK, Heath (2018, 4) found similar trends, noting that the increases in shared housing among roommates are “no doubt closely linked to dramatic changes in the housing market in recent years, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which have left many people struggling to meet their housing costs.” The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, year-on-year house price increases, reduced mortgage availability, and the breaking of the link between average house prices and average earnings are just some of the factors affecting housing unaffordability for people of all ages (Saunders 2016).

In light of this, some housing scholars have emphasized the need to address gaps in the literature about shared housing, especially as this type of living arrangement has steadily increased across different cities, in different national contexts, since the 2008 financial crisis. Since 2008, shared housing arrangements have undergone a demographic growth in dense urban cores in Australia (Maalsen 2020), New Zealand

¹ Reference here. http://www.metrovancouver.org/boards/Housing/HOU_2019-Nov-6_AGE.pdf

(Murphy 2011), many European countries (Schwanitz and Mulder 2015), especially Great Britain, (Heath 2011, 2014, 2018), the United States (Mukta 2012), and Canada.

This project closely follows the definitions, methodology and conceptual framework of sociologist Sue Heath's pioneering research on shared households in the UK, based on the *Under the Same Roof* project from the University of Manchester.² In the culminating book, *Shared Housing, Shared Lives*, Heath and her research team define "shared households" as "co-residence, based on the full or partial sharing of domestic space by groups of people who were unrelated to each other, although not necessarily consisting of non-kin" (2019, 9). However, my definition differs slightly from theirs, since their project was concerned with residents in "formal" and "institutionalized" forms of shared living, such as housing cooperatives and co-housing, while my project is not.

The concept "shared housing" can be plurally defined. But legal definitions may be of little use here. The Canadian census does not provide a distinct category for shared households, which stands in contrast to, for instance, Scandinavian countries that have long formally recognized shared households as long-term social, legal and financial entities (Woodward 1987: 216). Australian geographer Sophia Maalsen observes, "While shared households are significant in discussions of housing, it is a dwelling form that little is known about. Perhaps, this is because it is rarely analyzed independently of other dwelling types, often incorporated along with other complex housing arrangements such as 'non-family' or 'other'" (2020, 109).

Challenges in interpersonal roommate arrangements may also be affected by legal prescriptions and municipal bylaws which define households according to the normative standard of 'family.' For instance, in census terms, shared households comprised of roommates officially belong to the category "Non-Census Family Household." This category is further subdivided into three types: (1) One-person households; (2) Two-person households; and (3) Three-person households. The last two categories are even further subdivided, so that Two-Person households can be comprised of "related" or "unrelated persons"; and Three-Person Households can be

² More information about this research is published through the University of Manchester's website: <https://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgan-centre/research/research-themes/home-and-housing/under-the-same-roof/>

comprised of “all related,” “non-related,” and “some related, some not related.” In census terms, this means that (1) a person living alone, (2) a person living with their cousin and a friend, and (3) a person living with two Craigslist strangers all belong to the same category.³

Categories such as these pose a problem.⁴ From my research, it is evident that shared households face distinctive problems not encountered by other types of households they may be grouped together with for statistical purposes. Accordingly, this thesis distinguishes informal shared housing from other types of shared living arrangements commonly found in cities and, more specifically, in Vancouver. I crafted and amalgamated this typology from different interview accounts alongside key pieces of literature on shared households found in the following sections below.

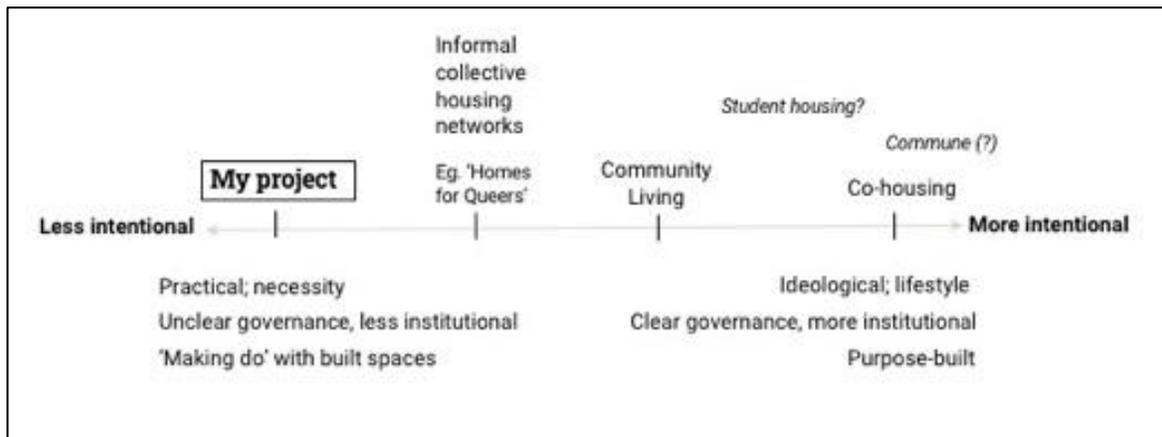


Figure 1. Shared housing typologies, created by the author.

³ Statistics Canada, Type of Private Household

<https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Var.pl?Function=DECI&Id=145117>

⁴ Similarly, in the UK context, Heath et al (2019, 3) make a similar contention: “As for the proportion of households consisting of sharers, precise figures are difficult to come by, as government statisticians place shared living arrangements involving non-kin into an umbrella ‘other household’ category. This category, defined as ‘a multi person household that is neither a couple household nor a lone parent household’ (DCLG, 2013: 23), includes a diversity of household forms that do not conform to conventional couple or family-based living arrangements. It includes not only unrelated sharers, but also co-residents who are related to each other outside of a parent-child or couple relationship, such as siblings and cousins, as well as adult children living with just one parent. The proportion of households in the ‘other household’ category rose from 6.6 per cent of all households in England and Wales in 2001 to 7.9 per cent in 2011 (ONS, 2014, Table 4), and is predicted to rise further by 2021 (DCLG, 2013). This increase may appear modest in absolute terms, yet represents the largest percentage change compared with other household types over the same period (ibid.).

The bases for the distinctions drawn above fall under three main headings: motivations for being in shared housing; household governance; and the built form of shared housing arrangements.

1. *Motivations: Pragmatic versus Ideological.*⁵ Certain living arrangements such as cohousing are considered 'intentional' types of shared households where motivations for participating are more ideologically oriented than pragmatic (Browne 1997). Whereas renters in shared households often report being motivated by pragmatic matters like economic necessity, residents of intentional shared living arrangements are often motivated by ideological or lifestyle reasons (Vanzella-Yang 2019). For instance, entering into a formal cohousing arrangement means committing to the values shared within the cohousing movement. In North American cities like Vancouver, Sargisson (2010) found that these values might include environmental consciousness, cooperation, sharing, and the desire to develop community on the basis of personal integrity and responsibility (17). On the other hand, renting a room in a private shared household need not imply a commitment to any particular value around collective living. It could simply indicate an inability to live otherwise.

2. *Household Governance: Informal vs. Formal Structures.* If household problems arise, cohousing residents can defer to an official centralized system of governance (e.g. governance committees) within their household, regulating appropriate behaviour and demarcate clear boundaries regarding the privacy or communality of certain spaces. Private shared households don't have the same singular authority, which means individual members are left to negotiate rules and regulations for themselves as they go along. The negotiation of practices is founded upon the unique relationships and dynamics found within each shared household. In a shared household, people are brought emotionally and physically closer to one another, putting them in more regular contact, which can result in the possibility of caring relationships, strained relationships, or a mixture of both. Living together has the potential to "shift the temporalities and spatialities of social relationships" (Bowlby 2012).

⁵ This first heading was derived from Heath et al (2, 2019), which focused in particular on how people's motivations for living together and the ways in which they organize the sharing of finances, domestic space and daily routines can affect the quality of their personal relationships.

3. *Purpose-built form.* Design and built-form can have a monumental impact on how practices of sharing and living together can change. The importance of housing layout for facilitating or discouraging sociability among residents of different housing types have been noted by scholars in architecture (Abu-Ghazzeah 1999, Blake et al 1956, Alexander et al 1977, Devlin et al 2008). For example, this might include the purpose-built nature of cohousing residences and the intentionality of interior design and layout for facilitating congenial relations among residents. In these intentionally shared spaces, one could say that congenial relations are spatially engineered (but certainly not guaranteed). Meanwhile, renters in private shared households have to navigate the physical structure of homes typically designed with the single-family unit in mind (Vanzella-Yang 2018).

Renters in private shared households are often left to negotiate the social aspects of their arrangements, but I argue that they also have to negotiate the spatial and physical aspects of their homes. The features of the built form can be crucial to a resident's ability to feel 'at home' in a shared household, almost as much as the quality of relationships existing within it. The normative values reflected in the single-family household layout can complicate and challenge the experience of sharing housing with strangers or friends. For example, who gets to live in the master bedroom with its own private bathroom, and on what basis? How are meals negotiated when the kitchen is mandatorily shared? Can any roommate just feel free to put their feet up in the living room coffee table?

But even as design might effectively facilitate sociality among residents, it cannot determine it. For example, Heath (2013) reported on the importance of serendipitous encounters in kitchens. Kitchens were often cited as the most important room in terms of encouraging interaction, particularly because of the informal social norms attached to it (Scicluna 2017). The kitchen often doubles as a site of unintended social encounter – which were considered pleasant because they were serendipitous, organic, 'natural'. Meanwhile, one cohousing resident in Heath's study lamented how her purposefully-designed living room unintentionally discouraged socialization. She described the cohousing unit's living room as a "a large room with seating permanently positioned in a semi-circle." The design was too intentional, which paradoxically decreased levels of socialization because of increased pressure to do so (85).

Furthermore, the architectural layout of the housing unit can make the demarcation of space easier. In shared housing, the negotiation of boundaries can be troubled among non-kin (Morgan 2011), and the architectural layout can provide physical boundaries 'by default.' For example, housing sharers in this study unanimously considered bedrooms as 'definitively' private spaces – often described "as mine." Because of clear physical demarcations, including the freedom to lock and unlock it, bedrooms are rarely sites of contestation among roommates. However, shared households often have to contend with a house designed with one bathroom (two if they are lucky), one living room, and one kitchen. These areas become *necessarily communal*, and using them entails careful consideration of what is appropriate and what is not.

Beyond the architectural design and layout of each individual housing unit, city-specific regulations on housing forms can also change whether or not the feeling of "home" is felt across different shared households. Sociologist Nathanael Lauster found that the City of Vancouver has been at "the forefront of containing and restricting the sprawl of single-family housing (2016, 99). Housing units are getting smaller, and yet more people are economically sequestered to live together. The outcome is that people are increasingly forced to reconsider notions of home as they are forced into smaller, denser, and frequently shared spaces (Vanzella-Yang 2018, 242).

City interventions on housing forms exist, but very few of these prioritize the needs of sharers. Even when individual landlords are mandated to retrofit a family home for multiple unrelated adults, they are more likely to increase the 'profitability' of the unit instead of the communality: e.g. landlords are more likely to turn an existing living room into an additional bedroom, rather than enlarging the kitchen, or adding more bathrooms. (Heath et al 2018, 82).

1.4. Policy and Legal Contexts

This next section presents a policy discussion of the British Columbia's Residential Tenancy Act and City of Vancouver Bylaw #3575, providing important legal contexts under which shared households operate.

1.4.1. British Columbia Residential Tenancy Act

In August 2019, the CBC reported a story in which two roommates entered a dispute in the Civil Resolution Tribunal.⁶ Kaley Antaya initiated the complaint after her roommate, Amy Wutzke, listed the empty bedroom in their shared 3-bedroom apartment on Airbnb without Kaley's consent. Kaley felt unsafe and moved out without 30 days' notice; but her roommate, the sole leaseholder, refused to return Kaley's \$400 security deposit. The main conflict arose from the fact that Kaley did *not* have her name on the lease, which means that "she had no rights under the Residential Tenancy Act."⁷

Robert Patterson, a spokesperson for BC's Tenant's Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC), said that "many people, trying to save money by living with roommates, aren't aware" of these legal intricacies under the RTA. In the absence of legal recognition, TRAC offers a 22-page "Roommate Agreement Template" on its website, listing the following points for agreement: Rent, Other Charges, Private and Shared Spaces, Household Obligations, Extended Vacancy, Subletting and Adding Roommates, Noise, Guests, Studying Arrangements, Personal Items, Smoking, Leaving Messages, Pets, Moving Out, Removing a Roommate, and End of Tenancy. Patterson offers an explanation of why those entering roommate households should feel encouraged to sign this template agreement: "In the beginning of any kind of living scenario, everyone is assuming that things are going to go well. But be imaginative in terms of what issues you think could come up."⁸

In British Columbia, the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) regulates and oversees all matters regarding tenancy in the province. Under the RTA, tenants and landlords are required to sign a residential tenancy agreement – the lease – a monthly contract which stipulates the conditions of a given tenancy.⁹

⁶ The Civil Resolution Tribunal resolves small claims less than \$5,000. Other non-monetary issues like evictions have to go to B.C. Supreme Court, which can be lengthy and expensive.

⁷ CBC (2019) Renter who listed spare room on Airbnb ordered to repay roommate's damage deposit. August 25. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/airbnb-roommate-decision-1.5258253>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Residential Tenancy Act [SBC 2002] Chapter 78, December 30 2020
https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/02078_01#section1

Signing the lease is meant to serve the interests of all parties involved. It protects the landlord's sense of security: in signing the lease, tenants are legally obligated to exercise care and consideration of the property they are renting. It can protect a renter's sense of security, too: the lease provides stipulations against unfair evictions, landlord incompetence, and allows tenants to re-claim security deposits. The lease also functions to fix the monthly rent for an agreed upon amount of time, protecting renters from having to deal with sudden rent increases.

In cases where either the landlord or the tenant breaks the terms of the lease agreement, the grieved party may choose to enter into a Dispute Resolution Proceeding, pursued through the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB). However, the RTB cautions, "Without being added to the tenancy agreement, roommates do not have recourse through the Residential Tenancy Branch as there is no contractual relationship between the roommate and the landlord."¹⁰

For some shared households, the RTA has proven to be of little help; and perhaps it has even caused more harm through its failure to provide specific stipulations for roommate renters.

1.4.2. City of Vancouver Bylaw #3575: Defining household as family

Municipally, the presence of legal mechanisms in Vancouver which limit the number of non-family members who can live together speak directly to persisting discourses around "family" as the appropriate members of a household. Zoning and Development Bylaw 3575 states "No private residential dwelling shall be used by more than one family." (City of Vancouver)¹¹. Passed in 1956, the bylaw also officially defines a "family" as "one or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption." This definition is also used as the basis for allowing only a maximum of 3 unrelated persons in a private household. Any number beyond that is deemed overcrowding and thus, illegal.

¹⁰ From the provincial government's website: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy/residential-tenancies/during-a-tenancy/changes-to-the-agreement>

¹¹ Official source: <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/zoning-and-development-by-law-no-3575-2>

While the bylaw is rarely enforced, local shared housing advocates have argued that the bylaw can still be used as reason for eviction, especially if done on the basis of complaints from neighbours or irate ex-roommates.¹² In addition, the bylaw further imagines that the nuclear family as the appropriate members of any given household. Present across different interviews was the recurring ideal of “homeownership” as it related to “family,” against which participants in this study measured their actual experiences of housing. According to sociologist Nathanael Lauster, housing transitions are linked to family transitions.¹³ Concretely, this shows up in how, for instance, some people decide to have children on the basis of moving into a bigger house with more bedrooms. For some, the opposite might be true (e.g. “Because I can only afford a two-bedroom apartment, I won’t have kids”). Why is this so? For Lauster, the phenomenon is partly rooted in “vague cultural reasons, grounded, for example, in sweeping claims about the importance of the Northwest European pattern of family formation relative to alternatives” (544). Yet these normative models are also shaped through institutionalized arrangements. Which households are legitimized through the law? Which types receive tax breaks and benefits? Which household types are recognized by the census? For whom are houses built and designed?

Households shared by roommates face different legal risks especially in contrast to other “legitimized” shared household arrangements in Vancouver, such as cohousing. Cohousing is a concept that came to North America in 1988 from Denmark where it emerged in the early 1960’s. It describes neighbourhoods that combine the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of shared resources and community living. (Canadian Cohousing Network).¹⁴ What this definition fails to mention is that co-housing is based on a model of private homeownership which requires a huge financial investment from individual “cohusers” (Heath et al 2018, 7). Supporters have lauded cohousing for its potential to engage with three key challenges of the times: environmental sustainability and low-impact living, financial sustainability, and the creation of supportive and inclusive all-age communities (Ibid). Critics of cohousing have

¹² Karen Sawatzky is quoted speaking out against Bylaw 3575, <https://www.straight.com/news/921211/city-vancouver-bylaw-defines-family-creates-concern-over-collective-housing>

¹³ Lauster, N. (2010) Housing and the Proper Performance of American Motherhood 1940-2005. *Housing Studies*, 25.4. 543-557.

¹⁴ The Canadian Cohousing Network is a national non-profit organization formed in 1992. <https://cohousing.ca/about-cohousing/what-is-cohousing/>

pointed out how this type of shared living tends to be exclusive, with inhabitants often already-affluent, highly educated, upper-middle class, and white (Ibid; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018). For many renters who go the path of living with roommates, often out of financial necessity and often in houses or apartments made for nuclear families, this option is not feasible.

Just as TRAC spokesperson Robert Patterson noted that many people in shared households aren't aware of the legal intricacies of the Residential Tenancy Act, the participants I interviewed were also not aware of Bylaw 3575's existence. For the most part, the bylaw doesn't seem to have made any practical differences in the everyday experiences of shared household renters in my study. However, its presence signifies a larger discourse around shared housing in Vancouver. Passed 65 years ago and yet still theoretically enforceable today, there ought to be reconsideration of these legal mechanisms that no longer reflect contemporary living patterns and housing needs. Could new bylaws be made to reflect the interests and ensure the protection of renters in shared households, which are only expected to increase over time?

1.5. Statement of the Problem

Considering these contextual factors in which shared households are formed, the thesis pursues the central question: *How does the housing crisis impact the organization of shared households among adult roommates in the City of Vancouver?* At the same time, a broader philosophical question lays at the heart of this project: *What does it mean for people to live together out of economic necessity?* The next section will present an overview of the research methodologies with which I set forth in beginning to answer these questions.

Chapter 2.

Methodology

I began thinking about this project in 2018. Housing was a common topic of discussion in Vancouver, so this project began through a series of conversations, with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. At first, I noticed how some of my friends who were in relationships expressed ambivalence about moving in with their significant others at a rate too soon for their liking. A friend told me, “We’ve only been together for three months, but we’ll save so much money living together.” Initially, I kept thinking about this “acceleration of intimacy,” having personally experienced that same pressure of wanting to save money but also enjoying the solitude of living alone. It turned out that other people were thinking about this too.



Figure 2. Can someone do an official study?



Figure 3. In Vancouver, we don't say 'I love you'

Upon reviewing the literature on cohabitation, intimacy, and housing, it was evident that plenty of research had been done on the topic. I turned my attention elsewhere. Soon, I kept hearing the word “roommate” over and over again, from friends, co-workers, and from the signs in the neighbourhood in which I lived. From my own ground level apartment, I would observe my neighbour’s house, a single-family dwelling outside where moving trucks and U-Hauls arrived every month or so. People and their mattresses moved in and out. But one resident seemed like a “constant variable” in the house, her presence permanent at that address. Two blocks from my apartment, I noticed there was a shared house which put up this same sign every couple of months, too.



Figure 4. For Rent: Room Share Bath with Kitchen, photo by author.

Upon further inquiry, friends, acquaintances, and chatty strangers told me that they usually found roommates through Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace. Some found shared housing through “a friend of a friend.” There was usually an interview. Prior to COVID-19, sitting in coffee shops, I sometimes observed similar sequences of interaction in which two people sat across each other, meeting for the first time, with one of them usually having a paper/pen or a clipboard to jot down notes. “How clean or messy are you?” one woman at JJ Bean asked another woman who appeared to be a potential roommate. The second woman replied, “I’m fairly lax about it.” Judging by the interviewer’s grimace, the applicant had given the wrong answer.

