

‘A Bridge Over the Chasm’: Rhetoric and Reflexivity in Housing Advocacy

By

Devin Kelly

BA in History  
University of California Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, CA (2013)

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Author: \_\_\_\_\_  
Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
May 18, 2021

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Devin Michelle Buntun  
Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by \_\_\_\_\_  
Ceasar McDowell  
Professor of the Practice  
Chair, MCP Committee  
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

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## **Abstract**

As we cast housing in the language of crisis, development, shortage, and units, we lose sight of its value in the context of social relations and human wellbeing. The rhetoric that has evolved to explain gaps in housing access intersects powerfully with homelessness policy and advocacy, and ideas about leadership and solutions. In a case study of a housing advocacy subculture in Anchorage, Alaska, I ask whether naming, and critically examining, one’s own experiences of being housed can disrupt habitual ways of acting and leading and create more informed, collaborative, compassionate, and transformational approaches to change in the housing and homelessness arena. Through a lens of critical reflexivity, I identify interlocking structural conditions, or “blueprints,” that constitute housed rhetoric and relations. I propose adapting a series of existing action-based tools to unpack these blueprints and support inclusive, collaborative policy work across difference.

**Thesis Supervisor: devin michelle bunten**

Assistant Professor of Urban Economics and Housing, MIT DUSP

**Thesis Reader: Ceasar McDowell**

Professor of Civic Design; Associate Department Head, MIT DUSP

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# Introduction

We cast “housing” in terms of crisis, of need, of production and development, of shortage and stagnation, of building, buying, and selling. We hear the drumbeat of news of a critical and growing lack of available and affordable units in rural and urban areas alike. Years-long waitlists for affordable units run throughout the country. Every day in the United States and Canada, millions entirely lack habitable shelter or spent a disproportionate amount of their monthly income to maintain it. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and ensuing exhortations by public officials to “shelter in place” cast in sharp relief the implications of disparities in access to shelter and the supportive resources. We think in markets, in numbers of units, in building and rebuilding.

Yet housing is not simply a physical structure. It is a manifestation of social relationships. We have seen how markets, which have successfully produced vast quantities of housing, leave people out. A lack of credit, a lack of employment or a tenuous labor market connection, and layers of social marginalization — along axes that include race, sexual orientation, mental health, addiction — all impact the ability of an individual or family to find and maintain the housing of their choice and ensure their wellbeing. The foundational aspects of adequate shelter and its connection to human wellbeing is central to its recognition in international human rights law (Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, 2014). As we have come to associate the physical structure of housing primarily with its financial value, we lose sight of why its value ever existed in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis began as an exploration into approaches to homelessness policy that equitably harness the knowledge and experience of people who have themselves experienced homelessness. It evolved into a study of language, meaning, and values. **I ask whether naming, and critically examining, one’s own experiences of being housed can disrupt habitual ways of acting and leading and create more informed, collaborative, compassionate and transformational approaches to change in the housing and homelessness arena.**

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Devin Buntten and Janelle Knox-Hayes for helping develop these ideas.

This work engages with a growing body of literature that explores the relationship between knowledge and power, the nuance of experience and identity, and working across difference (Narayan 1988) in the context of housing and homelessness. People with lived experience of homelessness and housing insecurity have called for representation, collaboration, and greater attention to power dynamics in policymaking spaces (Nelson 2020). The lens of critical reflexivity, or a process of examining an advantaged social position by surfacing underlying assumptions and beliefs, has been applied toward “reversing the gaze” of those in power and uncovering new avenues of equitable practice and social change in homelessness work (Phipps 2020). I contribute to this literature by examining, through a critically reflexive lens, the ideologies and rhetoric that have emerged to explain why the market has delivered adequate housing to some people and not others, and what should be done about the gap. Through a case study of a housing advocacy subculture in Anchorage, Alaska, I identify a “housed” identity and its rhetoric as constructed by housed professionals and advocates, building on modes of rhetoric identified by Sutton-Smith (1997). This thesis considers a reframe of “housing” as a manifestation of social relations and interdependence (Thistle 2017), and the implications of social position in working collaboratively and inclusively in housing policy — values that are enshrined in the Alaska Native way of doing (Hensley and O’Neill 2018).