Finding a shared house was one thing, but living in it was another matter. Some liked it, some felt neutral, but some despised it. Having a partner whom I loved, yet with whom I still felt reluctant to move in with for the sake of cutting costs, I wondered: might it be much harder for folks, like some of my friends, to have to move in with people they meet on the internet for the very first time?

Of course, living with roommates is not new. Research on shared households comprised of roommates are often narrowly conceptualized as spaces for young adults. Within broader family studies, living with roommates is often contextualized alongside university-living, or as a foray into “adulthood” or “independence” after leaving the family home. Clark, Tuffin, Frewin, and Bowker (2017) write that shared housing is a *pathway* by which young adults in the Western world are navigating housing difficulties, pragmatically deciding to share costs by living with peers. Williamson (2005) profiles roommates as “typically young, childless, and unmarried.” In my study, which included participants whose ages ranged from 23 to 52, it became clear that these research findings from elsewhere, in a different time, might not readily apply to Vancouver today. As Pavel, 52, deftly explains, “Speaking again from years and years of experience (over 25 years), it used to be that shared accommodation was the domain of younger people in their 20s, mostly. But now, older and older people are getting involved in shared accommodation because the housing market is just horrific in this city. You’re starting to find people who are really set in their ways, which can be difficult.”

Other research on shared housing has associated this type of living with patterns of household formation within the queer community, especially with lesbian couples (measured against the heteronormative nuclear family); and for seniors and people living with developmental or physical disabilities (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). A significant body of literature on shared living tends to concentrate on intergenerational, immigrant and shared living for the aged (Hemmons, Hoch, and Carp 1996) with surprisingly little research on older adults.

In different contexts, sharing a house has been a method of dealing with increasingly unaffordable housing conditions around the world (Tipple 1994: Sub-Saharan Africa; Gilbert 1993: Latin America). Shared households, in the form of boarding houses, served to cushion the shock of urban industrial life for newcomers to the city in American cities from the 18th century until its decline after 1930s. In the Pulitzer-Prize winning book *Evicted*, sociologist Matthew Desmond (2016) recounts the story of Arleen and Crystal, two black women who were roommates in the southside of Milwaukee, in a historically black neighbourhood marked by histories of segregation and redlining. The roommates met randomly, “under peculiar circumstances,” Desmond writes. “But they were engaging in a popular strategy poor people used to pay the bills and feed their children. Especially in the inner city, strangers brushed up against one

another constantly—on the street, at job centers, in the welfare building—and found ways to ask for and offer help. Before she met Arleen, Crystal stayed a month with a woman she had met on a bus. In the 1960s and 1970s, destitute families often relied on extended kin networks to get by. Poor black families were “immersed in a domestic web of a large number of kin and friends whom they could count on,” wrote anthropologist Carol Stack. “Those entwined in such a web swapped goods and services on a daily basis. This did little to lift families out of poverty, but it was enough to keep them afloat.” (161, 2016).

The varied experiences of shared housing are inextricable from class, race, gender, sex, ability, age and all the different intersections of privilege and oppression that exist in society. At the same time, the complex nature of shared housing – of living together - means that these experiences cannot be solely attributed to social forces either, no matter how dominant these may be. In this sense, I invoke social factors not as determinants, but as contexts to further substantiate the complex individual accounts offered by the participants who shared their stories with me.

2.1. Participants, Recruitment, Sampling

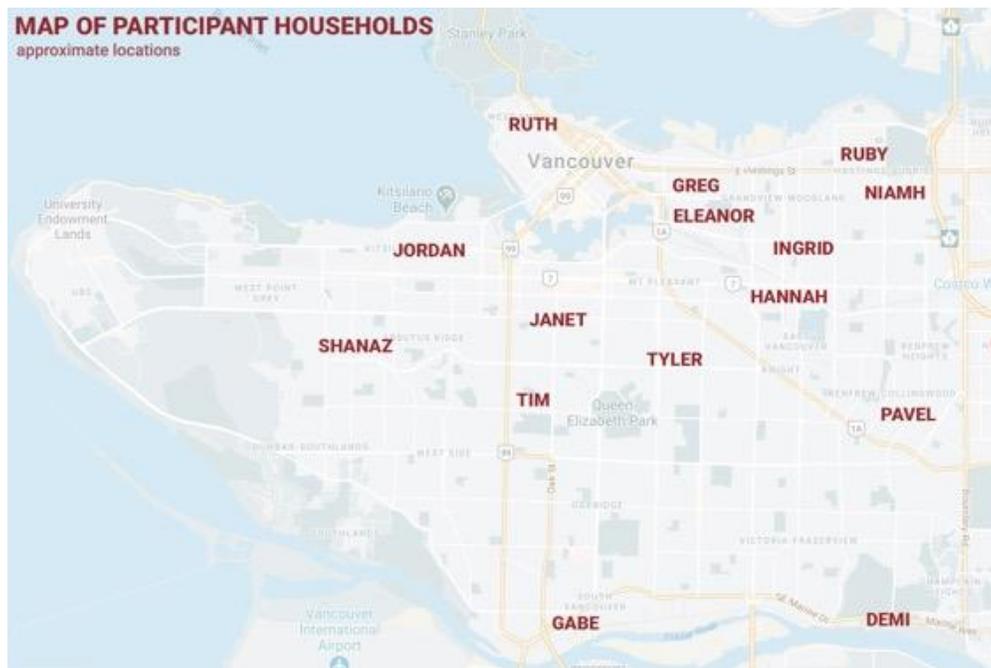


Figure 5. Map of approximate participant households, created by the author.

During the period January 2020 to May 2020, a total of 15 participants were recruited for the study. Four of them were interviewed in-person, and 11 were interviewed over the phone. The arrival of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020 meant that the study design had to pivot in line with rules for social distancing. The following section includes brief participant profiles, including their age, occupation, the number of roommates they live with, the type of dwelling where they lived, and the amount of rent they individually paid per month. All names in this thesis were anonymized.

In-Person Participants:

1. Greg is a 28-year-old graduate student. He lives with three roommates in a three-bedroom single detached house in Strathcona. His monthly rent costs \$600.

2. Eleanor is a 42-year-old asset manager who lives with six roommates in a seven-bedroom heritage townhouse in Strathcona. Her monthly rent costs \$580.

3. Jordan is a 27-year-old graduate student. He normally lives with two roommates in a three-bedroom apartment in Kitsilano, but one roommate would have her boyfriend over to live with them sometimes. Jordan's monthly rent costs \$700.

4. Shanaz is a 24-year-old graduate student who lives with one roommate in a two-bedroom basement suite in Kitsilano. Her monthly rent costs around \$600.

Phone Participants:

5. Ruby is a 30-year-old case worker with a non-profit agency who lives with one roommate in a two-bedroom suite in a single-detached house in the Hastings-Sunrise neighbourhood. Her monthly rent costs \$825.

6. Tyler is a 29-year-old freelance product designer who lives with two roommates in a three-bedroom apartment in Mount Pleasant. His monthly rent costs a little less than \$1000.

7. Niamh is a 25-year-old graduate student living with three roommates in a single-family detached house in the Hastings Sunrise neighbourhood. Her monthly rent costs \$500.

8. Janet is a 26-year-old woman who lives with one roommate in a two-bedroom apartment in Fairview. She was unemployed at the time of our conversation, but has worked in the catering industry on a seasonal basis. Her monthly rent was not disclosed.

9. Hannah is a 23-year-old undergraduate student living in a two-bedroom basement suite near the Commercial-Broadway area. She introduced herself as “typically living with two roommates but currently three due to the COVID quarantine situation.” Her monthly rent costs \$700.

10. Demi is a 23-year-old server who lives with two roommates in a two-bedroom apartment in the River District. She shares the place with her romantic partner and one roommate. Her monthly rent, divided with her romantic partner, costs \$1100.

11. Ruth is a 27-year-old pension plan administrator who lives with one roommate in a two-bedroom apartment in the West End. Her monthly rent costs \$900.

12. Tim is a 33-year-old managing director who lives with one roommate in a two-bedroom basement suite in Fairview. His monthly rent was not disclosed, except that he pays it “in cash.”

13. Pavel is a 52-year-old welfare recipient. He lives in the two-bedroom ground level suite of a single-detached house with one roommate. His monthly rent costs below \$600.

14. Gabe is a 31-year-old participant who lives with one roommate in a one-bedroom apartment Marpole. He was unemployed at the time of our conversation, but has worked as a stagehand whenever jobs are available. His monthly rent costs around \$500.

15. Ingrid is a 24-year-old accounting clerk who lives with three roommates in a three-bedroom basement suite in the Commercial Drive area. Her monthly rent was not disclosed.

The four In-Person Participants included a mix of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances from my own personal networks and were primarily recruited through snowball sampling. The interviews were held at participants homes when possible. Three of the first four interviews were conducted in participants’ respective living rooms.

Each gave me a “house tour” at the end of our interview, in which I met some of their roommates as well. Seldman (1991) argues that ethnographic interviews are ideally held in a private place where participants feel secure, comfortable, and familiar (40). Adler and Adler (2002) similarly assert that interviews dealing with potentially emotional, sensitive, or private issues are best conducted in the privacy of participant’s home, since such a setting automatically offers a sense of intimacy and friendliness. But clearly this is not always the case: a renter’s home is not invariably a place of privacy, intimacy, and friendliness. With Greg, a participant felt uneasy inviting me to his shared house; we instead decided to hold the interview at my place one Saturday morning.

The 11 participants interviewed by telephone were recruited through an online posting on the Vancouver “subreddit.”¹⁵ Online recruitment happened in March 2020, at the onset of COVID-19’s quarantine protocols. In addition to the collective sense of unease, the pandemic shut down many jobs, a lot of which were precarious in nature. Based on existing data about renters and job stability, participants were hypothesized as a population more likely to experience the negative effects of this new global health crisis. Thus, unlike the pre-COVID group, these participants were offered \$20 per hour of interview time.

2.2. Data Collection

Writing about the science and logic of case studies in urban-based research, the sociologist Mario Small proposed that each participant interview makes sense when viewed as an independent case study (2009). As ethnographers, we assume that social reality is both inter-subjective and radically situational, such that the meaning of actions and events can sometimes be explained only within the particular set of circumstances in which they occur (2009, 18). As such, ethnographic interviewing was the primary method used for data collection. Ethnographic interviewing is a method which assumes people are knowledgeable. It assumes that people can explain and reflect upon actions and values which they may not always have thought about before. (Franklin 1990).

¹⁵ Subreddits are specific communities on Reddit.com, an online “network of communities” where members can post, discuss, or share content that can range from personal stories, political events, humorous images, and miscellaneous ideas. The Vancouver subreddit has over 287,000 members and functions as a sort of unofficial “online town square” or “bulletin board” for city matters. Here is a link to my posting: https://www.reddit.com/r/vancouver/comments/fotxy7/looking_for_research_participants_folks_who_live/

In my fieldwork, interviews functioned as “research conversations,” consistent with Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) notion of “the active interview.” In an active interview, researcher and participant are engaged in a social interaction as opposed to a one-sided experiment in which the researcher simply “collects” information from a participant, as a geologist might collect rocks.

Instead, the active interview, comprised of a conversation between two people, produces a narrative. This production is partially based on an interview guide, a “conversational agenda” whose form and application might change from one participant to the next. Showed here are samples of “interview Guides” I brought during in-person conversations with Shanaz, Eleanor, and Greg. In Figure 5 you will see pertinent topics for conversation, such as BATHROOM, FOOD, GUESTS, RENT, TENURE, NOISE, listed based on prior literature reviews and anecdotal evidence.

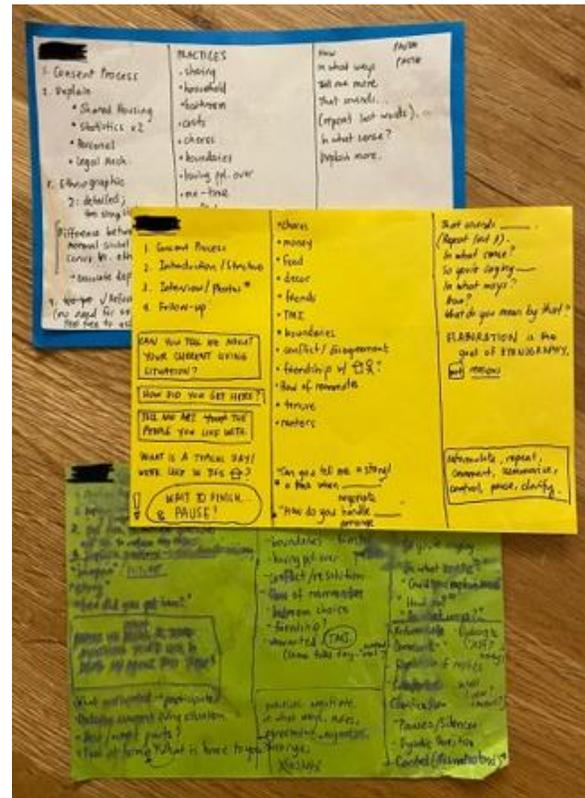


Figure 6. Interview guides for three in-person interviews.

To begin the interview, participants were asked a standard open-ended question, “Can you tell me about your current living arrangement?” Wherever possible, participants were allowed to talk freely without interruption, in order to let them narrate their own housing biography and life story (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Based on their response to this initial open-ended question, I would steer the conversation towards topics that participants seemed keen to discuss, or otherwise move to talk about “everyday” matters in the household, such as chores, their roommates, and the use of “communal” rooms like kitchens and living rooms. In asking questions and probing for answers, I avoided contradicting participants, and instead elaborated, reformulated, repeated, summarized, or commented on what they said. Sometimes, I would pause, heeding Gobo’s (2008) advice on “doing ethnography,” in which “silences too are actions.”

Interviews were conducted through two methods: in-person or by phone. Because of the methodological switch, a number of differences presented themselves. First was the matter of compensation. Phone participants, who were recruited online, were presented \$20 for each hour of interview, paid as soon as we put down the phone. In-person participants, recruited through my own personal networks, were not. Instead, meals (in one case, tea) were shared between myself and in-person participants, providing a more personal atmosphere to the research conversation.

Another difference was the matter of corporeality. Interviews held in-person tended to last longer, as some conversations naturally do. In person, there were also moments of interruption that provided some digression or relief from the topic at hand. One memorable instance was my interview with Eleanor. It was Sunday morning at her place, her roommates were slowly waking up, making their way down the stairs into the living room where we were chatting. They introduced themselves to me, and even joined in the conversation at different points, offering their own insights about their place, but also incidentally revealing a sense of openness and warmth among members of the household.

But phone conversations offered revelatory moments, too. One of these occurred when I was talking on the phone with a participant named Janet, who, at many points, would start whispering in fear of her roommate overhearing the details of her interview with me. Unlike Eleanor who described her roommates as “familial,” Janet describes her sole roommate as someone she “doesn’t like very much.” Certainly, being in the same room with someone felt different than talking on the phone. However, phone interviewing provided some advantages. For one, finding time was easier. Better yet, the anonymity of talking on the phone seemed to attract a wider range of people who might not have participated if the study design were fixed as an in-person event. All interviews lasted at least one hour, with a number of participants going up to two hours. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with each participant’s consent.

Alongside interviews, I also kept field notes, an ethnographic staple, which Roger Sanjek (1990) also calls “memory aids.” Field notes are a way of personal sense-making for ethnographers, which involves writing as many details about each encounter, as is customary with this method. Similarly, based on a suggestion by Paul Atkinson (2015), analytic memos were written down, communicating to myself relevant ideas and

emerging themes located within the raw data. Based on social anthropologist Noel Dyck's advice, I also kept a separate journal as a cathartic repository for my own feelings, in order to engage in critical self-reflection, and to keep some necessary objectivity in treating the data as a separate entity.

Throughout the research project, I regularly scoured through the website Craigslist.com to browse shared household postings, engaging in a form of virtual or digital ethnography (SAGE Research Methods). Based on participant interviews and related literature, Craigslist seemed to be a nearly universal first step in the search for shared housing. In this sense, Craigslist roommate ads were pertinent sources of information about the current market of roommate households.



Figure 7. Craigslist keywords used: roommate, shared, room for rent

For instance, roommate listings that featured photos of a dining table or a living room also tended to advertise themselves as “community-minded” or living more communally. On the other hand, those that featured photos of mainly the bedroom tended to advertise themselves as “quiet” and “respectful” types of households. I saved a number of listings that proved to be resonant with some of the stories included in this thesis, and some of these photos will be shown when relevant.

\$950 Welcoming New Roommate

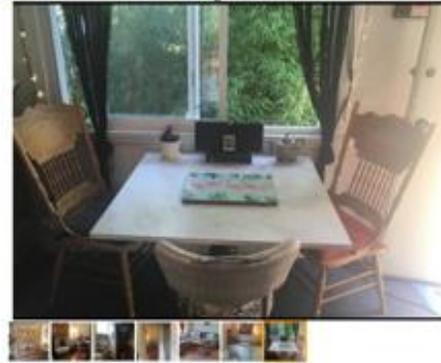
image 1 of 9



\$950 / 2br - LOOKING FOR RAD ROOMMATE

(Vancouver, Commercial Drive)

image 7 of 7



\$560 Responsible & quite roommate (Vancouver)

image 3 of 3



\$650 FURNISHED PRIVATE ROOM NEAR SKYTRAIN STATION (Vancouver)

image 1 of 7

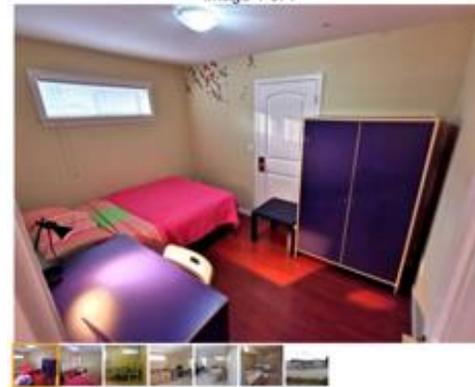


Figure 8. Craigslist images chosen may suggest shared household characteristics.

2.3. Data Analysis

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed as soon as possible, typically within a day of the interview itself. As each interview is treated as an independent case study, statistical representation was not the goal of data analysis.

As such, adaptive theory coding was used as the primary method for data analysis. Adaptive theory coding is a method which combines the structured nature of deductive coding with the openness of inductive coding (Layder 2014). Pre-determined and “orienting” codes were chosen based on expected themes from prior research, and new “emergent” codes were generated based on interview transcriptions. Each transcription yielded emergent codes that were then used as the basis for coding other

different transcriptions, allowing each case study to interact with all others in dialectical conversation. Alongside all this, I continuously read relevant literatures that matched with emergent codes, and refined my analysis as necessary.

This process was iterative. Analytical themes and categories emerged and kept on doing so until the analysis reached a level of saturation, in which new interviews yielded new details but fewer and fewer new insights (Small 2009). While the steps are delineated here, the depth of understanding needed for ethnographic analysis is necessarily non-linear. Even when analysis was meant to be “over,” it continued on its own. As I wrote, I continually reflected on the interviews and the literature. I listened to audio recordings when I went for walks, reviewed my fieldnotes, journaled, all the while paying attention to convergences and discrepancies arising from the data. While there were generalities among these shared housing participants, there were even more differences. Considering all these, the purpose of using adaptive theory coding is to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of 15 different renters in shared households as their accounts related to each other.

This chapter outlined the various methodologies used in gathering and analyzing the materials for this project. Independent case studies were crafted and collected through ethnographic interviewing and virtual ethnographic methods. What followed was an iterative process of adaptive theory coding, serving as the primary method for data analysis, where themes, generalities, and discrepancies among the data were considered for their analytical potential in providing a glimpse into the lives of 15 roommates in the City of Vancouver.

Chapter 3.

Conceptual Framework

This chapter will introduce a series of pertinent concepts drawn from the extensive literature on shared housing. These will be used to examine the original ethnographic data collected for this thesis.

3.1. Crisis

“High rent means living with your six best friends.” Heineken bus ad, Long Beach, California¹⁶

In 2018, *The Vancouver Sun* reported a story about Katrina Charlton, a 52-year-old renter who has worked two jobs in the last 20 years in order to raise two children as a single mom in the Lower Mainland. The first job, working part-time as an education assistant for the school board, pays the rent; and the second job, waitressing, pays the bills. Worse yet, her rental property was put up for sale, leaving her in an even deeper state of precarity. “A lot of people my age go back to sharing like when they were kids,” she said. “I’ve had roommates to get me through the summer (when she doesn’t get paid for her education job) and it’s not ideal. But it would be a way to get by, if you had to.”¹⁷

In recent years, British Columbia has outperformed the rest of the country in reported employment, having lowered its unemployment rate to 5.8% in 2017. From a macro-economic perspective, this was good. Former Premier Christy Clark announced, “When we [BC Liberals] launched the Jobs Plan in 2011, we were 9th when it came to creating jobs. Since then, we have become Number 1 in the country – Number 1 in job growth, Number 1 in lowest unemployment, Number 1 in economic growth, Number 1 in investment.”¹⁸ However, in 2016, data from Statistics Canada showed that half of the

¹⁶ James Andrew Carroll (2019) “Heineken, High Rent, and the Long Beach Crisis” *For The Organization*, <https://forthe.org/perspectives/heineken-high-rent/>

¹⁷ <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/b-c-s-working-poor-low-wage-jobs-keep-many-living-paycheque-to-paycheque>

¹⁸ <https://theprovince.com/news/bc-politics/premier-christy-clark-happy-to-praise-b-c-s-booming-economy-but-cost-of-living-is-booming-too>

new jobs created were only part-time, a pertinent detail Clark failed to mention in her speeches. Judging by the numbers only, more people were indeed employed and working. But a critical look at this situation makes it evident that this growth meant that more individuals were more likely to work two or more jobs in order to get paid for the same rate as one full-time position.¹⁹

The combination of below average incomes with the high costs of housing and living have led some to call Vancouver a “consumption city” (Siemiatycki, 2013). Since the early 1980s, Vancouver’s urban development has facilitated significant job losses and the proliferation of low-wage jobs. In addition, Vancouver is in the midst of a housing affordability crisis. As with many cities in North America, massive amounts of capital – both domestic and foreign – flow in and out in exchange for apartments, houses, and buildings, transforming housing into investments rather than homes. These political economic processes bleed into the fabric of everyday life, leaving a few privileged homeowners with multiple housing units, while many more folks struggle to find ways to afford next month’s rent.

How did this happen? To begin with, examining the role of the Canadian Housing Mortgage Corporation (CMHC) might illuminate some of the reasons for how this crisis came to be. CMHC is a federal crown corporation created in 1946 to replace the Wartime Housing Corporation in providing affordable housing for returning veterans. The organization was also responsible for the funding and facilitation of new social housing construction across the country. Through the CMHC, the federal government funded an average of 20,000 social housing units per year (Macdonald 2012). But this all changed upon the election of Progressive-Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who ended all federal funding for new social housing construction outside First Nation Reserves. Provincial and municipal governments were tasked with building affordable housing in their respective regions, but their capacity to do so was limited.

Economist Michael Rozworski (2019) argues this was a “sudden imposition of housing austerity” from the federal government. Homeownership became the primary form of housing tenure, as the government continued to undercut spending for new social and non-market housing stock. Over time, the CMHC transformed “from

¹⁹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/170106/t003a-eng.htm>

homebuilder to mortgage insurer” (Rozworski 2019). The move away from direct and indirect public provision of housing only further solidified long-standing economic and cultural pressures towards homeownership. With this move, the government expedited the transformation of housing from human necessity to investment good, now supplied almost exclusively by the private sector. This transformation is even more pronounced in global cities like Toronto and Vancouver.

It was also the CMHC that eventually bailed out a majority of national banks in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Considered the “first global housing crisis” (Aalbers 2012), the 2008 Global Financial Crisis set into motion a new global age of austerity that had deleterious effects for housing (Bramall 2013). Different governments across the world ‘rescued’ major national banks in places where the middle classes were hit hardest by the recession. In Canada, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) exposed a \$114 billion “Insured Mortgage Purchase Program” that revealed how the federal government used taxpayer funds to purchase worthless assets from banks to keep them afloat (CCPA 2012, CBC 2012).²⁰ Since 2008, average house prices in Canada have grown by 80%, and have more than doubled in most major cities, including Vancouver.

This is concerning, especially as the growth of wages has not kept up with the rate of housing inflation. In 2018, Vancouver-based urban planner Andy Yan discovered a worrying trend: while home prices in Metro Vancouver were the highest in Canada, its median household income was the lowest.²¹ However, Yan says there are people who were able to “get lucky” with the housing market because they ‘bought at a right time.’ Housing inflation has had the effect of turning some middle-class people into millionaire-rentiers, and at the same time turning others into impoverished renters. Economic inequalities continue to worsen post-crisis, and people’s ways of living began to follow suit.

²⁰ David Macdonald (2012) The Big Banks’ Big Secret: Estimating government support for Canadian banks during the financial crisis. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/big-banks-big-secret>

²¹ CBC British Columbia (2019) Vancouver’s brain drain? Young professionals leaving over high cost of housing. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-s-brain-drain-young-professionals-leaving-over-high-cost-of-housing-1.4976682>

The proliferation of private housing stock and the lack of social housing that followed meant that more and more people had to “make do” within the private rental sector, under the jurisdiction of landlords. In liberal market economies like Canada, the small size of the social housing sector means that a majority of low-income households have no choice but to rely on private landlords for accommodations (Kemp 2011, 1020). “Although most private renters are not poor, most poor people rent privately” (Ibid, 1021). The private rental sector is often described as “residual,” collecting the remains of those not accommodated by social housing. But the private rental sector isn’t a reliable safety net. In the absence of social housing, Pavel, a 52-year-old participant in my study, uses his monthly welfare assistance cheques to pay for a room in the ground floor of a “Vancouver special.”²² Forced to “compete” with non-welfare earners in the private rental market, Pavel says, “When I apply for a place, as soon as a landlord sees disability, they toss it. Because they play the numbers. If I apply, and 10 other people apply who are working full time, well you play the percentages. But y’know, somebody who’s working full time doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll be a good tenant. That’s one of the things— basically if I run into problems where I’m living, I’m facing living on the street.”

3.1.1. Making Do

In *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, Rebecca Bramall (2013, 24) notes that the further individuals are from their ideal living situations, the more there is a need to “make do” with what they have. When housing is commodified, it is treated primarily as a tradeable good instead of a place to live in. Yet housing is always essential. People will find ways to call a place their home. If not a single-family house, perhaps an apartment. If not an apartment, perhaps a room in a shared house. If not a room in the shared house, perhaps in a shelter, or on the street. In times of crisis, it has been proven that individuals actively rearrange their lifestyles and social relationships in order to cope with the challenges of everyday life (Hall 2019, 778).

Challenges in affording rent can force people to develop their own informal coping strategies. For instance, researchers in the UK found that low-income renters in the private rented sector often engaged in tactics such as informal subletting, turning the

²² The Vancouver Special is an architectural style of residential houses developed in Vancouver, Canada and the surrounding municipalities. The style was popular in the 1960s to 1980s due to ability to maximize floor space with relatively cheap construction costs. (Wikipedia)

living room into an extra bedroom, in order to spread the property's rental costs among more people (McKee, Soaita and Hoolachan 2019, 1478). This meant, however, the loss of privacy (for the living room renter) and the loss of communality (for all members of the household who couldn't gather in what was once a communal space). Other "coping strategies" involved lodging with friends for free, but entering into these arrangements entailed new "roles" which also had the effect of transforming relationships: from friend to friend, into that of "pseudo-landlord" to "pseudo tenant."

\$600 Good vibes roommate wanted, downtown next to the Skytrain (Downtown Vancouver)

image 5 of 9



Figure 9. Good vibes roommate wanted

same size as a single-bed, with very little space for other items, activities, or movement for that matter.

In Vancouver, the lack of affordable, adequate, and suitable housing means it is more likely for roommates to find housing that might be affordable yet unsuitable and inadequate. A cursory look at Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace will reveal advertisements, such as the one shown on Figure 8. Relative to other listings, \$600 is indeed a more affordable price in a central, transit-serviced location. But this is affordability in lieu of suitability and adequacy.

Here, the room measures the

Meanwhile, there are other roommate listings that advertise for nearly double the price of the one above. Shown on the right (Figure 9) is a decently-sized room in a two-bedroom apartment on Main and 8th, with lots of natural light in a transit-oriented, central location.

Roommate listings often come with details that describe both the existing tenant (e.g. “About me: clean, works from home, likes to garden”), and the

expectations about the prospective roommate. In this particular listing, one qualification was, “Must have a job.” In my study, Tyler, a 29-year-old freelance product designer, expresses the frustration of encountering these listings. “There are a lot of housing ads where there’s like ‘*you need to have a job; your office is not the house.*’ I don’t know why that matters to some people, but that’s normally what you see. Some posts would be like, ROOM FOR RENT, DON’T USE KITCHEN, MUST BE AWAKE BETWEEN X HOURS. I’m like, this is nuts.”

In searching for shared housing, some people who are already precariously employed must prove their financial stability in order to find housing that may very well be precarious, too. Other participants in my study echoed how looking for rental housing in Vancouver felt like a job application in itself.

But the security of having a full-time, nine-to-five job is becoming less common over time. From my interviews, the overwhelming majority of participants described themselves and their roommates as being unemployed, between jobs, working on call, working seasonally, or working on a contractual or freelance basis in the “gig economy.” To afford renting a one-bedroom apartment in Vancouver, analysts at the Canadian

\$1,250 / 800ft² - Looking for a roommate in a 2-bedroom apartment (mount pleasant) (vancouver)

image 3 of 6



Figure 10. Looking for a roommate in a 2-bedroom apartment

Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) have calculated that one must make an hourly wage of \$27 for one full year, on a nine-to-five basis.²³ But calculations are less straightforward for those who work contractually in the gig economy, where regular work are not guaranteed. An hour of work in the gig economy also pays about \$7 less than its traditional counterpart. In a 2018 study, Vancity Credit Union found that nearly 1 in 5 residents of British Columbia regularly work in the gig economy: 40% of them earned less than \$25,000 in the last year (25% earned just a little over \$50,000).²⁴ No wonder that the number of shared households is predicted to increase in coming years.

Furthermore, research has found stark differences between two general kinds of sharers: professional sharers versus low-income sharers. Kemp (2011, 1025) calls this the bi-modal nature of shared housing. “The lived experience of sharing a flat or house with chosen friends or other professionals is often very different from living with strangers in a dingy house at the bottom end of the private rented sector” (Kemp 2011, 1025).²⁵ But based on my interviews, many experiences of shared housing don’t simply fit between these two categories of “professional” and “low-income” either, A majority existed in-between. In my study: four participants had full-time jobs (asset manager, non-profit case worker, pension plan administrator, managing director); five were students (four graduate students, one undergraduate); two were precariously employed (server, freelance product designer); four were unemployed (one of them being on welfare).²⁶

Under crisis conditions, individual lifestyles and social relationships undergo changes, transformations, and redefinitions (Hall 2019, 778). For example, when affordable childcare spaces are inaccessible, parents often turn to their own parents to provide these missing services for free. Under crisis conditions, personal networks of

²³ Marc Lee and David Macdonald (2019). “How much do you have to earn to afford rent in Metro Vancouver?” *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. <https://www.policynote.ca/housing-wage/>

²⁴ Vancity Credit Union (2018) “Independents’ Day: Why gig work is taking hold in BC” <https://www.scribd.com/document/387347164/vancity>

²⁵ When Kemp discusses the “dingy house at the end of the private rented sector,” he is referring to a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO), a type of property in the UK rented out by at least three people who are not from 1 ‘household’ (for example, a family) but share facilities like the bathroom and kitchen. Monthly rent for HMOs may be subsidized under UK’s housing welfare system.

²⁶ The category of “student” and “precariously employed” also overlap here. Out of the 4 Graduate Students, 2 held Research Assistantships; 1 depended on monthly graduate stipend; and 1 did not have work. The undergraduate student did not have employment at the time of our interview.

care may fill in for the lack of institutional care. In many cases, the lack of affordable housing for young people, often called “Generation Rent” (McKee, Soaita, Hoolachan 2019), a parent’s house often becomes the ‘back up plan’ with the expectation that kids can live with reduced rent, or even rent-free.

Roommate arrangements are useful in analyzing how relationships have the capacity to offer support during hard times. In roommate households, what starts out as a pragmatic housing arrangement – a purely financial decision – may transform into a different sort of relationship, one more emotional and personal than initially anticipated. “Living with roommates can create connections that are intimate, supportive and emotionally meaningful in a time when life-time employment, relationships and family living nearby are no longer guaranteed” (Clark et al 2017, 1203).

But the opposite can be also be true. Living together can cause new frictions or magnify existing tensions. In 2017, researchers in New Zealand sought to understand the complications that arise in roommate relationships (Clark, Tuffin, Frewin and Bowker 2017). In shared housing, one common reason for conflict involved the blurring of boundaries. In roommate arrangements, a high degree of intimacy and interdependence might transpire (Ibid), blurring the lines between the private and the public. Furthermore, they found that intimacy and interdependence do not always carry positive associations, arguing: “Interpersonal relationships in the intimacy of domesticity are at best complicated, and at worst highly conflictual and fraught with challenges” (Clark et al 2017, 1204).

3.2. Intimacy

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “intimacy” in multiple ways. Meanings range from “close familiarity” to “sexual intercourse” to “closeness of observation, knowledge, and the like.” Meanwhile, the word’s cognate “intimate” is defined as “pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding, concerning or affecting one’s inmost self” and “characterized by closeness and familiarity.”²⁷ Intimacy has positive associations. But to assume that intimacy and intimate relations are automatically built on love and mutuality is at best romanticized, and at worst ignorant (Hall 2019). Yes,

²⁷ Dictionary source: <https://www-oed-com/view/Entry/98503?redirectedFrom=intimacy>

intimacy could indeed mean openness, warmth, mutuality and trust. Yet intimate bonds may also include elements of hostility, mistrust, exploitation and ambivalence (Kanwal and Akhtar 2019, 1).

As intimacy is often idealized to facilitate a potential for 'radical and positive social change,' Hall (2019, 4) argues that intimate encounters in moments of crisis can be braced by strong negative emotions: "feelings of loneliness and shame, rather than solidarity and collectivity." Clark et al (2017) similarly note that "interpersonal relationships in the intimacy of domesticity are at best complicated, and at worst highly conflictual and fraught with challenges" (1204). Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) have noted that there is a need for new, systematic research on new forms of household intimacy outside traditional families. This is especially significant in a context like Vancouver, where non-traditional household arrangements are only expected to rise in number.

Shared households have been described as sites that can "create connections that are intimate, supportive, and emotionally meaningful in a time when employment and supportive family relations are no longer guaranteed" (Heath 2004, 1203). At the same time, when shared households are formed in the context of crisis and austerity, the results may not always look so rosy. Crisis conditions can end up forcing people into housing conditions that they deem 'unfit,' and as a result, have to "endure unwanted intimacies" (Hall 2019). Interpersonal conflict in the intimacy of co-residence can also result in hostility and anxiety with negative mental and health implications (Heath 2018, 44). In the UK, existing research on houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) have shown that living in these shared arrangements often has negative effects on residents' mental health (Barratt et al 2012).

Here, instead, intimacy is defined as "*a quality of connection between people, observable through actions, practices, words, mundane interactions such as sharing the same space together, managing time*" (Jamieson 2011). Writings on intimacy across the social sciences have typically adopted geographical terminologies and concepts, such as proximity and propinquity, closeness and distance (Hall 2015). Here, intimacy is envisioned as a physical, corporeal and material; as well as an emotional, social and personal way of relating to others (Hall 2019, 104).

In addition, the sociologist David Morgan (2009) argued that three features of intimacy may exist in different relations regardless of relationship type: (1) physical intimacy (propinquity), (2) emotional intimacy and (3) intimate knowledge. Physical intimacy pertains to nearness and bodily closeness, whether intended or unintended (e.g. hugging, or passing your roommate in the hallway and bumping shoulders). Emotional Intimacy pertains to consensual and active forms of self-disclosure (e.g. confiding in your roommate about the death of a family member). Intimate knowledge pertains to the information that might be 'incidentally' discovered (e.g. hearing a roommate crying in their room, or discovering that the new roommate habitually forgets to flush).²⁸ Morgan (1996) also uses the notion of 'bodily density' to describe the ways in which living together can impinge upon the ability to protect one's privacy, whereby household members tend to monitor, control and have intimate knowledge of each other's bodies, whether desired or not.

Intimate relations aren't bound to develop in set ways, either. Some forms of intimate living arrangements entail a non-reciprocal form of intimacy, such as Pratt's (1997) observation of the unequal relations and "unidirectional propinquities" in Filipino nannies' experiences of living with their employers in Great Britain. These are also related to Berlant and Warner's (2000) idea of 'non-standard intimacies' which are created through relationships that don't conform to "non-normative" relationships (318).

Furthermore, the experience of intimacy is also culturally-bound, modified through institutional arrangements which recognize and protect particular types of relationships as "legitimate" or not. For Jamieson (2011) practices of intimacy may already be at play, even if the presence of intimacy is left unacknowledged by the actors involved. For instance, a number of interview participants drew rigid boundaries against giving their roommates the category "friend" even when elements of friendship were present. Tyler recounted some fond memories of having beers in the kitchen with his roommates, driving to IKEA together and even at one point going to a concert with his roommate, Daniel. But, Tyler says, "I wouldn't call my roommates 'friends.'"

"Why not?" I ask.

²⁸ The examples given here are lifted from my interview data without direct attribution to specific participants.

“A friend is someone you would hang out with that wasn’t a direct result of living together. I hang out with my friends, we go have a mutual agreed thing that we’re gonna’ go do together. If you live with someone, the things that happen have a function, some kind of mathematical result out of living together. And so it doesn’t feel like those things that spring up are genuine or authentic to me.”

Living together does not have to be friendly nor romantic, but in shared households, the proximity of bodies hearing, smelling, bumping, crossing and trafficking in each other’s paths means that developing intimate relations is, in some way, inevitable. As roommates often come and go, Layder’s (2009) idea of ‘episodic intimacy’ is also useful in thinking through how certain forms of intimacy are necessarily temporary.

3.3. Crisis Intimacies



Figure 11. New York City subway advertisement.

After having considered the conceptual relevance of the terms “crisis” and “intimacy,” this project offers the term “crisis intimacies” to refer to the ways in which relationships are formed out of conditions of crisis. Shared households are specific sites in which crisis intimacies are front and centre. Because of housing unaffordability, people enter into shared households, and subsequently into significant relational arrangements with others they might not have otherwise ever encountered. Crisis intimacies may also be present in other spaces and relationships: such as couples

forced to move in together to save on rent, how the heartbreak of separation or divorce is exacerbated in the face of multiplying costs, or even perhaps the transnational relationships that develop for immigrants forced to find livelihoods apart from their families and home countries.

This term relies heavily on British geographer Sarah Hall's concept, "austere intimacies," defined as the ways in which austerity policies and a personal condition of austerity can have significant impacts on intimate relationships (2019, 103). To investigate "austere intimacies," Hall asks a central question that proves relevant for this thesis as well: "What happens when the terms of our intimate relationships are dramatically altered, alongside the economic, social, political and personal contexts in which they are rooted? How does austerity rework these intimacies and relational boundaries, and what are the results?" (Ibid, 106).