This thesis proceeds as follows. The preface defines well-known terms around the absence of housing – “homeless,” “unhoused,” “houseless” and “person with lived experience” – and constructs a new term, “housed,” to identify the *presence* of housing. In the first chapter, “Seeing the Chasm,” I historicize and contextualize Anchorage, a city of 300,000 in Southcentral Alaska where I spent nearly six years as a reporter and imagine returning as a practitioner. I identify calls for collaboration in housing policy made by people with lived experience of homelessness, and connect these calls to well-established theories of knowledge, power and justice, and the risks and challenges of working across difference (Narayan 1988; Mawhinney 1998). In the second and third chapters, “Assembling Bridge Materials” and “Building the Bridge,” I describe the methods and the findings of 14 semi-structured interviews that took place between December 2020 and March 2021. These anonymous interviews represent a sample of housing and social service advocates in Anchorage, Alaska, and include people with and without lived experience of homelessness. Interviews explored critical reflexivity about being housed, about public perceptions and assumptions, and about the process of working collaboratively and inclusively with people who have experienced homelessness.

Through these interviews, I identify four interlocking structural conditions that I call *blueprints*: Expectation, advantage, vulnerability, and connectivity. I suggest here that surfacing these blueprints constitute an essential aspect of critical reflexivity among housed advocates and allies -- and the preparatory work for engaging in collaborative relationships across difference. In the concluding chapter, “Walking the Bridge,” I connect blueprints to an existing set of methodological tools called “Theory U” that I have explored with a team in the past year as part of a course and workshop series (Scharmer 2016, MIT Presencing Institute 2020). I suggest adapting these tools to the arena of housing policymaking, identifying ways that these tools have the potential to address housed blueprints by acknowledging and historicizing difference and social position. I consider the language, structures and spaces that may facilitate new ways of learning and doing in this space.

I focus this work on people like me — practitioners with histories of housing stability and who consider themselves allies — as well as any housed person who considers themselves touched by or concerned about the wellbeing of all the dwellers of a city.



## Preface: Constructions

The words we use and the meanings we ascribe to them shape our narratives and social relations. This thesis will seek to construct and unpack a series of terms that describe relationships to the structures in which we dwell.

### Homeless, Unhoused, Houseless

The term “homeless” remains the dominant term used in discourse and in government policy to reflect the extent to which a person or family has, at any point in their life, lacked adequate shelter. Definitions offered by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) cover a range of situations. “Literal homelessness” is presently defined by HUD as individuals or families lacking “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” which includes: “a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangement” or a “car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground” (HUD 2021). Individuals or families at “imminent risk” of homelessness face losing their primary nighttime residence within 14 days, have no alternative residence identified, and “lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing” (HUD 2021). Youth under the age of 25 and families who have not held a lease, ownership or rental agreement; experienced “two moves or more” in a 60-day period; and will be expected to continue experiencing the instability because of “needs or barriers” also qualify as homeless under certain federal statutes. The same applies to families or individuals fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, and who lack both an alternative residence and supportive structures to find other housing. Homelessness encompasses the experience of “who are trading sex for housing; who are staying with friends, but cannot stay there longer for than 14 days; who are being trafficked; and left home because of physical, emotional or financial abuse or threats of abuse and have no safe, alternative housing” (HUD 2021). HUD also distinguishes between “sheltered” (living in a formal shelter) and “unsheltered” (living outside of a shelter, such as in a tent or vehicle) homelessness.

In an Indigenous context, “a lack of a home, much as a sense of place or homeplace, is a culturally understood experience” (Thistle 2017, p. 8). It has a far more layered and complex definition, tied

the displacement, disruption and trauma caused by colonization and dispossession. In a definition developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, “indigenous homelessness has been incorrectly understood by settlers as being without a structure of habitation or being roofless....when Indigenous homelessness is also about **being without All My Relations**. Being without a physical structure is only a symptom of the root causes of Indigenous homelessness, which are being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships” (Thistle 2017, p. 8).

Over time, a growing number of advocates have come to see “homeless” as a pejorative term that implies personal failure and a sense of being less-than (Lee 2014). These advocates deploy the term “unhoused” to reflect the core economic policy problem of a lack of affordable structures, while also projecting a more inclusive view of unhoused people as members of the communities in which they live (Lee 2014). “Unhoused,” when used as a verb, implies being actively driven from shelter (Merriam-Webster 2021). Other advocates have similarly adopted the term “houseless” (Do Good Multnomah 2021), which is also reflected in the name of at least one advocacy group that formed in Anchorage in 2018. I have also interpreted the term as a political identity statement to resist the normative ideologies and limited options around housing as it exists today. In this way, a person who has been unhoused in the past may physically have a roof over their head today, but still identify as “houseless.” The term “roofless” appears to carry similar meaning.

Relatedly, the terms ‘lived expert’ or ‘person with lived experience’ acknowledge that a person has to some degree survived homelessness (see also Norman, 2015). While increasingly common in literature, advocacy and in organizational contexts, Phipps (2020) suggests instead the term “grounded experience” in relationship to homelessness, which emphasizes the knowledge and insight that the person has gained from the experience rather than the experience itself. At the same time, there is no singular experience of homelessness.

## Housed

While the term “homeless” is ubiquitous, this thesis seeks to construct an opposing identity category that is far less commonly used in discourse: that of being “housed.”

I identify two applications, the second being my own construction:

- Application 1. Verb. Past tense of “house,” a verb meaning, “to give a person or animal a place to live” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021)
- Application 2: Adjective. A person who is a) actively housed and/or b) **does not have lived experience of being homeless** (as in, a “housed person”)

The term “housed” has been deployed in group spaces of advocacy for the rights of the unhoused in Anchorage to delineate who in the group has lived experience and who is an “ally.” See, for example, the mission statement of an Anchorage advocacy group for people with lived experience, the Houseless Resources Advocacy Council (or HRAC):

*HRAC strives to be...*

*The voice that has not been heard in the past for all those communities we serve,*

*A safe space for houseless people to unpack their trauma & share their joys, concerns, hopes, & needs,*

***A bridge over the chasm separating the houseless and the housed,***

*A forum for houseless and formerly houseless individuals to meet housed individuals in the middle where we can seek reconciliation and build a common understanding of the problem while working together toward solutions that will mend our tattered safety nets.*

*We believe that intersectional conversations concerning our common and shared feelings of alienation may take us on a path toward reconciliation and healing some of society’s wounds.*

— Anchorage Houseless Resources Advocacy Council, 2021 (bolding by author)

I draw the title of this thesis from this mission statement. I seek to surface the nature of the “chasm separating the houseless and the housed,” identify materials for building the “bridge,” and explore what it means to walk across it — from the side of the housed.

# Chapter I: Seeing the Chasm

## Groundwork

I spent nearly six years working as a local newspaper reporter in Anchorage, Alaska. A city of about 300,000 in the Southcentral region, Anchorage encompasses the most populous urban area in Alaska. The municipality stretches thousands of square miles, hemmed in between the silty Cook Inlet (*Tikahtnu*) to the west and the vast peaks of the Chugach mountain range to the east. It was here that I developed an interest in the politics and language surrounding homelessness, often structured in discourse as one of Anchorage's most pressing -- and seemingly intractable -- crises. In this chapter, I historicize homelessness in Anchorage in the context of the city's own complex development.

### *Dena'ina Elnena*

For millennia, the lands now occupied by Anchorage have been the traditional hunting, fishing and gathering territory of the Dena'ina, members of the Northern Dene (Athabascan) indigenous cultural family. Traditional Dena'ina settlements in what is now Anchorage include a salmon fishing camp at *Dgbeyaytnu*, or what is now known as Ship Creek near downtown (Fall 2018). Families also hunted caribou, moose, bears, sheep and goat in the Chugach mountains (Fall 2018). A creek that runs through Anchorage today, Chanshtnu (now known as Chester Creek) was a major fish campsite (Fall 2018). It was a landscape of smokehouses, hanging racks and steam baths, and platforms used for netting salmon and spearing belugas. Rather than being nomadic, the Dena'ina lived in permanent settlements along the inlet, in dozens of villages (Fall 2018). The villages included, of course, houses: *nichil*, semi-permanent multifamily homes made of logs and birch bark (Fall 2018).

The eighteenth century marked the onset of colonial encounters with Europeans. In 1778 the British explorer Captain James Cook, for whom Cook Inlet (*Tikahtnu*) is now named, sailed up the inlet and marked the first European encounter with Dena'ina, which historians believe to be members of the Kenaitze tribe (Fall 2018). Cook's crew exchanged goods with the Dena'ina and also shot a dog, possibly in a power display (Fall 2018). In the late 1700s Russian fur traders arrived in the area and established trading posts on what is now the Kenai Peninsula (Fall 2018). The Dena'ina became

involved in the fur trade, but these relations were not peaceful, and the Dena'ina soon mounted raids and other resistance to Russian violence and intimidation (Fall 2018). Most Russians left the Cook Inlet area by about 1798, though trading relationships continued throughout the nineteenth century (Fall 2018). In the late 1830s a smallpox epidemic swept through the Dena'ina population and led to the abandonment and consolidation of many villages (Fall 2018).