3.3.1. Ontological Security and Residential Alienation

When conditions of crisis impede individual agency in housing decisions and personal life, what results is the loss of ontological security, described as "*the emotional foundation that allows us to feel at ease in our environment and at home in our housing*" (Marcuse and Madden 2016). Sociologist Anthony Giddens' earlier definition of ontological security is also useful here: "The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments, including a sense of the reliability of persons and things." (1992, 92)

Ontological security can also be understood as the feeling or sense of stability from having a fixed address. It's a subjective state, which depends upon a number of structural conditions.²⁹ Some researchers have called into question the capacity of rented accommodation to provide the same sense of ontological security as a home that one owns (Marcuse and Madden 2016; see also Easthope 2014). In Heath's extensive study of shared households in the UK, she found that "the ability to attain privacy and to exercise control over one's environment within the domestic sphere is widely believed to

²⁹ Madden and Marcuse go further and argue that ontological security is often reserved as an "elite, male, white privilege" (2016, 68) – a type of advantage reserved to those who, historically, have had access to homeownership and its respective emotional and social benefits.

have important consequences for personal wellbeing and self-identity... linked to the concept of ontological security” (2018, 24).

For Barratt and Green (2016, 3) creating a sense of ontological security is inseparable from the notion of “home” or “at-homeness.” But this becomes complicated when “home” is “typically portrayed as involving members of a heterosexual nuclear family, living in a detached, owner-occupied dwelling in a suburban location” (Blunt and Bowling 2006. 100-101). What are the implications for those who reside outside of these normative patterns of living? What happens when someone's experience of living in a particular place does not match up to their notion of a 'proper' place to live, such as when a roommate says that they are “forced” to live where they are?

The loss of ontological security has spawned a corresponding concept, which David Madden and Peter Marcuse refer to as *residential alienation*, defined as “the painful, at times traumatic, experience of the divergence between home and housing” (2016, 60). Residential alienation describes the ways in which households, during times of crisis, cannot shape their domestic environment as they wish, do not find satisfaction in their housing, and struggle to fulfill individuality and freedom (Ibid, 59). There are degrees to residential alienation, too: homelessness, they say, may represent the most “extreme form” (69), but “those who are not homeless yet occupy places on the bottom rungs of the housing hierarchy are also subject to residential alienation. This includes the uncountable numbers of people barely holding on to their places of residence: those who have doubled up, those who are sleeping in temporary quarters, and other informal and short-term strategies.”

This chapter has woven together two primary theoretical frameworks, detailing how “crisis” and “intimacy” will be discursively used and applied in the rest of this thesis. Taken together, the concept “crisis intimacies” describes the phenomenon in which people are made to rearrange their personal and social connections in order to cope with structural or economic challenges. As such, experiences of living with roommates might be fraught or conflict-ridden, while at the same time generating new spaces for relationships which would otherwise not develop except for a shared need to live together out of financial necessity.

Chapter 4.

Encounters in Shared Housing

The following chapter will offer a brief discussion of encounters, the “units of observation” located and enacted within the shared household. As argued in the previous section, intimacy is a quality of connection observable through actions, words, practices and mundane interactions. Here, I use the term ‘encounters’ to encapsulate these differences into one analytic unit. Encounters may span a wide range of activities, but for the purposes of understanding shared households, we will consider three forms of encounters commonly found within participants’ stories: spatial, temporal, and digital.

4.1. Spatial Dimensions

“It’s kind of tricky, when you’re living with roommates—how much do you engage with each other in common spaces?” Tyler, a 29-year-old freelance product designer, tells me on the phone, thinking out loud. “Like, if someone is sitting on the couch reading a book, does it mean you need to say hi? Or is it their personal time, and you just let them have it? At the same time, you want to be warm, be nice to your roommate, so it’s hard to know what to do, how to act.”

What are the rules of engagement in communal spaces within shared houses or apartments, and what are the factors that might determine these? For Tim, a 33-year-old managing director, the rules come down to a simple formula: square footage per person. He attributed the peaceful coexistence he had with his roommate to the spaciousness of their duplex basement suite. “What it boils down to is the square footage per person, you know what I mean?”

“No, can you say more?” I probe.

“In my situation now, we have a fair amount of space. If you’re cramped in an apartment downtown with a roommate, then they might get on your nerves because everything is much smaller. That’s part of the formula.”

Beyond Tim’s formula of square footage per person, another crucial aspect in the spatial dimension of shared housing were the presence of physical boundaries: doors, walls, and partitions. Hannah, a 23-year-old undergraduate student who lived in a 3-bedroom basement suite with two other undergrads, confessed to having moments in which she heard “too much information.”

She shared a thin bedroom wall with one of her roommates. “I hear everything. It’s... frustrating for me,” she sighs deeply. “Yeah. Anything from her and her boyfriend having sex, and having conversations. Sometimes at night, even if I put music on and tune out with a podcast or something like that, sometimes I could hear word for word everything that they’re saying. They both have loud voices and don’t care when they’re yelling at each other. I’m very, very annoyed.”

“In moments like that,” I inquire. “What do you do?”

“Usually I just try to put music on and try to go to bed. I fantasize about just getting up and pounding on the wall. During quarantine, I was getting a little bit vindictive. Instead of ambient music, I put on my podcast on full blast. I wanted them to hear what it sounds like when people are having loud conversations.”

In the beginning of our interview, Hannah described her roommate as someone she’s “known for over 10 years.” “We had a pretty tight knit friendship before we moved in together.” But living together has dampened the relationship in some ways, saying, “I’ve picked up on the negative things more.”



Figure 12. Who gets to use common spaces?
Illustration by the author.

Doors, walls, and partitions are critical to cohesion in roommate households. Walls are of particular importance because they clearly demarcate what's "mine" and what's "yours." Walls also function as physical barriers to keep sensory details – sounds, smells, and sights – hidden from other residents' view. In shared living arrangements, the boundaries between the public and the private are blurred, consequently facilitating a high degree of intimacy and interdependence (Clark et al 2017, 1203). Yet as discussed, intimacy and interdependence are not always mutually, or even unilaterally, desired.

Indeed, sharing a wall was something that participants frequently watched out for, knowing that this physical feature could make or break the peace of the household. Ruth, a 27-year-old pension plan administrator, who shared a two-bedroom apartment with one roommate, said that she chose her apartment based on "the size, which attracted me to it, and that the two bedrooms didn't share a wall. Then you're not always hearing each other." Eleanor, a 42-year-old asset manager, acknowledges that even in her relatively harmonious 7-person household, people occupying bedrooms with shared walls will often have extra conversations to negotiate boundaries around "quiet time."

4.2. Temporal Dimensions

As much as space matters in living together, so does time. It matters *when* a roommate wakes up, cooks, eats, showers, or begins to work. These must seem like "little things," as some participants would say, yet they can have significant effects on day-to-day operations and the maintenance of long-term household harmony.

Ruby, a 30-year-old non-profit case worker living with one roommate in a two-bedroom upper-level suite of a single-family house, attributes the good rhythm she has with her roommate in part to their "natural and compatible biological clocks." "I've lived in previous shared housing where my roommate was a night-owl, and would start playing music as soon as I would go to bed. It was not good." Indeed, incompatibility with timing can lead to frustrations, or perhaps even eruptions in household relations.

Pavel, 52-years-old, recounted an ex-roommate who would spend "hours" in the bathroom. "If we were on really good terms, I could have probably knocked and said, 'You mind?' But we're not. So, I hear him come out. I'm waiting there, and he snaps, 'I'm not done yet!' and I said, 'Well, shit, it's not your bathroom, man!' We had an argument.

We're standing there, in front of the bathroom, and he pushed me. A little push because he thought I was too close. I pushed him back once, and he called the police."

Furthermore, encounters might be spontaneous or planned. Passing your roommate in the hallway and bumping shoulders, waiting for your turn to use the shower, smelling the funky odor of your roommate's expired milk, and overhearing your roommate quarrel with their significant other in their bedroom are some examples of "spontaneous" encounters participants have mentioned across interviews.



Figure 13. Kitchens are sites of serendipitous encounters, illustration by the author.

As stated previously, researchers have found that kitchens were particularly apt sites for "serendipitous encounters" (Heath 2013, Scicluna 2017). The experiences of Tyler support this finding. "In the evening, my roommates and I sometimes do this 'dance' in the kitchen to see who will occupy that space, since there's really only room for one person to cook." Similarly, Eleanor enthusiastically shared, "Sometimes we find ourselves all in the kitchen, and we all go— 'We're all here!' and do a group hug. It's happened a few times." She laughs.

Encounters, while "spontaneous," still have some sort of operational logic to them. When I asked about how spaces are generally used among household members, Janet, a 26-year-old participant who lives in a two-bedroom apartment with one roommate, explains, "The way we handle who gets to use the living space is 'opportunity-based.' If I'm in there, she just goes into her room. If she's already in her room, I'll go there, practice yoga. In the bathroom, obviously a closed door means closed-door, don't come in."

But encounters can also be planned, consensual, and prepared for in advance. Scheduling time to have a bath, letting roommates know about guests coming, or agreeing to a house meeting are some common examples of "planned" encounters from

interview accounts. Eleanor's household makes it a point to schedule house meetings that are conducted alongside shared meals, typically once a month, where all roommates can check-in and air any grievances as necessary. "House meetings are where we check-in if things have been slipping," she says, referring to the division of chores agreed upon in earlier meetings.

4.3. Digital Dimensions

Niamh, a 25-year-old graduate student who lived with three roommates in a single-family house, shares how she had to dig up her roommates' contact information on Facebook, initially finding them based on their first names and profile pictures. "At first it was a little weird because I don't run into my roommates that often. There was a lot of stuff I wasn't sure about the house. *'Is this space communal? Does this belong to somebody?'* But over time, we figured it out. I think I only had the leaseholder's contact information at first. The other ones I dug out from Facebook. (laughs). So at first that's how I contacted people. Over time when I ran into them on the hallway, I asked for numbers so we could communicate better."

Communication is a distinct type of encounter that may also be spontaneous or planned. For some, like Eleanor, house meetings were forms of regular planned communication. But for a majority of participants, texting was the primary method with which they conferred with their roommates. Demi, a 23-year-old server who shared a two-bedroom apartment with her romantic partner and one roommate, tells me, "Anything difficult tends to happen over text. It's not that I am trying to avoid in-person conversations, but it's more that I want to have a clear record so that there's no misunderstanding, and things can be reviewed. There's nothing negative about our interactions because difficult things happen over text. We each have plenty of time and space to think about and respond to things."

Tyler, who lived with two roommates in a three-bedroom apartment, mentioned that the "lead roommate" would often message him on Facebook. I asked him to say more about their general communication style. "You mentioned Jacob would message you on Facebook. Is that how communication usually works with you and your roommates?"

“Jacob and I tend to spend a lot of time in our rooms, and Daniel spends a little bit more time than I do. So, we usually use technology for that communication. It’s usually half and half,” he explains. “Sometimes he’ll come into the kitchen, sometimes he’ll message on Facebook. When it does happen in the kitchen, we end up talking for a few minutes. So I guess it’s more like accidental? Accidental common space interactions.”

In 1997, a study on shared households in Vancouver was conducted by anthropology graduate student Matthew Browne. In the 24 years that has transpired between his ethnographic study and mine, striking similarities and differences can be observed. Most evident was the difference in methods of communication between roommates. For instance, Browne reports that the process of recruiting new members mostly happened through personal networks (i.e. “friend of a friend”) or through local bookstores and bulletin boards. This stands in contrast today, when participants typically found roommates either through Craigslist or Facebook.

“Shared housing in the twenty-first century is arguably different: characterized by long-term tenure, diverse demographics, and digitally mediated,” says Australian geographer Sophia Maalsen, introducing her concept, ‘Generation Share’ (2020, 107). Digital mediation can reconfigure spatial relations, Maalsen argues (2020, 106). Writing about the prevalence of apps like Splitwise,³⁰ she writes, “It seems less awkward asking someone for money through [text] messaging than face-to-face” (2020, 110).³¹

³⁰ Splitwise is a digital application, described as “a free tool for friends and roommates to track bills and other shared expenses, so that everyone gets paid back. On the web, iPhone, and Android!”

³¹ Writing from an Australian context, Maalsen notes the prevalence of “online flatmate finding sites and Facebook groups” which require both households and those seeking accommodation to create online housing identities in order to match themselves in order to fit themselves better to suitable households. Such identities are shaped through classificatory criteria such as age and gender but also increasingly specify sexual orientation, interests and lifestyle choices. In my study, nearly all participants (except for one) found their households through Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace, frequently referring to it as the “search,” the first step in entering into shared living arrangements.

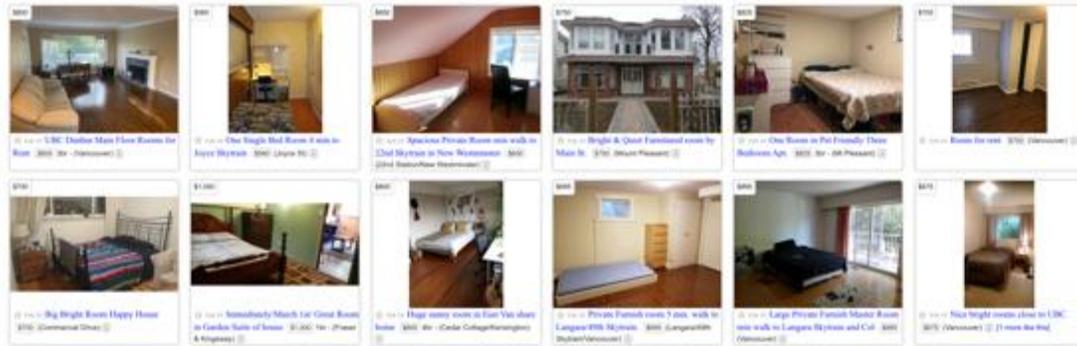


Figure 14. Generation Share

This section discussed the different forms of encounters reported by participants living within shared households. Spatial, temporal and digital encounters are the observable units with which roommates relate to one another. Understanding these dimensions, we can now move on to specific participant stories which highlight the complexity in the scale of the everyday. The next chapter provides a number of narratives that speak to the nature of crisis intimacies: the contradictions and complexities inherent in the experience of living closely together out of circumstantial necessity.

Chapter 5.

Shared Householding

Householding is a field of activity in which individuals engage in an ongoing process of developing and contesting their roles and relationships (Hannerz 1980, 102-3). It involves practices and activities ranging from the major to the mundane. Chores. Paying the bills. Determining which space belongs to whom. Leveling complaints against the landlord. In a shared household, conducting these practices means inevitably coming into contact with each other's bodies and belongings, habits and quirks, for better or for worse.

In this section, we will weave through a number of participant stories about mundane tasks regarding householding: house rules and specific issues around cleaning, storage space and the use of things around the house. That roommates often find themselves together out of economic necessity means that householding practices might be fraught and punctuated by difficult feelings, such as weariness and fatigue. The stories also highlight how social differences, such as class and gender, might impact how householding is conducted, when inequalities and power imbalances make themselves known in the household. For instance, this might be witnessed in the form of a roommate acting as a "quasi-landlord," exerting more control over the shared apartment or house versus other members of the household.

5.1. Cleaning, Chores, and House Rules

On March 25th 2020, I received an email from Janet, a 26-year-old woman who introduced herself as a potential study participant. She wrote: "Having a roommate has greatly impacted my mental health, but there's often no other option for affordable housing." Janet lives in a two-bedroom apartment in Fairview with one roommate. "It's an older apartment, with a large square footage. Two bedrooms, a shared bathroom, shared living room, shared kitchen. Not too cramped in terms of the space." Three years ago, Janet and a friend decided to pack up from Alberta and move to Vancouver together, finding this apartment after four months of searching. After a year, her friend moved to Europe, leaving Janet to find a replacement roommate.

“When my friend left, I had to go on Craigslist to find a roommate, and I was without a roommate for two months. Then I had an exchange student move in, she was here for about eight months. And then she moved out and I had to find another Craigslist roommate,” she pauses and sighs. “So now I have another Craigslist roommate here, who is Turkish.”

“How would you describe your relationship with your current roommate?” I ask.

“She’s here right now,” Janet mutters, explaining the reason for her muffled speech. “What I will say is she’s very spoiled and privileged. She’s used to living with maids all her life.”

As a result, most of the cleaning tended to fall on Janet’s shoulders. “She’s never cleaned the bathroom, she’s been here six months!” she whispers with exasperation. “Things like taking the recycling out, or doing the deep cleaning, falls on me because I’ll see that it needs to be done, and I’ll wait, and I’ll wait, and I’ll just do it, because people are less proactive. But I don’t want to have to tell her, ‘*hey, you have to clean the bathroom!*’ like her mother, or something.”

In this example, Janet’s frustration comes from the discrepancy between “what is” versus “what ought to be.” Her *expectation* was that cleaning *ought to be* a task equitably shared between her and her roommate. But the *actual* experience didn’t reflect this expectation. Janet’s expectation was largely shaped through her life history. She described herself as growing up in a middle-class home from a suburb in Alberta, where cleaning practices were done by her, her mom, and siblings. Upon leaving her family home, she went to university and lived with roommates, where cleaning was also done collectively. Meanwhile her roommate, an undergraduate student and a new immigrant from Turkey, who Janet described as “spoiled and privileged”, did not share this cultural context or background.

According to David Morgan, “with respect to household practices, individuals typically come into a set of practices already partially shaped through legal prescriptions, economic constraints, and cultural conditions” (2011, 7). These are what anthropologist Daniel Miller (2001) would refer to as “discourses.” Here, discourse refers to normative models borne out of legal frameworks, academic literature, popular media, and other

institutionalized orders that permeate social life (Miller 2001).³² In Janet's case, her unwillingness to function "like her [roommate's] mother" speaks to a certain discourse around householding, in which women – historically, wives, mothers, and daughters – are made responsible for cleaning and chores.

How are householding discourses typically learned? For many, this begins with the family. The family household is arguably the most common shared household form, and it is where many of us learn how to live with others. In a literal sense, this is where we learn rituals and norms about what spaces ought to be: that we eat in the kitchen, gather in the living room, and sleep in the privacy of our bedroom. This is where we learn and practice how to "household."

In Janet's case, her personal history certainly shaped her expectations around cleaning – that it's a mother's job, and that it ought to be equitably done by roommates. But beyond Janet, these beliefs about householding and cleaning were echoed by other participants, too. Ruth, a 27-year old pension plan administrator, shares that, "Cleaning... gives me the most frustrations. We would say we'd split up chores, but he [roommate] wouldn't do them. Like, I'm not your mother, I'm not going nag you about this. I would end up cleaning. I feel like I don't have an option." Pavel, a 52-year-old welfare recipient, recounts a time when he was living with a particularly unhygienic roommate. "He's disgusting, his room stank and there were dust bunnies everywhere. By then, our place had a foul smell, like a pigsty. But whatever, I'm not his mom, and I'm not gonna be the maid."

Demi, a 23-year-old server who lives in a two-bedroom apartment with her male romantic partner and a female roommate, similarly recounted how "all of the cleaning tends to fall on me." Her partner works graveyards, she reasoned, so he's mostly asleep during the day and awake during the night, during "quiet hours" when cleaning might cause a ruckus. Meanwhile her roommate, Camila, keeps to herself and doesn't use the kitchen much anyway. "I think things fall on me because," she pauses, sighs. "Things kind of work well that way."

³² Discourse here is not used in a "disciplinary" sense (popularized by Foucault) where individual agency and social structures are posited against each other, in an unwinnable tug-of-war for power.

“What do you mean when you say it works well?” I ask.

“It works well because my roommate and I are both conflict-avoidant. We avoid difficult conversations, and just follow each other’s flow. But it crosses my mind that this might need to change someday.”

It is interesting that Demi did not elaborate the role her romantic partner might have in contributing to household chores, even as her female roommate, Camila, was implicated in her frustration. Her claims were aligned with normative discourses around family, household, and gender, in which women typically assume housekeeping roles. In fact, Demi describes her living situation as similar to living with family. “I love her, almost like a sister,” Demi says, describing the nature of her relationship with her roommate, Camila. They were previously co-workers who did not consider themselves close. But living together forged a deeper friendship. “When we have people over, it’s the same friend group that we’ve both chosen to build together.”

But Demi also talked about a significant period of tension that developed between her and Camila. Shortly after signing the lease together, Demi lost her job. “My income dropped significantly, so my partner made the decision to move in to decrease my rent.” A few months later, Camila’s partner decided to move in, too.

“Did you have a discussion about your respective partners moving in?” I ask.

“No,” she says sheepishly. “We didn’t fully realize what we were getting into. We were relaxed. I think we were optimistic.”

“Optimistic?” I seek clarification.

“You know what, optimistic is too generous. I think we were naïve.”

With a nervous chuckle, Demi begins to narrate the hard four months that transpired in shared household. Her roommate Camila’s partner ended up settling himself and his things in the living room. He slept on the couch, which was also the most expensive thing Demi has ever purchased. The couch has, as a result, suffered long-term damage. “He was a big guy, and the couch was not built for a 200-pound man sleeping on it every night.” To Demi, it felt disrespectful. Neither Camila nor her boyfriend asked for permission, for this or for leaving a mess every night and not

cleaning up the common spaces. But neither did Demi protest or voice any of her concerns, nor did she ask Camila's permission about having her own partner move in.

I inquire further, "How come her partner was sleeping in the living room? They could have shared the bed, like you and your partner did, and like what many couples do."

"They quickly discovered that they didn't share space very well, but I didn't agree for her partner to come in and sleep on my couch every night."

At that time, Demi had other concerns. Her dog lived in the two-bedroom apartment with the four of them, a rescue pet who couldn't warm up to the roommate's boyfriend. He would taunt the dog, drink, and taunt the dog more. But there was one silver lining to the presence of the roommate's boyfriend: cheaper rent. They split the \$2550 among four instead of two, a major source of comfort for Demi who was job-hunting and serving on the side. Every bit of money she could save, she did. "My partner has a thyroid problem, so he's always cold, but it's so expensive to live here and I have to keep the heat off," she admits.

Eventually, the roommate's boyfriend left, shifting the composition of the household yet again. After four months of living together with three people and one dog inside a two-bedroom apartment, Demi felt relieved. I asked whether or not she ever had a conversation with her roommate, Camila, about those stressful four months. "No, I just left it," she says, her voice turning serious. "The only time it came up was when she sent less rent."

Demi held the responsibility of collecting rent and sending the money to their landlord. But this particular month, Camila sent less than the usual amount. "I told her, '*I don't think the current split is fair, can we have a conversation about it?*'" Demi says, simultaneously expressing her discomfort with this level of directness. "Camila came back to tell me, '*I feel like I'm just living in your and your partner's space, and it's not my home anymore.*'"

"What was your response to that?" I inquired further.

“What I said to her was: *Well, whatever we can do so you don’t feel that way, just let me know.* But I was surprised that she was saying that, given what it was like to have her partner here! I feel like my hands are tied in the situation.”

“Do you think there is any truth to Camila’s statement? That your place is more like yours and your partner’s?” I asked.

“My partner works 12-hour days, six or seven days a week. He’s barely here. So, I really didn’t understand. And in my mind, sure, maybe having one more body in the house creates more of a mess. But I’m the one cleaning up all the messes anyway! Those things have to be accounted for, or balanced out.”

Demi perceived multiple imbalances that her roommate Camila needed to account for: cleaning, and making reparations for her boyfriend’s damages to the couch. To Demi, these imbalances were obvious enough that Camila’s lack of initiative meant stubbornness and refusal. “Why do you think it’s clean all the time? Do you think this place cleans itself?” she says over the phone, in an imagined conversation with her roommate.

Throughout interviews, issues around cleaning were commonly reported sources of tension among roommates. What was supposedly a daily “light cleaning” task by some was considered “deep cleaning” by others. What seemed too basic for some seemed too tedious to others.³³ But not all roommates reported the same problems around cleaning. In the households described above, where cleaning tended to fall on the shoulders of one roommate, there was an observable pattern of behaviour in which house rules or boundaries were never (or only barely) discussed.

In contrast to these cases, some participants separately recounted having explicit discussions about “chore schedules” and assigned tasks. I interviewed Jordan at his three-bedroom apartment in Kitsilano one Friday morning, where he showed me a “chore chart” pasted on their refrigerator. On it, a clear division of labour was agreed

³³ Disjunctures in shared understanding may speak to a larger, ontological occurrences where some philosophers might argue “true” shared understanding is impossible. Yes, even people who dearly love each other and have lived together for a long time might never reach consensus on what a “clean” kitchen sink looks like. But no matter the differences, there are methods towards compromise that household members can engage in order to arrive at common understandings. These moves towards compromise and negotiation lay at the heart of these ethnographic findings.

upon and written down for everyone to see. It also mattered that all household members were fairly lax about anyone “slipping” on their responsibilities. “Ideally, we follow the chore chart,” Jordan says. “But that doesn’t always happen, and we’re fairly chill about it. Thank goodness!”

Eleanor, who held monthly ‘house meetings’ with her seven-person household, also had more specific rules around cleaning. “We agreed that our cleaning schedule is zone-based. Just one task. I clean the kitchen. I try to do it weekly, and yeah, so Aaron has hallways and stairwells, and someone does the living room, someone does the bathroom, and then it’s a bit self-managed. But during house meetings we check-in on it if things have been slipping. We now have a calendar where we’ve been asked to sign off once it’s been done, for accountability purposes.”

Hannah, who shared a three-bedroom basement suite with two roommates, explains the cleaning system she developed with her roommates, over time. “For chores, at one point we printed off a little checklist of things that need to be done. We decided we weren’t going to set chores, but we were trying to – I suggested this idea, if we put up a checklist and then I initial beside the things that I’m doing, that will socially pressure people to see who’s doing what, and to contribute in an equal way. We just stopped doing that because – (laughs) it’s just (laughs) too formal!”

Clear and formalized divisions of in collective households may have found their roots in commune movements of the past. In *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes describes the dynamic of some communes in the USSR, in the 1920s, the years following the October Revolution. One account, attributed to a man named William Reich, described a situation where “some friends, finding it impossible to return to their families, set up home on the second story of a big house.” “Little obstructions” began to stall everyday life, including “not doing the washing, making noise at night, meetings, and never-ending discussions on commissions.” In their shared house, commissions for every aspect of daily life were formed: The Tea Commission, The Soap Commission, the Toothpaste Commission, the Clothes Commission; producing what Barthes referred to as “an absurd outcome.” (2014, 42-43).

Indeed, it couldn’t have mattered less whether there was a “formal” chore schedule or not—after all, it could be needlessly fussy, as Barthes’ account showed.

Rather, what seemed to matter more was communication and “being on the same page.” Some participants, like Ruby, a 30-year-old non-profit case manager, explained that cleaning was contingent on the “good rhythm” she had with her roommate. “Before I moved in, my roommate and I talked about the standard of cleanliness we liked. We talked about how we liked to clean, and if we decided to have a chore schedule or not, and we decided we didn’t.” Similar to this, Tim, a 33-year-old managing director, reports that he and his roommate manage to live with relatively little tension or conflict around cleaning. I ask him about how they handle chores in their two-bedroom duplex basement suite. “We’ve never discussed taking turns for chores. There’s a self-rule to clean up after yourself.”

5.2. Privacy and The Bedroom

Beyond cleaning, another significant issue around householding was the negotiation of privacy and “alone time.” Ruth, a 28-year-old pension plan administrator, bemoans the weariness of having to be “on” when living with her roommate in their two-bedroom apartment downtown. “When I’m having a really shitty day, when I really need alone time, I have to go to the park to get that. Even if my roommate is around in his room, there’s just that kind of--- not 100% free space. You always have to be conscious that there’s another person sharing the space. There’s a level of always having to be ‘on.’”

In *Private Dwelling*, housing scholar Peter King (2013) explores how ideas of “privacy” have come to permeate understandings of housing, home, and the domestic sphere. Taking the word privacy to imply *the state of being private and undisturbed*, he notes that the word ‘private’ has varied meanings, including: that which is personal to us, that to which knowledge is restricted, that which is kept from general view, and that which is secluded and inaccessible. For King, the home secludes and separates people from the public sphere and thus ensures domestic privacy: ‘the dwelling achieves this because it encloses us. It protects us from intrusion and unwanted attention’ (2004, 41).

This conceptualization of “privacy” implies that there are people whom we are willing to allow inside our enclosed spaces, and people whom we are not. In constructing “privacy,” there is then a corresponding construction of boundaries to demarcate the “private” from the “public,” or the familiar (and familial) from the strange.

This close association between home, family and privacy is usually linked to the separation of public and private spheres that ensued in the wake of the Industrial Revolution (Rybczynski, 1988). As the site of labour moved away from the home and into designated workplaces, an ideological distinction was drawn between the public world of commerce and civic life on the one hand and the sanctity of the private family home on the other (Heath et al 2019, 22).³⁴

But in roommate households, distinctions may become less clear. Across my interviews, some participants routinely referred to their roommates as “strangers.” Yet the “strangers” they lived with were not the sort of strangers encountered on the street, normally passed and forgotten. As Tyler says, “My roommates and I aren’t friends. We communicate with each other because we HAVE to... but I guess there’s a little bit more to it than that.”

Indeed, the odd matter of sharing the same address, the same kitchen, the same bathroom on a daily basis perhaps provided “a little bit more” in the experience of living with roommates. But this constant proximity could have a disruptive effect in individual lifestyles. Throughout the interviewing, I felt struck by the frequency of listening to participants express their inability to form new relationships as a result of not having privacy within the shared house. Tyler recounts recounts the “self-consciousness” of dating someone new, out of discomfort from living with his two roommates. We were talking about how his he and his roommates negotiated visitors or guests, such as romantic partners or even momentary lovers.

He says, “I tend to not date or invite people over, just ‘cause I feel weird about it, or self-conscious about it. I’m gay slash queer, I don’t really know what label to choose. If I lived alone, I might do it more frequently than I do now. Living with roommates probably does dampen my connection building in that way, in terms of intimacy and physical connection.” The awkwardness of occupying the living room meant that the bedroom was the only place to which Tyler could invite people over. But he also felt the

³⁴ Although this view of the history of domestic privacy is a disputed one – the separation of spheres and its gendered nature was never as clear cut as is often claimed (Spencer-Wood, 1999; Heynen, 2005), and neither was the presence of ‘strangers’ in the home unusual (Davidoff, 1995; Cuming, 2016). Yet considering all this the association between home, family and privacy retains a strong grip on the popular imagination. (Heath et al, 2018, p. 22).

claustrophobia of being boxed in the bedroom, the only place that was definitely “his place.” The bedroom becomes a sort of de facto ‘home,’ as Tyler describes it: “In my own bedroom... I play the piano, so I have the piano in the corner, and my bookshelf and a bunch of books. I don’t really have room for a desk per se, so I ended up jury-rigging some kind of computer on the bed, and using the piano bench situation, which is probably not great from a posture perspective.”

Attaining privacy felt even more impossible for Gabe, a 30-year-old participant who did not have his own bedroom. Instead, he slept in a corner of the living room of his shared one-bedroom apartment. “My roommate pays a little bit more money, and I sleep in the living room, which means I have no privacy. At all,” he says, his voice turning severe. “I learned to live with it, but... God! Why is a one-bedroom apartment so goddamn expensive?!”

Sleeping in the living room is a conscious decision, Gabe says, because at least it means he pays considerably less than his roommate. The entire place costs \$1200 per month, which is unevenly divided into two. He’s lived in the same apartment since moving to Vancouver from Vernon, “the only place I could afford to get a one-bedroom to myself, which was fantastic.”

Over the phone, Gabe provides a description of the one-bedroom apartment he currently shared with his roommate. “It’s not a little apartment and that’s cool. I have a bed, a couch, there’s a coffee table, there’s a TV set-up. I have a record player and a bookshelf and such. A dresser over there, with plants and all that. And still I have room to do yoga. It’s a good-sized space. It could be a hell of a lot worse.”

In the last three years of living in the same apartment, different people have come and gone, most of whom were friends who were in-between places and needed somewhere to stay. “Last fall, a friend of mine got kicked out of her place and didn’t have anywhere to live. So I was like, ‘*No worries, you can totally stay at my place!*’ Originally, it was supposed to be just a couple of weeks, but it ended up being two-and-a-half months because she just couldn’t get her shit together. That definitely put a strain in the living situation, because it was another person and she was always in the living room with me.” At this point, Gabe and his temporary guest were sleeping in the living room, and the rent-paying roommate occupied the bedroom.

Gabe's landlord heard about the arrangement. "Chris wasn't super happy about it because it was technically illegal. He's a businessman, which is bothersome to me, but for the most part he's pretty reasonable. At the end of the day, he doesn't give a shit as long as he gets his money and as long as we don't break the rules. He definitely thinks it's weird that people keep leaving. But anyway, we talked it out a bunch. I said, '*Chris, she's my friend, and I don't want to kick her out. Can we work something out?*' We figured out a find-her-a-place-to-live-by-date, which was fine with me, because at that point, she was pissing me off. She wasn't a good guest."

In the past, Gabe has asked two people to leave. Talking about a particularly stressful experience of living with, and eventually evicting, one roommate, he says, "I did end up kind of kicking out one roommate though. He's a good guy and I'm not gonna talk shit about him. But he was just like constantly miserable and had a drinking problem. He never vacuumed. he never cleaned anything. He would just come home and drink in his room, and leave food out on the counter for days at a time. That was just—emotionally draining on me, more than anything. When I already don't have my own space, it just made it more stressful than it needed to be."

Despite friends frequently crashing with him, Gabe feels stifled from inviting who he calls "special people" to his place, owing largely to not having his own bedroom. I asked one of my standard questions. "So how do you and your roommate deal with guests and visitors, including romantic partners and significant others?"

"Uh, I don't!" he laughs. "We could probably work something out, like tell my roommate, '*I'm going to have a special person over on if you wanna skedaddle?*' Usually, it's just waiting for the other person to to--- the apartment is so small, so wait for the other person to leave before getting it on!" We share a chuckle. "I mean duh, it's hard to have a special person when you don't have your own space. I also don't get laid very often, so it's not a thing I worry about too, too much." But our conversation turns serious again as he continues explaining the difficulty of sleeping in the living room, of having had no sense of personal space and enclosure for the last three years:

I don't have a door, or a wall, or anything that really separates me from my roommate just walking into the living room and using the kitchen anytime she wants. Which is fine. She lives here, she pays to live here, this is all technically

part of her space. At the same time though, the bedroom is hers. It's HER room. It is not—at least in my mind—it is in no way okay to go into her room and do somersaults or something like that. Where, in my mind, it is totally okay that she can come and do that in the living room because that is still technically part of her space. With the exception of the corner that I sleep in, nowhere in this apartment is just mine. When I'm having a super bad day, there is no door I can close to isolate myself from the rest of the world so I can recharge. I am always at the mercy of whoever else is here.

Lack of privacy and the interpersonal challenges of shared living have been well documented in the youth transitions and housing studies literatures (see for example, Soaita and McKee 2019; Barratt, Kitcher and Stewart 2011). Older renters in shared housing are even more affected by issues of privacy; McKee, Soaita, Munro (2019, 19) note “there is much more pessimism and much less possibility of change for these longer-term renters.” Easthope et al. (2015) make a similar point in relation to multi-generational households. In cases where the dwelling occupied by a household is owned by one generation (for example, the parents), with family members of older or younger generations paying rent to them, they found that these tenants derive little sense of security from their housing, even though their landlords are close relatives.³⁵

In the UK, research on houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) have attested to how low-income tenants in shared housing have routinely felt despondent primarily because of losing privacy (Barratt and Green 2016, Easthope 2014). Even without the presence of major “intrusions” from their roommates, a majority of HMO residents felt *deprived*, from the mere fact of sharing their place with others. Without needing permission, roommates would come and go as they please, invite guests, use the kitchen and the bathroom whenever they wanted. Without direct interaction or provocation, the presence of roommates was enough to cause feelings of deprivation (literally de-private-ion).

³⁵ Indeed, even in traditional nuclear family households, privacy can still be an issue, but perhaps less pressing compared to roommate households. For King (2004), this is perhaps because the family unit has been seen as providing a kind of collective privacy for its members, that privacy is somehow given “by default.”

5.3. The Lease

Another recurring theme across participant accounts was the issue around the lease, monthly rent, and one's official legal status within the household. For some participants like Gabe, having a lease was essential. Despite not having his own bedroom, he was the sole leaseholder of his one-bedroom apartment. From past experiences, Gabe has learned to exercise caution because of the possibility of having a "shady" landlord. "The first place I lived in, I was 16, shit got f---d up for me because my name wasn't on the lease, that's why I always make sure to put my name on the lease now," he says, with self-assuredness. As such, for the most part, Gabe has the ability to exercise control over his living arrangements. "I get to choose who I live with, so it's cool. Actually, it's just my name on the lease. It used to be two of us, whoever I was living with and me. Now it's just me, plus one."

But not all participants had their name on the lease. Some actively chose not to, perhaps for good reasons. *Residential Tenancy Policy Guideline, Section 13, Rights and Responsibilities of Co-Tenants* states that "co-tenants are also jointly and severally responsible for paying rent." Ideally, all co-tenants would pay the right amount in time.³⁶ But if not, the stipulation of being "jointly and severally responsible" means: If I pay rent, but my roommate cannot, then we can both get evicted on account of not meeting the total monthly rent. Having all parties sign the lease may, in fact, add a layer of vulnerability to residents already experiencing precarity in different ways. "Having all roommates listed on a lease also poses challenges," says TRAC spokesperson Robert Patterson. "A new tenancy agreement has to be rewritten every time someone moves out which opens the door to rent increases above the allowable 2.5 per cent."

Further, entering into a lease with a landlord usually means having to prove one's ability to consistently pay rent: a stable job, maybe a hefty savings account, and references to vouch for your financial capacity and character. But many roommate renters do not meet these criteria. Ruby, a 30-year-old non-profit case manager, illustrates the compounding precarity of living without a lease in a housing-afflicted city like Vancouver:

³⁶ A PDF of this document is available here: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/housing-and-tenancy/residential-tenancies/policy-guidelines/gl13.pdf>

I just moved in four months ago, and now, we're being evicted. Renovicted, I should say.³⁷ I think they're going to tear the place down. We're on the top floor of a two-storey house. Neither me nor my roommate are on the lease. The leaseholder hasn't lived here for two years. I found the house through a friend of mine. It was negotiated to me with the implication that the leaseholder would have one foot in, one foot out. She's kind of holding the space, unofficially. I'm not on the lease, so I knew I could get kicked out at any time. I mean, it doesn't matter now because we're getting renovicted anyway. Whatever. I moved in not knowing how long I'll be allowed to stay here. But that's a lot of Vancouver, that's just what you think about.

Across my interviews, participants universally spoke about their legal "status" in the shared household, even without using the official terms outlined by the RTA. Out of 15 participants:

Three were Co-tenants, who lived in households where all roommates had their name on the lease.

Seven were Occupants, who did not sign a residential tenancy agreement, and had no written record with their landlord. Some had "under-the-table" contracts with their landlord. Others mentioned that their landlord wasn't even aware that they lived there. Occupants reported having one roommate who functioned as the "leaseholder," who was the same person responsible for recruiting and interviewing them into the shared household.

Four were the Sole Leaseholders, who, unlike the Occupants, signed a lease but reported that their roommate/s did not. Under tenancy law, those who signed a lease were considered Tenants, and legally speaking, they lived alone. I offer this term provisionally, as the RTA does not provide an official category for these renter types. Sole leaseholders benefit from the security of having their name on the lease. But they also carried more risks in cases where their roommates caused legal trouble. As the sole

³⁷ Renoviction is a portmanteau of "renovation" and "eviction." The word is commonly used in conversation around Vancouver, describing the phenomenon of renters being forced to move out as a result of a landlord's decision to "improve" the dwelling.

leaseholder, they become responsible for the actions of their roommates in the eyes of the landlord and the courts.

5.3.1. The Quasi-Landlord

Sole leaseholders often exercised a modicum of control over their roommates and their households. They often take on or ‘subcontract’ roles and functions that landlords typically fulfill: collecting rent, arranging for repairs, and setting the rules and boundaries within the shared space. In effect, the sole leaseholder tended to act as the quasi-landlord of the household. Not all sole leaseholders do this, however. Despite the differences in legal status, it is worth remembering that sole leaseholders might need roommates as much as potential roommates need housing. But in cases where sole leaseholders **do** exert a significant amount of control, the actual landlords are often described as “hands-off” (e.g. overseas, multiple property owner; or the landlord simply cares less about the property but more so about getting their rent money every month).