The U.S. purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 led to little change at first (Fall 2018). Commercial salmon fishing began in Cook Inlet in the 1880s, displacing the Dena'ina from many traditional fishing sites (Fall 2018). By the 1890s, commercial fishers had depleted many of the salmon runs (Fall 2018). Fur prices also dropped around this time, creating hardships for the Dena'ina in the form of lower incomes and access to trade goods (Fall 2018). At the same time, American gold prospectors began exploring the Susitna and Yentna rivers in the 1870s and 1880s, and discoveries included in the Turnagain Arm (known to the Dena'ina as “the backwater,” or *Tutl'ub*) (Fall 2018, p. 23-24). Mining operations ushered in a new phase of settlement in the Upper Cook Inlet. Non-native populations settled on the Kenai Peninsula and portions of the Upper Cook Inlet Region. The future city of Anchorage was established in 1915, initially as a railroad construction camp (Hensley and O'Neill 2018). Despite its long history of Dena'ina habitation, the Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC) believed they had encountered a “mostly uninhabited wilderness” (Blasingame 2018, p. 180). The name “Anchorage” came from the U.S. Post Office, which marked Ship Creek's use as a transfer site for passengers and supplies for the more established community of Knik nearby (Blasingame 2018). About 3,000 people lived in this tent city to build the railroad and provide community services for workers and their families (Angvik 2018).

In 1918, a massive influenza epidemic killed close to 90 percent of the Dena'ina population and resulted in further abandonment of villages and traditional territories (Fall 2018, Eklutna Inc. 2021). By 1920, the Dena'ina had become “a minority in their own homeland”, with just between 1,000 and 2,000 people remaining (Fall 2018, p. 23). Over the next several decades, the surviving Dena'ina watched as traditional subsistence areas became subsumed by settler-colonial structures of military installations, extensive private development, highways, infrastructure, settler housing and railroads, as well as discrimination against Alaska Native peoples in employment and housing in the growing city (Hensley and O'Neill 2018). Many families had fish camps in what is now downtown Anchorage, and these camps were occupied until “non Dena'ina newcomers changed the rules of

land ownership and the Dena'ina were forced to leave” (Fall 2018, p. 27). Hunting regulations imposed by territorial and federal game management authorities curtailed much of the traditional hunting in the area by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Fall 2018). One fish camp became an Army dump in the 1940s (Fall 2018). Traditional camps were abandoned in numerous locations because of increasing restrictions (Fall 2018).

In the early 1960s, Dena'ina residents organized the Native Village of Eklutna (*Idlughbet*) in a bid to protect traditional land rights (Native Village of Eklutna, 2019). At this point, a reservation of 326,000 acres had been reduced to just 1,819 acres (Native Village of Eklutna, 2019). The village won Supreme Court rulings to prevent mining by the railroad and the National Bank of Alaska (the future Wells Fargo Bank). In 1971, to resolve land claims created by resource development, the federal government signed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which created 13 regional Alaska Native corporations and about 175 village corporations. The legislation inaugurated Alaska Native tribes into a Western, capitalism-based regime of corporations and shareholders (Tuck 2014), but also preserved land claims and a form of Native sovereignty (Hensley and O'Neill, 46). In fact, the largest landowner in Anchorage today is Eklutna Inc., formed in 1972 as the Alaska Native corporation for the Dena'ina Region (Eklutna Inc. 2021). The Native Village of Eklutna also won back the land that had been disputed in Supreme Court rulings: In 2014, Wells Fargo donated the land to the tribe through a conservation easement (Fall 2018). While the village had likely been occupied for hundreds of years, it is today the only Dena'ina village remaining within the municipality of Anchorage (Fall 2018).

Military bases brought considerable population growth to Anchorage in the 1940s and '50s (Angvik 2018, p. 228). The growth continued to surge into the 1970s, fueled by oil exploration and the approval to build the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in 1974 (Angvik 2018, p. 233). These years marked the beginnings of a culture shift in Anchorage, as it became less of a “transient” place (Haycox 2018, p. 335). A citizen commission pushed to unify a patchwork of services being provided by borough and city governments and develop a chartered city government, leading to the creation of the Municipality of Anchorage in 1975 (Angvik 2018). Sewers played a key role in the development of the geography of Anchorage, draining wetlands and dictating the development of denser city blocks (Angvik 2018; see also Wohlforth 2015). Today the settlement patterns of Anchorage reflect its growth in bursts, from the blocks of zoned subdivisions for single-family homes, to strip malls and

highways that run around and through the downtown area, and sharp distinctions between commercial and residential areas.