In this next section, we follow the stories of three quasi-landlords: Ruth, Janet and Eleanor. While all of them were sole leaseholders, they exercised varying degrees of control over their households and roommates. To organize these differences, I paid close attention to the way each participant spoke about their household. In particular, I noticed how some leaseholders, like Ruth and Janet, referred to their shared apartments as “my house” or “mine; while some like Eleanor repeatedly referred to her household as “our place” or “ours.”

5.3.2. I/Mine

We begin with the story of Ruth, a 27-year-old pension plan administrator who lives in a two-bedroom apartment in the West End. Describing her shared apartment, she gushes, “It’s lovely, close to Stanley Park, built in the 60s, pretty large, lots of space and a great view.” In her introductory email, she mentioned wanting to talk about the topic of “being stuck with someone after you’d really rather not live together anymore, the precarious legal position of sharing space with a landlord, and being the landlord.”

The monthly rent for her shared two-bedroom apartment costs \$1800, evenly divided in two. She explains that her motivations for sharing were carefully calculated

based on the quality of life she wanted to maintain. “I could afford a one-bedroom, but for that you’re looking at around \$1300 or more. A two-bedroom is just around \$400 more, but splitting it in half means being able to keep up with my lifestyle, travel and pay off my debts. It would be a preference to live by myself, but it’s just not worth it. I select roommates who would give me a similar experience to living alone.”

“Your landlord lets you select your roommates?” I inquire further.

“My landlord is this little old Italian man who has taken a shine to me and hasn’t raised my rent in two years. He lets me have 100% control over my roommates, but I inform him about my decisions. I put up the ad, interview people. I’m the one who pays the landlord full rent. My roommate pays me.”

“So, when you post your roommate ad, who do you usually look for?”

“I look for somebody who is not going to have people over every night, once in a while is fine, but it’s not great to have in the space all the time.” Ruth segues into the specifics. “When interviewing a roommate, I ask questions like ‘What are your expectations for chores? Do you consistently want something that’s formally split up? Do you want something that is more like ‘we both just do things when they look like they need to be done,’ like taking out the garbage, for example. We would talk about when you tend to take showers, what kind of hours you keep. Do you have people over? Do you like to have large gatherings, one or two people? Do you have people over for the night often?”

Browne’s 1997 study of Vancouver shared households revealed a similar trend. “There may be a core person or persons who hold the lease or rental agreement, and they would have the option of asking another housemate to leave at any time” (1997, 33-34). Conversely, they were also usually responsible for posting ads for new roommate recruitment, conducting interviews, and making decisions about who passes the “roommate audition,” as Tyler, my study participant, calls it.

In our conversation, Ruth openly expresses appreciation for the amount of control her landlord allows her in maintaining this space. In fact, she claims that the control she exercises is significantly responsible for her feeling of at-homeness. “I decorated this place, I grow plants, I painted the walls. They were an awful shade of pink

when I moved in. Putting that work into the apartment makes it feel a lot more like mine. I feel at home. Being on the lease makes me feel steady. It's lovely. It's mine."

In Ruth's case, having a "congenial landlord who is hands-off" means that she is able to feel like her shared apartment is "hers," in practice. Yet still I wondered about the perspective of her roommate.

"You split the rent evenly, correct?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Then could your roommate also paint the walls if, say, they didn't like the colour you chose?"

"I don't know," she pauses. "But I just---this is very much my place. I'm renting out a room. Like I said, I choose people who tend to be temporary, I expect that they would move on. I don't want someone permanent, and haven't done much thinking about my roommate's perspective because I tended to think about the temporariness of their arrangement here."

In Sue Heath's research on shared households among roommates in the UK, she found that "the ability to exercise control over one's environment within the domestic sphere is widely believed to have important consequences for personal wellbeing and self-identity" (2018, 24). Relatedly, in the UK, Barratt and Green (2016) found that residents in low-income shared households were commonly prevented by landlords from painting their walls, putting up pictures, or otherwise decorating their shared houses or apartments in a way that openly expressed their personalities and identities. As such, residents in these shared households frequently expressed an inability to feel at-home. In Ruth's case, we can infer that the amount of control she has over the space positively affects her feeling of at-homeness. But what about the roommate, who pays the same rate, yet doesn't a corresponding amount of control?

A similar story comes from Janet, whom we previously encountered in the section about cleaning and house rules. As another example of the "quasi-landlord" role, Janet intentionally selects roommates who didn't bring too many things upon moving in. "I am definitely controlling over my house, and I do feel like I finally have it exactly the way I want it. I'm not comfortable with my roommate adding their own things in the

common spaces. When I choose a roommate, I looked for somebody that didn't have a lot of belongings. My current roommate, she didn't really have anything. She furnished her room. But I don't like her style very much."

When I asked Janet about her process for recruiting new roommates, she explains, "I'm not interested in people who don't have jobs. I'm not interested in students either. I want somebody who has a set schedule, who's not always around because I don't necessarily have a full-time job. Somebody in a similar age range. No smokers or partiers. I didn't want somebody going to bars then having friends over at 3:00 AM after the bar is closed."

Her distaste for having an unemployed roommate surprised me. Later in the interview, Janet admitted she was unemployed herself. "I was in the catering industry, but that was just a temporary fix. I was supposed to be getting a new job in January [2020], and then I just kind of didn't. Now, I'm stuck." We spoke over the phone in May. Like other participants, Janet's employment prospects stalled in the face of COVID-19. Being at home all the time with her roommate meant having to exercise even more control over her shared apartment.

As the sole leaseholder who also functioned as a quasi-landlord, Janet accessed forms of security that not all participants in this study did. First, she had the ability to control the flow of roommates – from interviewing to evicting - despite it technically being the landlord's official responsibility. Much like Ruth, Janet is on good terms with her landlord. "I have a really good relationship with my landlord. He knows that I personally have high standards, that I'm not going to have anyone here who is loud or disruptive, or having guests over. Having that trust between us is really important."

Janet feels secure enough to call this place her 'home' for the indefinite future. She compares her current experience of sharing housing with her previous one, in a "party house" in Alberta. But what was so different? "It was temporary housing, a simpler living situation. We had a detachment to the place. All the items were shared and temporary." And what about now? "Now I live in a place that's secure. I get a lot of relief that all these items that I own that I appreciate and want in my life are around me. I'm quite attached to the security of my house. Different people move in and out, but all items are my own."

In a study investigating the possibilities and processes of 'making a home in a rental property' in the UK, Easthope (2014) found that *security of tenure* and *the ability of tenants to make changes and effectively maintain the property* were important contributing factors to tenants' ability to make the property feel like a 'home.' Renters who were able to freely decorate, put things up, and personalize their dwelling spaces were also more likely to feel "at home" where they were. As a consequence, the ability to feel at home was significantly curtailed for these renters who could not.

Relatedly, the researchers also found that a majority of affordable shared housing for low-income tenants came pre-furnished with "cheap and basic furniture, projecting what landlords perceive to be appropriate for their tenants as well as the temporary nature of many shared housing tenancies" (Ibid, 6). While some of these shared households aren't necessarily furnished with "cheap and basic furniture," they are however furnished primarily according to the tastes and control of the leaseholder. Considering these findings, it makes sense when Janet claims that she "definitely" felt at home here. "I'm very much a homebody. I do a lot of cooking, use my space creatively, do my yoga and dancing and creative processing in the house. That's more so why I feel uncomfortable having a roommate here, I feel like I can't do my usual routine and my usual expression and art, that kind of thing, with somebody around."

As a consequence of the sole leaseholder's exertion of spatial control, other participants in the study who weren't sole leaseholders expressed some hesitation about using communal spaces. Ruby, whose name wasn't on the lease, says, "I have the tendency of not using the common space quite as much when my roommate's home. A big part is that she's lived there much longer than me, and a lot of the things in the shared spaces are hers. I have the couch there, but besides that it's all of her furnishing and stuff. It feels more like her place than a common living space."

But not all quasi-landlords exerted the same amount of control over their households and roommates, nor did they have any desire to.³⁸ Let us consider the case of Eleanor, a 42-year-old non-profit asset manager who was the sole leaseholder of a three-storey heritage townhouse in Strathcona.

³⁸ Just as not all landlords are necessarily "shady" or unscrupulous, there are variations and exceptions to these themes and patterns, too.

5.3.3. We/Ours

“We are a seven-person household,” Eleanor says, beginning to narrate the cast of characters that make up her home. “We actually just got a new roommate two days ago, a non-binary person going to law school, so we have a student. We also have Max, another non-binary human who is a nurse. Judy is a singer-songwriter and actress. Rick is doing a post-doc and a math instructor. Yuki is another non-binary person, formerly an arborist, and now going to nursing school. Aaron was a sword-fighting instructor and now a barber. He’s also my partner,” she pauses, a sheepish smile on her face, “and there’s myself.”

“How would you describe your dynamic in the house?” I ask.

“Most people in the house are going through something---” she cuts herself off, searching for the right word. “We’re values-based. Being trauma-informed is good. Emotional safety is important. We don’t see each other all the time, but when you’re in the kitchen, there’s often a lot of emotional support, helping, or witnessing.”

We conducted our interview at Eleanor’s shared townhouse, in February prior to COVID-19 restrictions. I arrived at her place on a corner of a quiet street in Strathcona, lined by a canopy of trees. On the front door were stickers and signs: a trans flag with its trademark stripes of pink, white, and blue; another that says, “SEX WORK IS REAL WORK”; and another that says, “Queer folks welcome.” I knock on the door. Eleanor greets me. “Hello, welcome to our place! Please make yourself at home.” We exchange some pleasantries. “You have a beautiful home,” I say, as we both sink into the couches, facing each other, a large square-shaped coffee table in between us. She serves us herbal tea in two mismatched mugs. “All of this,” Eleanor says, gesturing to the items around room, “It all sort of happened naturally, throughout the years, people moving in and out. That piano is Max’s, the bookshelf in mine, the couch you’re sitting in we somehow found in the basement, cleaned it, and brought it up here. Some people just leave their things here, and new people add to space. It’s a collective effort.”

Her consistent use of “we” certainly attested to how this space was not simply hers, but a home she made in concert with her roommates, past and present. The house felt like an embodiment of the concept of *homeyness* (McCracken 1989). Based on ethnographic work conducted in mid-1980s America, physical, symbolic, and pragmatic

properties of homeyness were identified. Included in the “homey” were objects and things which provided a sense of enclosure (fences, shrubbery, arches) and a sense of history (trophies, gifts, photographs, mementos, knick-knacks).

Beyond that, it was important that these objects and things were placed by the people dwelling in the home. Sifting through stuff, deciding what to keep, throw away, unpack, and how to display them are all important actions in establishing a sense of homeyness, or not.

Similar to Eleanor and her roommates’ collective efforts towards furnishing and decorating, Jordan, a 27-year-old graduate student, recounts the adventures that he and his two roommates have embarked on together in search of furniture for their three-bedroom apartment. “Steph and Denise both have really good taste,” he says. “We were keen about getting furniture from Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist. We would usually split the costs. Because I have a van, we would often drive together and pick it up.”

Recent studies within the social sciences have investigated how objects and materials have the capacity to facilitate, produce and sustain intimate relationships (Lewis 2018, Holmes 2018, Burrell 2017). Discussing the possibility of “more-than-human intimacies,” geographer Sarah Hall (2019, 109) argues that objects and materials are “conduits and points of potentiality for intimacy and intimate relations” in moments of crisis. Objects and materials enable contact and interaction, “a form of fibrous connectivity” (Ibid, 127). In shared households, the sending, giving, circulating, and sharing of things constitute “mundane elements” of everyday life that ultimately belong to the full spectrum of living together. Further, Hall argues that “the passing on of material items can also be a way of maintaining already-established intimacy through shared knowledge and memories” (Ibid, 132). In Eleanor’s and Robin’s cases, their fond remembrance of objected-related roommate moments signifies a larger picture of getting along with their household companions.

In addition to being the sole leaseholder, Eleanor is also the most tenured: she’s lived there the longest and has primary contact with the property manager (the landlord is overseas in the UK, and is mostly hands-off). Like other tenured roommates in the study, such as Ruth, Janet, and Gabe, Eleanor fulfills some of the landlord’s duties

herself. One example is her responsibility for screening and evicting tenants. She spoke about engaging in a comprehensive interview process where potential tenants must first prove to be a 'good fit' with the rest of the household members. Yet unlike other tenured roommates in the study, she doesn't go about it alone, but instead involves the rest of the household in the screening process.

"We have interviews. We ask how they [potential roommate] would address conflict. Communication style, conflict style, what they're looking for. Are they willing to share things about themselves? A lot of us here are, y'know--- Yuki is at law school, but they're also an arborist-slash-burlesque dancer. Aaron is a swordfighter-slash-barber. Everybody's got that 'slash.' It's part of being values-based. We are also in a traditional Black neighbourhood, in what was previously Hogan's Alley, and so we wanted to give priority to Black, First Nations and people of colour. We used to be seven white folks here, and we were like, 'This is weird. Let's see what we can do about this.'"

"Have you ever had anyone that passed the interview, but didn't end up working out?"

She nods. "We've asked two people to leave. When I became a leaseholder, there was one gentleman. He was bringing home a lot of random partners and not contributing the household. We're very sex-positive but he was not contributing in physical ways like cleaning up, or emotional ways, or anything like that. We evicted him. There was another gentleman who was a fairly heavy drinker. Very heavy. He would talk about wanting to get help, but would not really help himself. There was a lot of toxicity. At one point he broke in one of the windows into the room of a former female roommate in the middle of the night. So... yeah, had to ask him to leave, too."

5.4. Degrees of Advantage among Shared Housing Residents

Compared to other participants in the study, Eleanor and her roommates seemed more *intentionally communal* about how they lived. A long communitarian tradition of intentional shared living has existed in many parts of the world, often linked to radical political and religious movements (Heath et al 2018, 23). Notable examples include the nineteenth century utopian socialism of Frenchman Charles Fourier and Welshman

Robert Owen, whose ideas were taken up in the USA amongst other places; pacifist and anarchist groups of the first half of the twentieth century; the kibbutzim movement within Jewish communities, and the counter-cultural commune movements which blossomed in many parts of the developed world in the 1960s and 1970s (Rigby, 1974; Hayden, 1981; Taylor, 1983). These movements all offered a radical analysis of the shortcomings of the existing social order, as indeed have more contemporary examples committed to green politics, to particular religious causes, or to queer politics. “The Commune Movement saw the social relations of the family precisely as a setting in which people were bound to transgress one another’s freedom and to offer in communes a reconstruction of intimacy’ (Abrams et al 1976, 5).

Living together, eating together, socializing together, making decisions together and sometimes working together as equals with people to whom you were unrelated were all crucial elements of these radical experiments in intentional community, not least because practices such as these upended more conventional ideas governing relations between generations, between genders, and between the public and the private spheres. (Heath et al 2018, 24).

In shared households among roommates, these communitarian traditions seem to be interestingly linked to some privilege and social advantage. 19 years ago, Kenyon and Heath (2001) published a study exploring how narratives of ‘choice’ factored in the experience of “more advantaged” sharers in the UK. “More advantaged” was measured through certain factors such as highest level of education attained, income earned and the nature of employment. The study, although dated, found that more advantaged sharers are more likely to embrace the non-material aspects of sharing even if “financial concerns are not necessarily unimportant” (619).

Eleanor’s emphasis on being a “values-based” household resonates to some extent with these historical roots of communal shared living. And it wasn’t as if Eleanor had no financial concerns of her own. In a city where the average price for a one-bedroom costs fluctuates around \$1800-\$2000, depending on who you ask, one of the big allures of shared housing comes from paying a below-average rental rate.³⁹

³⁹ In 2017, the CMHC reported that vacant one-bedroom units cost, on average, \$1,442 per month in the city of Vancouver. This is in contrast to research done by private-sector companies like PadMapper, who report average costs closer to \$2000. <https://www.straight.com/news/1000781/cmhc-report-shows-average-vancouver-rents-are-far-lower-candidates-claims>

Speaking about how she found this house, Eleanor recalls, “I saw a posting on Facebook. There was a larger room available but I didn’t want to pay that amount of rent. The woman who posted the ad decided to move into the larger room, so I got lucky and got one of the smaller rooms.”

“How much was it posted for?”

“It was \$550 when I moved in. I’m paying \$580 now.”

In the same 2001 study about more advantaged sharers in the UK, Kenyon and Heath also found that more-advantaged sharers were more willing and able to spend on services, like housekeeping, that less-advantaged sharers might not even consider or be able to afford. This had the effect of mitigating certain tensions around householding, especially cleaning and repairs. In one of their case studies, the researchers interviewed the members of one shared household consisting of four 24-year-old male engineers who, having recently graduated from Oxford, decided to “club together to employ a cleaner, as a time-saving strategy” (627). They also found that more advantaged sharers also tended to be *serial sharers*, adept at distinguishing between different households in which they had lived according to their quality. Eleanor, having opted to live in shared housing since her university days (nearly 20 years ago), recalls her first place in the city. “When I first moved to Vancouver in 2011, there were six of us in a house on Rose Street. We hired a housekeeper too because there were, y’know, a lot of working professionals.”

But certainly not all “serial sharers” tend to be “more advantaged.” Today, the opposite might be more often true: that serial sharers might be those who have been nudged into the shared housing market out of necessity, not choice.

Tyler, a 29-year-old freelance product designer, shared some insights from his extensive experience living in both “intentionally communal” households and individualistic households in Vancouver. At one point during our conversation, I ask him, “How would you describe your relationship with your roommates?”

The word I used in my email to you was ‘atomistic.’ I’ve lived in more collective kinds of housing before-- you might have seen them in places like *Vancouver Collective Housing Network* on Facebook, or know other famous collective

houses around the city, like 'The Beehive.' I have a friend who's involved in creating the cohousing community in Vancouver. Those situations are very intentionally communal. People there make the intentional decision that they want to live together and make it work. For me, where I live right now, it's more of a necessity. We're all here because we need it, budget-wise. We communicate sparsely. I guess for us it's more about figuring out how to get along well with others for the sake of it.

He currently resides in a three-bedroom apartment shared with two roommates whom he couldn't consider "friends." They barely talk, and when they do, it usually happens over text. To provide a contrast to his current shared house, Tyler recalled his third shared house in Vancouver, which his previous Baptist church community helped him find.

There was an email list, around 2015. A guy found this house and emailed some other people, 'I found this rental listing for super cheap, do you guys want to go look at it?' I was in disbelief at the price. This HAS to be a scam, it's so cheap! We showed up together. We didn't know each other, but we met for breakfast before seeing the place. Turns out the house was totally abandoned, so it made sense that the rental was \$1000 for 4 bedrooms. It was a renovation situation, we knew we were going to be kicked out eventually. But we agreed to rent it out in its very decrepit state. The day we moved in, we spent around 9 hours just cleaning the mess previous tenants left behind.

"How many members were in your group?" I ask.

There was five of us, three single people, including myself, occupied a bedroom each. The final bedroom had a couple living in it. It's the only shared house I've lived in where we ate meals together. We ate dinner together every night, having regular conversations. But the church had a strong tradition of people living together to begin with.

5.4.1. Potential Homeowners

In shared households, another way of identifying the "more advantaged sharer" is by gauging an individual's capacity and intention with respect to eventual

homeownership. More advantaged sharers expressed desires of continuing to live in shared housing despite the probability of eventual homeownership (Kenyon and Heath 2001, 630). It was more likely that they lived with roommates as a matter of 'pure' preference and desire rather than as a result of economic constraint. Luke, a participant from Kenyon and Heath's study, observed, "The thing is I am actually going to be buying a house soon. But I will still want to live with other people. And that's just not a financial thing, it is mainly that I don't really want to live on my own." (Ibid.)

Similarly, Eleanor tells me about potentially buying a place, not for living in but as an investment. "I could look into purchasing real estate on the Sunshine Coast, or somewhere like that as an investment property. But I would love to keep living here. I'd love to keep my expenses low, and live so centrally. I bike 10 minutes to work. You just can't beat the rent, the location, and the people. So yeah, as long as I can, I'll be here."

Out of the 15 participants in my study, only two expressed having a financial predilection towards homeownership: Eleanor and Tim, a 33-year old managing director living in his friend's two-bedroom duplex basement suite in Fairview. "I'm actually a professional lobbyist, but not many people understand what that is, so I just say 'managing director' to keep things simple," he tells me when we speak on the phone. In his introductory email, he provided an initial description of his long history of shared housing, writing: "From the age of 13, playing hockey and living in billets in small towns, I've lived all over North America, I've been forced to live in a variety of housing situations with roommates: basement suites, garages, pool houses, apartments, fraternity housing, large homes. I've been in lots of situations where you're forced to have roommates."

Tim finds himself in shared housing not so much because of financial constraints, but because of the fierce competition within the city's rental market. Unlike Eleanor, Tim doesn't feel an affinity for living with roommates beyond practical reasons. In fact, he would much rather live alone. "After living with roommates for so long, once, I went and got a place of my own, I learned how much privacy, and having time to yourself where there's nothing but quiet, silence – how precious that is. It's an invaluable commodity in itself."

Based on the 2016 census, Statistics Canada reported that one-person households had become the most common type of household for the first time in history

nationally. This rise in one-person households has occurred alongside the rise in shared households, a paradoxical trend described as “part of a package of demographic changes” – the restructuring of life practices such as household formation, partnering, parenting, and even death - that occur alongside historical and structural changes (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013, 23).

But despite their similar trajectories, shared housing and solo living are quite different. For one thing, solo living stands as a status symbol of sorts, connoting an ability to be self-sufficient, aligned with an idea of what an ‘adult’ should look like. In times of crisis, when homeownership is for many people more fantasy than reality, researchers have found that living alone increasingly stands in lieu for other markers of adulthood and success (Heath and Cleaver 2003; Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; Molgat and Vezina 2008).

One participant in my study, Shanaz, a graduate student and relatively new immigrant from Iran, tells me she feels lucky to live in a two-bedroom basement suite in Kitsilano with someone she considers “like an older sister.” Beyond that, the landlords who live upstairs happen to be her uncle and aunt, who would routinely offer to let her stay rent-free. “I’m secure here, I’m never going to be kicked out, and I don’t have to pay rent if I don’t have to.” (She still does). But despite the security she feels, the allure of living alone compels her. “I want to be more independent. I see myself living alone in a high-rise, with big windows in the city centre. Since I have that picture in my mind, I think I’ll eventually move out of here, not because of any discomfort, but because, y’know, everyone has a dream home.”

Tim seems to share a similar sentiment. He had been actively looking for a one-bedroom apartment downtown, with a solo budget of \$2500. “In the past couple of months, I’ve lost apartments to people who just have certain things in order. One of the ones where I got turned down, it was because somebody came in with a credit report, letters of reference, everything.” The long search had him hopping from one Airbnb to another. After three months, an old friend, who was going through a divorce, had an extra room to spare. “It was December, and my friend said ‘*there’s no way anybody should be alone for the holidays.*’ He said, ‘*I have this extra space, give me a fixed amount of money and even save yourself up some in the meantime as well.*’”

Fitting within the “more advantaged” sharer category, Tim used to be a homeowner until he, like many others, was pushed into selling the house in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. He recounted his experience living in a house that he owned. As a homeowner, he chose to fill his house with roommates to help ease some mortgage payments. During that time, he enjoyed the experience of sharing the house with others, if for the fact that he could exert control and authority over most household matters, unlike in his current place.

“In the past, when I owned a home, I had a large living room. There was a large kitchen, and a large—I don’t know—family room? The family room had couches set up by the window. There was a big deck. We would see the ocean. We would often sit out in the deck and watch the sunset. There was a sunken living room, and I had a TV and computer setup in there, and that was a space I used freely. My friends who were my roommates had big bedrooms with their own computer setups. *And I owned the home.* So, it was easy for me to go, ‘*Okay, I live here. If you want to stay here, this is how the way it is.*’ I had a girlfriend at the time, and she would come over and snuggle on the couch in the living room. But that’s something I can’t really do now.”

“What makes you say that?” I inquire further.

“Because it’s not my place, it’s not my furniture,” he sighs. “Being in a relationship and starting a family with someone, I can do that once I’m a homeowner, in my mind, y’know? That’s obviously where I’d like to be, once again. To finally invite girls that I’m dating, and do things that I would feel like I have the freedom to do, once it’s my own place. Yeah, start a family, these types of things, we’re talking next level, being an adult so to speak.”

“You’re saying that homeownership comes first, before all these?” I ask.

“Yeah, it would be really hard to start a family and propose to someone if I’m living here in the basement suite with my friend. I’m seeing someone now, she’s doing her Ph.D. in London, but she’s been back here for a few months. I haven’t had her over, not once. It’s putting a strain on the relationship, to be completely honest.”

“How do you see each other then?”

“We did go get an Airbnb for a few days in the city, just to catch up and do normal things for once.”

“Because you see your current place as your friend’s place,” I clarify.

“Yeah, he could walk in at any point. He might go, ‘*Oh, who’s your friend?*’ What am I supposed to do? Go hide in my room? It’s a weird situation, I have to introduce him to this person, we have to kind of stand there until somebody leaves, so it’s hard to put myself out there. And I don’t want to put him [roommate] in an uncomfortable position either.”

In spite of being a “more advantaged” sharer, Tim still expresses feelings of anxiety and being unable to live freely due to living with a roommate who might intrude without a moment’s notice. Unlike Eleanor, who embraced the non-normative aspects of shared living, Tim’s frequent references to “being an adult” indicated how he operated according to certain normative ideals regarding housing and its relationship to one’s social role and status.

Throughout this section, participants revealed how shared householding practices mattered when it came to the general experience of living with their roommates. Though seemingly mundane, routine ‘everyday’ operations such as cleaning, chores, having guests over (or not), negotiating privacy, and signing a monthly lease proved crucial in affecting roommate relationships. Degrees of advantage and disadvantage found among roommates – such as the presence of a quasi-landlord – might also shift residents’ experiences in their respective households.

Chapter 6.

Alternative Domesticities

As the previous chapter highlighted common themes and phenomena reported across different shared households, this chapter presents the obverse. In qualitative research we are so often trained to see the connections, the over-arching themes. But to focus solely on these is to run the risk of overlooking the stories of those who do not neatly fit, who tell a somewhat different tale (Wilkinson and Ortega Alcazar 2019, 159). In this section, I present two case studies that proved to be “exceptions to the rule.” In doing so, I hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of the range of experiences possible among roommates in shared households.

To contextualize this chapter, it is useful to draw on the the *alternative domesticities framework* (Pilkey, Scicluna and Gorman-Murray 2015) which argues that experiences of home are plural, flexible, and complex. The framework stands opposed to common assumptions inherent in established household forms. With shared households, one assumption often involves associations among youth living arrangements. In the Western world, living with roommates gained popularity partly because of university and student housing, an experience which includes related stereotypes like the ‘broke college student’ (Heath et al 2018, 100). Within broader studies of young people’s housing and domestic transitions, sharing tends to be acknowledged as just one amongst a number of possible ‘transitional’ or ‘intermediate’ living arrangements available to young adults, a type of “housing pathway” particularly upon leaving the parental home (see, for example, Jones, 1995; Rugg, 1999b).

Nearly two decades ago, Kenyon and Heath (2001) through interviewing 25 “shared households among non-kin” in the UK (for a total of 81 individuals), reported that a majority of informants believed that living with roommates was a transitional life stage prior to living alone or cohabiting with a romantic partner. But in the years since, with rising housing costs and welfare reforms, Heath and Scicluna (2020, 53) conducted another study of shared households, finding striking differences between then and now. Today, majority of their participants expressed feeling unable to imagine a time when they can afford *not* to share.

Because of these associations between shared housing and youth living arrangements, popularized in a previous time, relatively little is known about the contemporary everyday experiences of sharers, especially older sharers whose lives are largely unexplored within sociological literature on personal life (Heath et al 2018, 17). In this section, I first highlight the case study of one older sharer whose account did not fit neatly with the rest.

6.1. Pavel's Case

With the alternative domesticities framework in mind, we move on to the case study of Pavel, a 52-year-old welfare recipient who described himself as having over 25 years of experience living with roommates. He got in touch with me via my online posting. We had a series of email exchanges before he agreed to participate in my study:

Wednesday March 25 2020 2:18 PM

Hello, I have lived in shared accommodation situations for 25+ years. Mostly with one roommate at a time. My current place I am on my sixth roommate here.

I may have a story or two to tell.

We continued to exchange a few emails before agreeing on a date for our interview. Despite his enthusiasm to share his experiences, Pavel expressed concerns about his privacy.

Friday March 27 2020 10:11 AM

As to the actual interview... the walls have ears at my home, so I would prefer to conduct the interview at a friend's place that I have access to at any time. No one else will be around, period, so I will not feel inhibited in anything I may wish to say.

Eventually, he made some arrangements with a trusted friend who agreed to let him use her landline. When he picks up the phone, we exchange pleasantries. I ask him to describe his current living arrangement. "I am currently on disability assistance – yes – welfare, but I'm classified by the province as disabled," he begins, not directly answering my question. "Being on disability assistance there's a big stigma with that. It's

kind of unfair because I'm on disability, I'm technically not able to work because I'm not well. I'm not this slack on the sidewalk who just doesn't want to get off my butt and don't do anything. But because it's done through the ministry, it's all lumped together as '*oh, you're on welfare.*'"

The case of Pavel provides an interesting contrast to the earlier case featuring Eleanor. They both stand to represent alternative domesticities within the study, in that, being 52-years-old and 42-years-old respectively, they both defy the normative expectation of shared housing as an arrangement for young adults. But any similarities seem to end there. As a welfare recipient, Pavel faces a different set of challenges from all other participants in the study. Discussing the specific concerns of housing welfare recipients in the UK, researchers found that "sharers on welfare experience very different constraints and opportunities compared with non-welfare sharers, and accordingly have vastly different expectations and experiences (Heath et al 2018, 5-6).

One example of this "vastly different experience" would be the amount of control that Pavel is able to exert in his roommate choices. Unlike Eleanor and other more-advantaged sharers previously described, Pavel's roommate was wholly dependent upon the landlord's decision. British geographers Eleanor Wilkinson and Iliana Ortega-Alcazar (2019) have analyzed the everyday experiences of those forced to live in "stranger shares."⁴⁰ Stranger shares meant that roommates had absolutely no control over who they got to live with, not having any role in screening or interviewing the people they were made to live with. Instead, the composition of household members depended solely on the landlord. As such, shared living with strangers can create an environment that is often "detrimental to the wellbeing of tenants" and that living in stranger shares can often result in "emotional turmoil and psychological stress (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019, 2).

⁴⁰ This is one of the more interesting journal articles I've encountered throughout my literature review. Their data consists of 40 biographical interviews of young people on housing welfare. In particular, their research is contextualized through the "new austerity programmes" rolled out in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, in which the upper limit of the age-threshold for the UK's Shared Accommodation Rate was changed from 24 years old to 35 years old, thereby destabilizing the category of what a "young person" was. The policy changes resulted in significant reductions to housing welfare, where previous welfare claimants who were eligible for a one-bedroom rate, under the Local Housing Allowance, were now only limited to choosing from shared houses.

For the last seven years, Pavel had been living in the ground level suite of an old Vancouver Special in the Collingwood neighbourhood, sharing the space with one roommate at a time. His landlord lives in the suite above. He and his landlord have had a fraught relationship. Pavel commented that the landlord had a habit of accepting tenancy applications from people who were on welfare. “The woman renting the other one-bedroom suite is on disability. A bunch of my roommates were on disability, but one lied about it,” Pavel explains. The landlord’s motivations are unknown, yet for this Pavel felt some gratitude.⁴¹ “My landlord can be best described as shady, but I’ll give him one thing. At the time he allowed me in, he knew I was on welfare.

“And the fact of the matter is I was lucky to get the place I have now. The roommate I had originally was desperate for somebody because at the time the landlord was doing a contract for the entire suite, and if he didn’t find somebody he was gonna get kicked out. That’s another issue with the landlord, he’s a little shady. I managed to play tricks and get it so that both rooms are separate contracts for each room.”

To Pavel, this felt nearly miraculous. “When I apply for a place, and 10 other people also apply who are working full-time, well, what do you think is gonna happen? But y’know, somebody who’s working full time doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll be a good tenant. So, I try to be--- basically, if I run into problems where I’m living, I’m facing living on the street. That’s a huge degree of anxiety for me.”

Yet even having this tenancy and a roof over his head, his experiences have not been easy. He recounted three particularly difficult periods marked by three different roommates over the last seven years. All these roommates were picked by the landlord living above. Pavel’s first “horror story” (his term) involved a 55-year-old roommate who moved in 2016, when Pavel had been living in the suite for three years. The two of them butted heads for a few months, pushing and pulling, not getting along. “This guy was OCD about cleaning, so it ended up being that he would clean the whole apartment.⁴² My room was never good enough for him. He’d harass me constantly. That’s none of

⁴¹ In shared households among low-income tenants, Barratt and Green (2016) found that “the landlord exercises control through formal and informal risk assessment of tenants and close surveillance of them. These control mechanisms may also involve direct or indirect provision of support and care to some tenants. This illustrates the complex relationship between care and control and the extent to which both are integral to the housing management of vulnerable tenants living in shared households.”

⁴² OCD stands for obsessive-compulsive disorder.

your business! Leave me alone. If I have dead bodies rotting in my room, or attracting rats, fine, but that wasn't the case."

Tension escalated between the two men. The roommate started ranting in the middle of the night, in his own room, calling Pavel "every name in the book, saying how much he would destroy me, kill me, y'know, all that stuff." Eventually, the resident landlord heard these midnight ramblings, and cautioned the roommates to stop. He feared that the neighbours might hear.

Eventually, the 55-year-old roommate left. A new one came in. "I thought that old guy was one of the worst roommates I've ever had, but then the next guy was even worse, but different," Pavel says. "He wants everything his way, he would try to get more and more aggressive, but the problem is he's listed as disabled and have anxiety and stuff. He kept pestering our landlord because he won't approach me, because he's afraid of how I'm going to react."

At one point, the two roommates engaged in a physical altercation which ended in a 911 call and police intervention. The next day, the landlord served Pavel's roommate an eviction notice. During that time, the landlord also pleads with Pavel, "Please no more conflict." But tension kept simmering. Pavel explains, "After that night, I told him to stop using my stuff. But I came home one time and saw him washing one of my pots in the sink. The next morning, I pulled all my stuff in my room."

"You mean you put pots, pans, dishes, cutlery, all those things in your room?" I clarify.

"Everything," Pavel says, his voice stiffening. "He was rather upset. But I noticed that he had some of my stuff in his room. At this point he and I were really not talking. He and I were writing notes. I've never gotten to a point where you couldn't even talk to your roommate."

"Was it your landlord that prohibited you from talking to each other?"

"Well, he got an advocate. It's kind of complicated." Pavel says, uncharacteristically terse, and left it at that.

In the end, the roommate left. The third roommate, Pavel describes, “was even worse.”

Their levels of sociability were mismatched – the new roommate would “assault him with words” when he wanted to be left alone. Worse yet, they also butted heads about household maintenance and cleaning. A few weeks into living together, Pavel noticed that this third roommate had a habit of using the living room as his personal storage space, stuffing it with bins, boxes and six bicycles. But two months into living together, things came to a head.

“Come March, he sets up two fans in his bedroom, right beside mine, a thin wall, no insulation in between. There’s this hummer vibration at night that’s quite loud. This place used to be dead quiet after 10 PM. Dead quiet. This vibration is loud enough that it’s affecting my sleep. Him and I were not really talking at this point. I didn’t want to talk to him, and he didn’t want to talk to me.

“Three weeks later, I emailed him and CC’ed the landlord, said, ‘*Can you please deal with this?*’ The landlord says, ‘*No, no. This is quiet enjoyment. Stop emailing me.*’ So nothing happens.

“We got into an argument, and he goes, ‘*Welfare queen loser, what will happen if I tell the neighbours that you’re a welfare queen loser?*’ He’s talking, and I just walk away, go into my room. I close my door, and he spends another minute talking at my door, calling me a welfare queen loser. He knows I can hear him, so I just sit there and say, ‘*you’re talking to a closed door, man.*’ I didn’t want to cause any more trouble. In this respect, there wasn’t quite the drama of the previous roommate. Then the guy gives the landlord a notice that he’s going to leave, he’s gonna move to Toronto, and oh, he’s not taking any of the stuff.”

After hearing Pavel’s litany of roommate “horror stories,” I had to ask whether or not, throughout the 25 or so years he’s lived with roommates, he’s had any experiences that were pleasant or opposed to these ones he’d initially shared.

“A couple of the better experiences I’ve had sharing housing is with people I’ve already had good relationships prior to moving in. But living together did put a dent in the friendship.” In years past, he and a good friend decided to rent a two-bedroom

apartment together. For the first two years, things ran smoothly. “But the third year, I hit a dark spot because when you’re suffering from a lifelong mental illness, you go through waves. For a while, for him, it was just awful for him coming home. He’d be at work, I wasn’t. I would just be sitting in the living room. Sitting in the dark, just on the couch, and he can just feel the whole black cloud of negativity. When I started going south, he moved his computer into his room which used to be in the living room.” The friend moved out a couple of months later, in effect ending their friendship, as well.

Having a secure and stable home has been documented as essential for individual health and well-being, but even more so for those struggling with mental health problems (Diggle et al 2017). Research has revealed that those with pre-existing mental health conditions are more likely to be living in insecure, poor quality accommodation in which they were not able to feel “at home” (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019, 4; Evans et al 2003). In the previously mentioned study regarding “stranger shares,” the researchers found that living in shared households with strangers led to a further decline in tenants’ emotional and mental states. “Sharers in our study often spoke of how they felt disconnected from the people they lived with. They explained how no one actually wanted to be living there. The issue was exacerbated by the high turnaround of tenants, meaning that it was hard to forge bonds, often people were nothing more than proximate strangers” (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019, 5).

Elsewhere, Pavel noted how living with mood disorders made cleaning difficult for him. “One of the problems was my issue with depression. Dust collects quickly in this place, I can’t always get myself to clean. At one point, the place had dust badgers, yes, worse than dust bunnies.” Cleaning was hard enough to do on some days, but it was even harder to get roommates to understand his difficulty. “Whether living with friends or strangers, my roommates tended to be working stiffs.⁴³ Usually their attitude is, *‘I’m coming home tired, doing all this hard labour, and you’re always just at home, sitting around playing video games, maybe you should be the one cleaning and doing more stuff around the house.’*”

The challenges of living with his mood disorders compounds with the general difficulty he faces living with roommates, too. “Because of my mood disorders, if I come

⁴³ Cambridge Dictionary defines a “working stiff” as someone who does an ordinary job that is often not very well paid. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/working-stiff>

home one day I'm not in the mood to talk to somebody... I have to be in a certain mood. And if I'm not in that mood I've learned over the years to keep to myself. Ideally, I would live alone. Honestly, most people don't want to live with strangers, the other person is a human being, they have wants and desires that may not align with yours."