Recent decades have seen population change and increasing patterns of diversity. In 1990, about 80 percent of Anchorage's 226,000 residents identified as white, with less than 20 percent identifying as a person of color (Hensley and O'Neill 2018). Twenty-five years later, the nonwhite population has doubled from less than 20 percent to nearly 40 percent of an overall population of about 300,000, trends marked by growth in the Alaska Native population as well as Asian, Pacific Islander and people of Hispanic ethnicity (Hensley and O'Neill 2018). As the population changes the city has also begun to see signs of acknowledgement to its origins in *Dena'ina Elnena* (Dena'ina Country). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century it was difficult for Anchorage residents to find any public knowledge of that geographic fact (Fall 2018). In the past two decades, however, the city has erected new signage, statutes, building names and museum exhibitions that acknowledge the history and continued presence of the Dena'ina, as well as robust structures of Alaska Native leadership through corporations, coalitions, institutes, and organizations (Fall 2018; Hensley and O'Neill 2018). Values of inclusion and collaboration are continually advanced by Alaska Native leaders, making a call for inclusion that wraps around all of Anchorage's residents:

*The collaborative framework that has been advanced among Native organizations, and increasingly between Native and non-Native organizations, must be the template for the future, in which collaboration must grow stronger, to include the full diversity of Anchorage's residents, and the full range of the city's resources.*

—Hensley and O'Neill 2018 (p. 56)

## Homelessness in Anchorage

It is within this complex history that I situate Anchorage's more recent conflicts over houselessness, public space, and the paradigmatic question of a "right to the city" for all inhabitants (Lefebvre et. al. 1996). Over the periods of colonization, settlement and urban growth, one of Anchorage's central and lasting planning features emerged in the form of a 120-mile paved greenbelt system that winds its way along the salty inlet and across the city toward the Chugach mountains (Municipality of Anchorage 2021). In the winter, groomed snow carries skiers, winter-tire bikers and Iditarod dogsled teams; on sunny summer days, joggers, walkers and cyclists flock to the paved paths. Home and

businesses tightly hem to the trail in certain places (Anchorage Waterways Council, 2014). The trail system has also become the temporary residence of hundreds of unhoused people over the years. In this way, the woods become a site of conflict between formal structures and informal settlements, typifying urban conflicts across the United States that accompany modern homelessness. Even in winter, where temperatures average between 20- and 30-degrees Fahrenheit and occasionally dip down below zero, people spend nights in tents, tarps and hand-built structures along the forested greenbelt outside instead of staying in the crowded emergency shelter downtown or overflow shelters. In the spring and summer, the informal dwelling structures on public lands become more visible, prompting a higher volume of complaints and a more coordinated city response (Kelly 2016). Through an evolving blend of police enforcement, social services outreach, park maintenance crews and physical design, the Municipality of Anchorage has sought over the years to deter informal settlement and move people into shelters, or transitional or permanent housing. Legal challenges have led to policies that require two weeks' notice before clearing a camp, or clearance within three days so long as belongings were stored (Kelly 2018). The city currently uses a GIS-based system to track complaints made by housed residents and the status of the city's police and clean-up response. On one page, a data dashboard tracks reports of camps and the status of those reports, maps camp locations, catalogues cleaning metrics (such as "tons of trash cleaned") and indicates shelter occupancy levels (Municipality of Anchorage, 2021).

While homelessness has been studied since the 1920s, systematic efforts to count unhoused individuals and families date back to the 1980s, when advocates sought to pin a number on the total number of people on the streets at any given night in hopes of sparking interest in the issue (Smith 2019). The U.S. count still occurs each year on a single night in January (hence the name, the "Point-In-Time Count", or PIT) and is required of jurisdictions that receive funding through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Researchers have documented the problems with the PIT approach: Most recently, Smith et al (2019) documented the conflicts of interest, definitional challenges and lack of thoroughness embedded in the current count structure, while conducting a separate count that sought to enumerate those who are marginally housed (including those sleeping on friends' couches and doubling up in units). Acknowledging the limits of PIT data, federal authorities and communities have sought to develop more systematic and ongoing methods of tracking people who are unhoused. Over the past several years officials in Alaska have built up a centralized database called the Alaska Homeless Management Information System



(AKHMIS) (Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness 2021). The system tracks unhoused people by name as they access services, and ranks people based on vulnerability. In March 2021 in Anchorage, about 5,500 people were recorded as having contact with social service providers enrolled in the system. This included about 1,039 single adults who identified as chronically homeless, and about 111 families (Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness 2021). About 33 percent identified as Alaska Native or American Indian; about 24.7 percent identified as white; and about 9.5 percent identified as Black. Anchorage is using the data to participate in a national initiative called Built for Zero. This approach deploys real-time data to move communities to a standard of “functional zero,” where the number of available units exceeds the number of people searching for housing (Built For Zero 2021).