Here, Pavel expresses a feeling of residential alienation, previously discussed as the ways in which households cannot shape their domestic environment as they wish, under times of crisis (Marcuse and Madden 2016, 59). Beyond feelings of residential alienation, certain 'negative' emotions - like exhaustion, depression, anxiety - emerge from having to endure the housing crisis in the everyday (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019). The rolling back of state-provided benefits, such as affordable housing, means that people are forced to make do, carry on, get by, be resilient (Bramall, 2013). Investigating crisis in the domain of everyday life means considering the role of emotions, especially in how they might activate or hinder certain political and relational possibilities (see Ahmed 2004; Anderson and Wilson 2017; Pedwell 2017).⁴⁴

In the next section, we begin to consider the emotion *weariness*, defined as a *gradual and slow-wearing state of fatigue from having to endure everyday hardship under neoliberal policies* (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019). Thinking about the significance of weariness alongside the experience of shared housing, I think about my conversation with Greg, a participant who recounted the difficulty of living where he did, ruefully declaring, "*A year and a half more, I kept saying to myself. I've made it out in this place for two years, can I do another year and a half?*"

6.2. Greg's Case

Greg is a 28-year-old graduate student who lives in a shared house in Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood. We had this conversation on a Wednesday

⁴⁴ One illustrative example is Anna Jefferson's account (2013) about homeowners and housing activists having to confront narratives of blame, suicide, and walking away as they cope with the deleterious effects of losing a home in the foreclosure crisis in Michigan. People who have lost their homes through foreclosure *feel* as if they've failed to live up to the American Dream. Blame is individualized and absorbed as a personal failing, even as there are clear structural evidences that have transformed the process of homeownership into a losing battle: subprime loans, predatory lending, and the global turn to neoliberal and financialized housing policies since the 1970s.

morning at my place. Prior to COVID-19, interviews were meant to be held, ideally, at the participant's house, and everyone so far was able to accommodate this request. But Greg felt uncomfortable inviting me in for a number of reasons. Finding privacy would be difficult, he explained, because there was the *chaos* of people coming in and out of the house from morning until night. A typical day will start around 6 or 7 AM. "Carl, the single father, will get home support. A nurse arrives. They get him ready, get his meds, sometimes they help with bathing. At the same time this is happening, his 15-year-old son is getting ready for school. Oftentimes there's some sort of argument that happens, therefore I don't want to wake up," he laughs uneasily. "The nurse leaves. When it's quiet for a bit, that's when I wake up. I go downstairs, and Oscar, the couch surfer is there. The living room is just his *square*."⁴⁵

Arriving from Toronto, Greg found this house through a Christian non-profit he belonged to. Despite the personal connection, he had no choice or idea about who his roommates were going to be. "None of us had a relationship before this arrangement, except of course the father and the son. This was not planned."

They met for the first time when he arrived in Vancouver, and settled all his belongings inside the house that served as his address for the next three years. "My living situation seems unique, even to me," he says, taking a sip of coffee when our interview begins. We're sitting in my living room, eating pancakes for breakfast. "I live with a single father, Carl. He's on welfare for disability assistance, and he's also the landlord. He has a teenage son who is on the autism spectrum, so there are certain dynamics that poses in the household. And then there's Carl's friend, Oscar. He landed at our place two years ago. It started as a couch surfing situation but then the surfing became static, and he just stayed there."⁴⁶ When Greg first moved in 2016, he lived in the basement. "One of the people in the church said a basement was available, which

⁴⁵ Dionne: His square?

Greg: Yeah, a square, with an L-shaped couch. It literally looks like a— um...

Dionne: A zone

Greg: He's got his own borders. (laughs). Because it's hard, right? To have personal space in what is technically a shared space."

⁴⁶ People sleeping on a friend's couch in times of housing hardship is not uncommon, and could indeed be another manifestation of "residential alienation." I would also distinguish this practice from couchsurfing. Couchsurfing, for one, carries connotations of globalized travel and mobility. Take the example of Couchsurfing.com, referred to as the primary networking website for the "global couch surfing community." They tout themselves as people who are interested in "fostering cultural exchange, practicing new languages, and staying curious." Sleeping on the couch, on the other hand, signifies precarity.

was not the most ideal conditions. Any basement is not. It flooded a couple of years ago, and that meant that I had to move all my stuff in a vacant room upstairs. Even within the same home, I had some movement, as a result of that.”

The physical layout of the house included one full bathroom, one kitchen, one living room, and three bedrooms. “The largest room is occupied by the father, at the furthest end of the hallway. And then right next to that would be me, and the closest to the bathroom would be the son’s. And of course, the couch surfer is on the couch.

“And what about the basement?” I ask.

“So, the couch surfer – he’s a handyman. One of the ways he has decided to contribute is to redo the basement. Water damage was extensive. He’s been doing that, tearing down all the stuff, all the drywall. He doesn’t pay rent but he’s putting in money for supplies to redo it. He wanted to at least contribute in a form that was non-monetary, because that’s not something he has a lot of.”

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Cooking arrangement

I have a empty room in 2BD ground level apartment. It is a nice and quiet place. The owners lives upstairs and we have a good friendly relationship.

Looking for a roommate (friend) someone who will feel comfortable sharing common space together.

I would appreciate help with cooking for lower rent or arrangement.

- do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

Figure 15. Roommate ad offering lower rent in exchange for cooking services.

If we consider the household as a primary social unit, then here we see the semblance of an economy which operates on exchange beyond monetary compensation. Without the ability to pay rent, Oscar, the couch-surfer, instead offers to use his handyman skills to “pay” for his share in the house. “I mean, he’s much slower than if you actually hired help,” Greg clarifies. “He does it in his free time. But he’s extremely good with his hands, and lots of confidence in his own skill. I’ve seen the basement progress, and it’s definitely going somewhere.”

In addition, Oscar has also volunteered to take on the role of household deep-cleaner. Talking about the division of household labour, Greg says, “The father generally cooks. I usually do the everyday tidy and shuffling around. The son will sometimes take out the garbage. But the couch surfer will go and just do an absolute deep clean of the entire place, once every week or two. He’ll disinfect everything, scrub, pick up all the stuff from the counter and clean, sweep, mop. Everything.”

Greg describes how the living room has transformed into Oscar’s makeshift bedroom: The L-shaped couch, used as a bed, also doubles as a half-wall or partition. But sometimes his makeshift bedroom is used as an actual living room. The different uses of space – sometimes bedroom, sometimes living room – can confuse the dynamics in Greg’s household. Despite intermittently using the living room communally, where all members of the household eat and watch TV, Greg still feels like he is intruding on Oscar’s personal space. “The fact that he occupies this space that is generally a shared space means that it can’t always be used as a shared space!”

“At this point, do you consider it a ‘living room’ or ‘Oscar’s room?’” I wonder.

“It’s definitely not a space I would occupy as a living room.”

Researchers elsewhere have indeed found that shared houses were often places where boundaries were permeable, with little or no space to offer retreat or sanctuary (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar 2019, 4), perhaps even more so for Oscar than Greg. In addition, as Oscar gets to stay in this house for free, I wondered about that dynamic and how that might have affected Greg, who was the sole rent-paying roommate in his four-person household. I pose a question to Greg, “You mentioned that Carl and Oscar are friends?”

“Yes,” he responds.

“How does that affect the dynamic of the household?” I ask.

Greg pauses. “Carl has had a difficult time. He’s on permanent disability, he doesn’t have anything in terms of income. Carl COULD be collecting rent, in order to supplement his income, but he can’t, because Oscar doesn’t have the capacity to pay. But he would also feel bad about kicking him out. He’s kind of stuck, he feels stuck in the situation. There’s been confrontations about this. Carl will go, *‘I’ll give you three months ‘til you find something.’* But then three months will come, and Oscar wouldn’t end up finding anything. At that point, it gets renewed and renewed and renewed, and it’s a year. Carl just doesn’t have--- He’s too nice. He doesn’t have the willpower.”

Beyond the presence of a permanent couch surfer in his house, another compounding reason for Greg’s weariness was the role confusion he experienced in his relationship with Carl. “In terms of our boundaries, Carl is technically my landlord. So there is that dynamic – he’s my landlord, he’s also my roommate, and he’s also, you know, someone who I will invite to my birthday party. One of the things he got upset about was, he said, *‘I don’t want for it to be like I’m this landlord, I’m above you.’* But he also wants things to be done. For rent to be paid on time. Some sort of security, give a notice if I’m leaving anytime soon. There are these blurred lines in terms of our roles here.” As a result of these blurred lines in household roles, Greg didn’t end up signing a lease, which he calls “crazy.” At first, he wanted a contract, but Carl the landlord insisted on their arrangement having a more “informal basis.”

The role confusion also arose from the fact that Greg and his roommates would sometimes share meals together. “What sometimes happens is that Carl will usually cook. His mindset is, *‘Well, I’m making food already, so why not make for one or two more, and then we’ll all have dinner together in the living room?’*”

“Do you split costs for groceries as well?” I inquire.

“The thing is Carl has—he is a food hoarder.”

“How do you mean?”

“Imagine, we have a fridge, and three freezers: a standing freezer, a deep freezer, and one attached to the fridge. They’re all full. They don’t close sometimes. So, he goes and buys groceries once a week, and I notice how much he buys, like around \$200 a week, and I thought, ‘*That’s going to ruin me.*’” Greg empathically explains a possible reason for the hoarding: Carl grew up poor, and his childhood was marred by difficult instances of feeling hungry without the ability to solve it. In order to live with the lack of food storage space, Greg found his own solution: buying a mini refrigerator, and putting it in his room, separating his own food from the rest of the household.

But above all else, the cause for Greg’s weariness came from moments of turbulence with Carl’s teenage son, Leo. There was a lot of “in-fighting,” Greg reveals. “There were times I would overhear stuff, my heart would start racing. Emotional tension, whether you’re directly part of it or not, you can feel it if it’s there.”

“What would be happening, when your heart would start racing?”

At one point, Leo snuck into Greg’s room, stealing his homemade beer. Beyond that, a tumultuous dynamic existed between the father and son. “Carl will kick him out, but then will realize he’s legally liable for Leo, then he’ll go out and chase after him. They would yell at 7AM. When all these things are happening, it feels like the whole house is being turned upside down.”

Things weren’t always this chaotic. Greg sighs. “At an earlier point, my relationship with the son was better. He would want to learn things from me, get into whatever thing I liked, kind of like a little brother.” The familial metaphor feels appropriate, especially as the idea of “family” can often denote contradictory but simultaneous feelings of conflict and care. Still, Greg expresses uneasiness in embodying familial roles which stand in conflict with other roles present in the household, delineating the different roles he’s had in relation to the members of his household. With Leo, Greg says, “there are different roles I’ve tried out. Older brother, didn’t quite work out. Mentor, didn’t quite work out. For now, it’s just become roommate, or housemate, I guess.”

It didn’t help that Leo mostly kept himself locked in his bedroom, unable to use communal spaces elsewhere in the house, especially since the living room “belonged” to Oscar, the couch surfer. Greg empathizes with the teenager. “I understand, at the worst

point, he was 13, and of course, no 13-year-old would choose to have a roommate who's not family. But he was getting into all sorts of trouble, with the police and substance use. Carl and Leo will start yelling at each other. There were also these other household issues, like Leo would sometimes set things on fire, and he flooded the bathroom four or five times."

"How did you deal with all this?" I inquire.

"At one point, for example with the yelling, I said, '*Leo, you can't scream and yell and slam the door at 7 AM. I hear everything!*' I reprimanded him, but he started talking back to me, and to everyone, which he didn't used to do."

"Being a teenager can be hard," I say.

"Yeah, and he would say, '*You can't tell me that! You're not my dad!*' Sure, I'm not your dad," Greg says rhetorically. "But let me tell you why I **can** tell you this."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said, '*I can because I am a person who lives here. Whether you like it or not, there are certain things you need to accommodate for the people you live with. And whether it's here now, or ten years later, when you find yourself in shared accommodation, which you WILL, unless you make a LOT of money, you're going to have to deal with this eventually. You got to learn this, this is going to be a skill that you're going to have to carry with you.*'"

6.3. Learning How to Live Together

Greg touches on a crucial point: that shared housing can be a form of practice, that living together with others is a skill that we carry with us. Eleanor, another participant, might agree with Greg when she says, "I think there's a lot of learning in shared housing. You learn a lot about relationships, you learn to know what your needs are and to negotiate those with other people. It's a valuable skill to learn and practice."

Of equal importance in Greg's account is the emphasis on financial constraint as a typical route into finding oneself in shared housing. But another dialectic is at play here. Indeed, as sociologist Sue Heath argues in *Shared Housing, Shared Lives*, "While

many such sharers are, despite living collectively, primarily motivated by individualist reasons for sharing – a means of saving for a house of their own – many subsequently realise the value of learning to think through the collective. In this sense, even the most pragmatic forms of sharing can become a creative endeavor in the light of life’s uncertainties and fears. (2019, 43).

At a certain point, when everything felt like “it was too much,” Greg started looking for other places to live in, without telling Carl. “There were times when I thought, *I really can’t take this anymore. If I had to pay more rent and get to live on my own, it would significantly reduce my stress level.* But I looked at a couple of places and eventually decided not to.” Other Craigslist listings cost significantly more money per month than the \$600 he was paying to live here. He decided to stick it out. “I’m going to hunker down and rough it out for the rest of the duration, for the remainder of the time I need to be here. It would save me a ton of money in the long term, save for my wedding, and also save me the hassle of having to move twice.”

“But you know, a weird thing happened when I decided to rough it out,” he pauses. “Things started to fall into place more.”

“How do you mean?”

“When I first moved in here, my standard of cleanliness was up here,” he motions his hand to the top of his head. “But over time, I learned to drop it down lower, for my own sanity. I think about the time earlier, too, when my frustration would be high. The son would do dishes, and he wouldn’t do it very well. I learned to see it as a teaching moment. I told him, ‘Okay, come over here, let me show you how to do it, like this in a circular motion. At first, it felt silly, having to verbalize doing dishes, something you think that’s just innate, well, not *innate*, but...’”

“Taken for granted?” I offer.

“Yeah, these are things we learn often by observation without realizing. After a certain time, I realized that no matter how frustrated I get, trying to teach and train Leo and even Carl to do what I thought was ‘easy’ household stuff, it wasn’t working. At the beginning, I used to think to myself, *‘they’re not trying, not putting in the effort, they’re just being sloppy.’* But it’s not that at all. They want to do it very well, but they can’t.

They're trying their best, but because of certain limitations, they still can't.⁴⁷ Therefore, I'll do it. Because I have the capacity and the ability. So, then, my frustration kind of dissipated."

"Sounds a lot like patience, Greg," I say, feeling touched by his insight.

"The main thing, I realized, was my perception: that they weren't trying hard enough. That was the root of it. If I had left when I started looking for other places, I would have left on pretty bad terms. It would have been the end of my relationship with them."

"Throughout our interview you mentioned occupying different roles that didn't quite work out in your relationships, like brother, mentor, leader. Could you now say that you're 'friends'?" I wondered.

"Friend," he pauses for a while. "There's an endearing sense of solidarity and camaraderie, because we were all in this together. But friendship?" he pauses again. "They're very close and dear to me. They're a part of my everyday life, they're – you know – invited to my wedding. Friendship is different, but there's that level that I think well of all of them."

In spaces and times of crisis, Clarke and Newman (2012, 303) argue that individuals are asked to share in a process of "collective pain sharing" in the absence of institutionalized supports and social safety nets. No wonder that Greg expresses this sense of "solidarity" and "camaraderie" with his roommates, having gone through significant, difficult and deeply personal encounters together. But even more interesting is Greg's resistance to categorizing his roommate relationships into friend, or any specific role for that matter.

Perhaps for good reason. Shared households contain "various and plural interdependencies... creating surfaces from which intimacies can be built, made or unmade" (Hall 2019, 105). These various and plural interdependencies exist within the stage of the household, comprised of different actors, encounters, materials, and relationships. It is precisely these encounters with difference which can transform shared

⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Greg explains that Carl, the father, has physical mobility problems (which explains why he is on welfare assistance) and that Leo, the son, is diagnosed with autism.

households as spaces where doing becomes an act of learning: that we learn how to live with others by simply doing so.

This is not to romanticize or idealize shared housing arrangements. As this thesis has shown, shared households may contain critical moments of conflict, weariness, and anxiety. Yet the dialectical nature of these negative emotions mean they carry certain relational possibilities, too. When Greg says, “a year and a half more,” we see how the emotion weariness translates into a corresponding action: endurance. As Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar (2019) argue, at the same time that weariness is about exhaustion, it is also equally about endurance. For Roland Barthes (2014), weariness contains within it a “paradoxical infinity:” The more you endure, the wearier you are. The wearier you are, the greater your capacity for endurance. The cycle between the two continues.

In this chapter we worked through two case studies that proved to deviate from most other informant accounts, highlighting the vast range of experiences possible in roommate arrangements. Through Pavel’s case, we learned about how the compounding difficulty of being an older renter on welfare, with little control over one’s own living arrangement, negatively impacts the experience of shared housing, when living on the street is the only housing alternative left. Through Greg’s case, we observed challenges that might present themselves to roommate dynamics that do not conform neatly to traditional arrangements, featuring a household composition which Greg himself referred to as “strange, even to me.”

But with these unusual dynamics also came corresponding learnings. As Sue Heath and her team observe in their study of shared households in the UK, living with roommates is an ongoing learning process about how to live collectively in successful ways. “It involves experimentation, initiative, development, skill and growth. Sharers, we have found, are creative in their practices. We heard of many examples where people had learned to become skilled sharers, if not in the sense of always making a success out of sharing, then at least in the sense of coping better over time with the failures” (2019, 124).

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

At the end of each research conversation, as a way to triangulate and summarize interviews, I asked each participant a standard question before parting ways with them. “What would you say are the best and worst parts about your experiences in shared housing?” In searching for themes across their answers, most striking to me was that the “best” parts were often discussed along pedagogical lines: teaching and learning, trial and error, gaining new insight about themselves, other people, and the world through encountering differences within their own intimate spaces.

Tyler talks about the practical skills he’s learned from and through his encounters with roommates over the years. “I’ve learned a lot of cooking skills from one of my old roommates. She used to be a chef. I gained a lot of love for cooking through that, too.” Speaking about a different roommate, he says, “I’m not the handiest person in the world, and our toilet got backed up a few times, and I had a very handy housemate, John, who taught me so much more about the inner workings of plumbing than I would have learned in YouTube.”

For Ruth, living with roommates has taught her how to communicate better. “I’ve learned to ask people if something is bothering them. *‘Do you mind if I put this thing there? Can you help me with this? Can you please make sure to put down the toilet seat?’* I’ve learned not to let things fester. Part of what caused my earlier frustration with roommates was that I didn’t know how to do that.”

Shanaz was another participant who expressed that living with her roommate has been a source of great learning for her, especially as a new immigrant with no previous experience living outside her family home. The key to living well together, Shanaz tells me, is this Persian concept *گذشت* (pronounced: gozasht), a word that means both “patience and forgiveness.” “It’s the notion of being patient with somebody while forgiving or ignoring their flaws or what they do wrong because there’s a more important value to your relationship with them,” she explains, using a mundane example of not getting upset even when, say, her roommate would leave milk sitting outside the fridge to curdle.

Beyond the pedagogical value of living with roommates, some also expressed practical benefits. “As I get older, so I’m 42 this month, and I find that there’s more resilience to this model of living,” Eleanor tells me at the end of our interview, when I expressed my surprise at her singular enthusiasm for shared housing. “If any of us, and some of us HAVE gotten sick, you’re not—like, with nuclear families, you’re SO reliant on the individual, on the partner. But here, I have a partner, I have my roommates, I have my friends. Everyone’s schedules are so diverse. Even, just y’know, the Purolator guy! Someone can let them in, I don’t have to rush home. People can catch you. You have a safety net, in a lot of ways. An economic necessity of renting with people becomes such a benefit to myself.”

Yet it is not lost on me that nearly all participants who reported the pedagogical value of learning how to live with roommates, maintain good relations and household harmony were also often better resourced. I especially think about the case of Pavel, who for nearly two decades, has been using welfare assistance cheques to pay for rent, precariously jumping from one shared house to another. In cases like this, what is to be done in order to help alleviate some of these challenges of shared housing? Perhaps it is worth considering how policy shifts in residential tenancy laws and municipal bylaws may lessen the precarity of living in these households that are not often legitimized in comparison to their counterparts, such as single-family households.

Above all else, the challenges of shared housing present opportunities to engage in creative thinking, to come up with strategic solutions in the common task of learning how to live together. Sharers in all contexts manage, negotiate and utilize different elements of sharing – ideology and motivation, the economic and the material, the spatial and the temporal – in ways that allow them to either connect or disconnect at various times from their fellow sharers – to create moments of group belonging and solidarity, as well as moments of individual privacy (Heath et al 2019, 129). In times of crisis, we know how relationships become crucial sources of support, and it is my hope to have shown that roommate relationships also have a significant place in cultivating a sense of intimacy, safety and care.

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