As a reporter covering Anchorage’s local government and neighborhoods between 2014 and 2019, I wrote often about the intersections of homelessness, social services, neighborhoods and policing. I attended numerous public meetings where local elected officials and housed residents surfaced concerns, walked through the greenbelt woods with volunteers at 6 a.m. for the January homeless count, and periodically interviewed people living at the downtown emergency shelter and in tents in the woods. I tried to better understand efforts to systematically connect people to housing through data. Over time, I became interested in what I perceived to be a habitual absence at local government meetings of representation of people who were homeless or had lived experience of being homeless. While I imagined that policymakers and the (housed) public had much to learn from people with direct experience with homelessness in Anchorage, it seemed that these spaces, and consequently my own reporting, tended to elevate a perspective of housed concern over a more nuanced understanding of the lives and situations of those who were not housed.

In addition to surveying various policies, I also reviewed formally adopted plans focused on ending homelessness. In Anchorage I describe here two planning documents in place at the start of this thesis research, with particular attention to the role of people with lived experience in each of them. The community-wide plan to end homelessness for youth and adults in Anchorage is called “Anchored Home,” with the most recent version, at the time of this writing, adopted by the city Assembly in 2018. The plan outlines a series of goals and metrics aimed at establishing what is known as “functional zero,” or the point where the available supply of housing units surpasses the demand from those experiencing brief episodes of homelessness. It identifies four pillars of

response. Prevention and Diversion apply to identifying at-risk individuals and families and coordinating resources to prevent homelessness (Anchored Home, p. 12). Housing and Support Systems relate to expanding the capacity of housing and social services, and directs an “empowerment” approach toward those with lived experience and Alaska Native organizations. Public Health and Safety relate to a goal of reducing public encampments, identifying demographic trends of who is living outside of formal shelters, and ensuring improved safety (Anchored Home, p. 16). Finally, the pillar of Advocacy and Funding addresses who will generate the resources to bring the elements of the plan to fruition. In terms of addressing lived experience or empowerment overall, the plan cited meetings and discussions with people with lived experience as part of a broader public engagement process. It suggests including those with lived experience in planning and implementation, though it does not identify specific avenues for doing so. A “Homelessness Advisory Team” appeared in the plan’s governance structure as a container for advocacy and advice from those with lived experience. At the same time, the plan identified the separate advocacy and governance of a body called the “Homeless Leadership Council,” which appeared to be comprised primarily of housed leadership. This body was identified as an oversight council to “build support among community councils, businesses and corporations, elected officials, philanthropic leaders, residents, and faith- and community-based organizations.” Members of the media were identified as vehicles for sharing positive stories of people who have experienced homelessness.

A second plan adopted in 2017, “Municipality of Anchorage Community Plan to End Homelessness: Youth and Young Adults 2020,” specifically addresses homelessness among residents younger than 24. The plan emphasizes a collaborative focus, with youth with lived experience being “integrated into all levels of leadership” (p. 13). Informed by lived experts, the plan identified critical vulnerabilities in specific populations, particularly youth who identify as LGBTQ, pregnant or parenting mothers, victims of sexual trafficking or domestic violence, and “systems-involved” youth with experience in foster care, corrections or child protection (Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project Overview 2021). The plan became the cornerstone of a HUD-funded demonstration project, which is advancing a multi-pronged approach of host homes, permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing and permanency navigators — a relationship-based approach that seeks to support unhoused youth over a long term – to make youth homelessness as brief and rare as possible (Municipality of Anchorage Community Plan to End Homelessness: Youth and Young Adults 2020). The authors identified at the beginning of the plan included the names of three members of

what is known as the Youth Task Force at Covenant House Alaska. This body, part of the governance of Covenant House, consists of a majority of young people with lived experience of youth homelessness. Its members were identified as among the “roster of experts” involved in the creation of the community plan. A recent website describing the demonstration project noted the plan itself “relied heavily on the knowledge of those who have actually been there,” concluding that those with lived experience “are the ones that can best inform us about the factors that lead to homeless(ness)” (Homelessness Demonstration Project Overview, 2021).

Taken together, these plans raised, for me, questions about experts, leadership, and decision-making power in the context of homelessness policy. I want to be clear that I consider myself implicated in these structures. I am a white woman from a middle-class background, I am able-bodied and neurotypical, and I have a history of housing stability. I came to graduate school interested in affordable housing development, after reaching the conclusion as a journalist that housing was essential to human wellbeing. But my own research, as well as relationships with people of different backgrounds than my own, led me to call into question the logic underpinning the seemingly straightforward act of “building” more affordable housing. I became curious about what it would mean to better understand the side of the chasm on which I stand.

## Theoretical framework

This thesis explores intersectional work that blends theory and action. In a theoretical context, I investigate language, binaries and complexity in the context of housing. I consider the epistemic claims of those with lived experience of homelessness, and the implicit risks of working across difference. I seek to surface and problematize the rhetorical power, or ideological values, of the housed. In the following section I walk through the theoretical underpinnings of each of these questions.

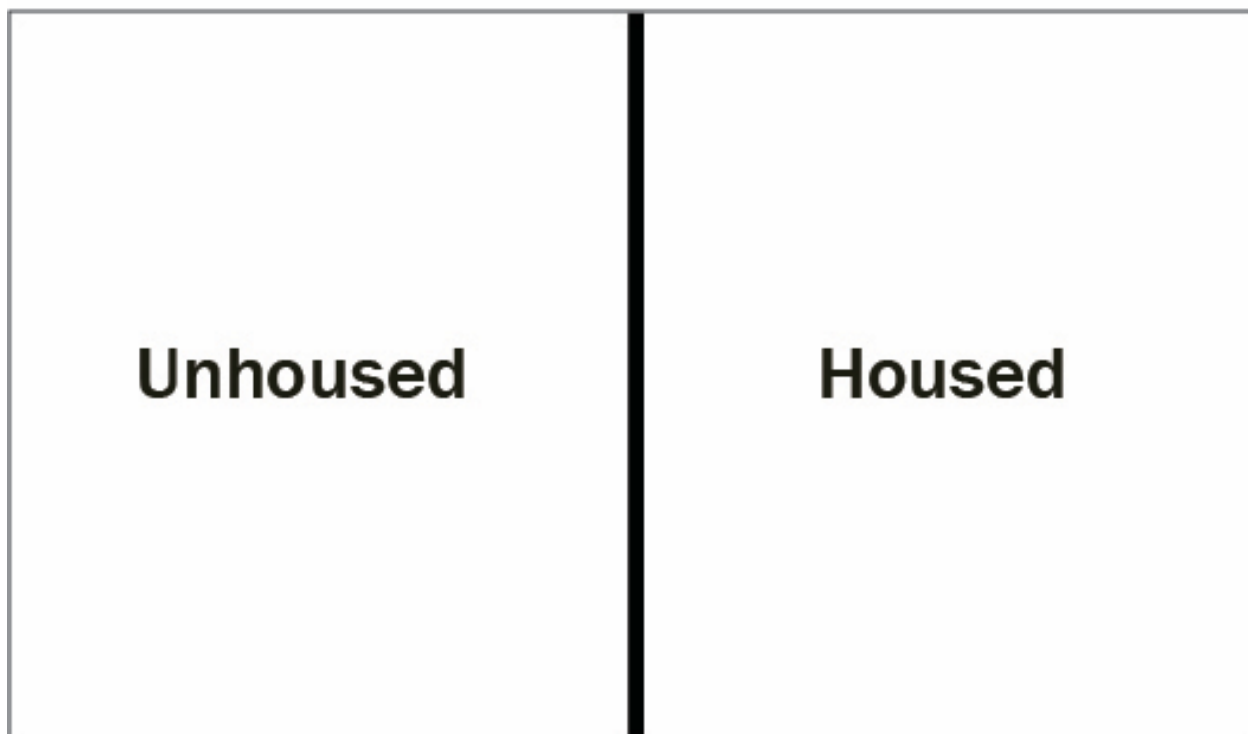
## Oppositions and deconstructions

In the preface to this thesis, I constructed the term “housed” as a binary opposition to the term “homeless” or “unhoused” (see Fig. 1). The reasoning here is that, in the classic Western traditions of constructions and oppositions, if we talk about homelessness, we can also talk about *housedness* – a

norm so invisible that the word does not exist in a dictionary. Another oppositional term might be *homeful* or *homed*, but I deploy “housed” here because it is already extant in some advocacy discourse.

I engage the term “housed” in this thesis to indicate that there are many individuals in significant leadership and decision-making positions around housing that have never themselves experienced housing insecurity, let alone literal homelessness. As noted in the preface, the term “housed” has been deployed in group spaces of advocacy for the rights of the unhoused in Anchorage, including to delineate who in the group has lived experience and who is an “ally.” I follow other researchers in seeking to delineate the relationship between knowledge, experience, and power.

**Fig. 1: Identifying a binary**



Oppositional binaries denoting *difference* have long shaped the power relations of social spaces in explicit and totalizing terms (black versus white, male versus female). These oppositions become naturalized in public narrative and everyday life (Harcourt 2007). But of course, these mechanistic and starkly divided binaries do not describe reality. Between the two poles lie a spectrum that

encompasses a constantly evolving and shifting social situations. This applies to the “unhoused” and “housed” poles, and the complex and wide-ranging social situations that apply in between. Further, in the “houseless” identity, I perceive a subset of people that do not consider themselves to be on the spectrum at all (see Fig. 2).

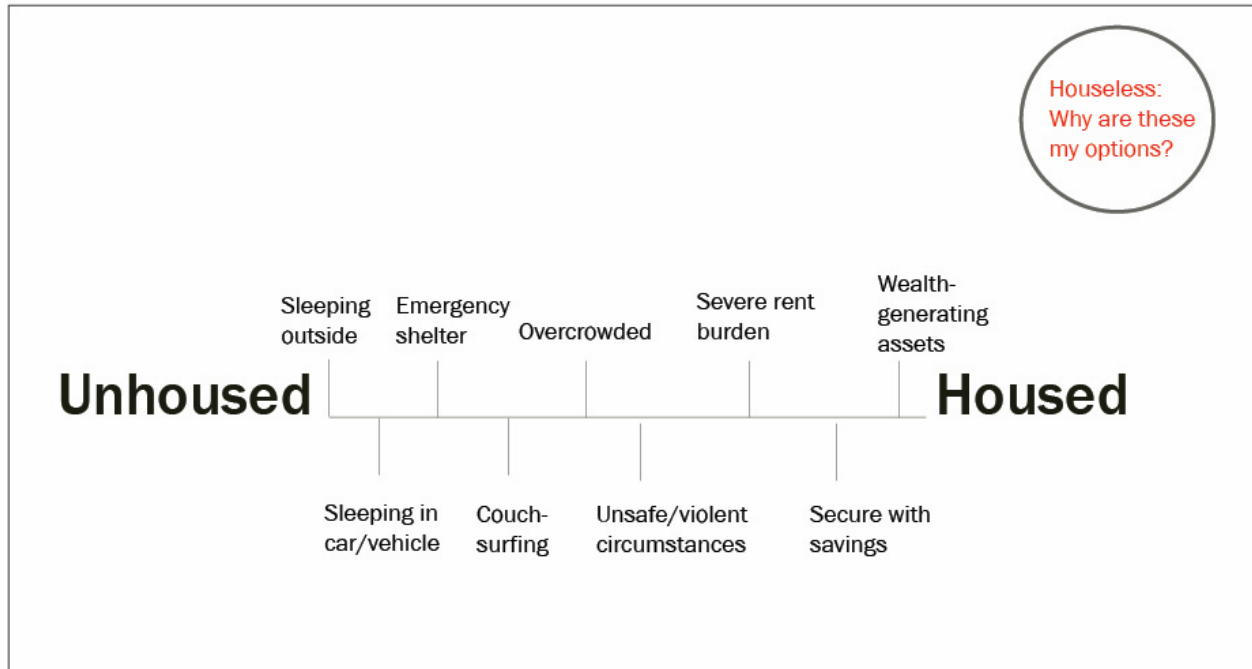
In an Indigenous context, “homelessness” emerges not as description of solely as a lack of a dwelling but as a more complex manifestation of disrupted relationships. For the original stewards of these lands, “a lack of a home, much as a sense of place or homeplace, is a culturally understood experience” (Thistle 2017, p. 8). The manifestations of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous peoples, including addiction and street poverty, are “incorrectly assumed to be the causes of homelessness in popular and worldwide blame-the-victim discourses” (Thistle 2017, p. 7). These discourses obscure historical processes and narrative prejudices by the states and settler societies that have produced Indigenous homelessness, and the extent to which “homelessness” is socially constructed (Thistle 2017).

I follow deconstructionist critiques (such as Derrida 1973, 1976, also cited in Cunliffe and Jun 2005) that seek to inject ambiguity and openness in contrast to “claims of totality and universality” present in structural oppositions (Butler 1990, p. 40, quoted in Harcourt 2007). Such deconstructions have numerous applications; Smith (2012) applied it to the colonizer/colonized binary, noting that these two binaries in fact constitute a set of relations, and “different layerings which have occurred within each group and across the two groups” (p. 69).

Overly-reductionist categorical groupings (also known as *essentialism*) create the impression of a singular perspective, such as that of “women.” This of course masks the complex racial and sexual identities encompassed within (Lorde 1984; hooks 1982). Descriptions of “the homeless” and “the homeless community” prevalent in discourse and news stories (including my own) also paint a monolithic picture devoid of personal histories and complexities. The distinct experiences of members of this community (if it exists) are obscured. Even when deployed in the context of advocacy, the term “lived experience,” of course, also encompasses an extremely broad range of histories, conditions and social positionings. Intersections with race, gender and sexuality produce intensely disparate outcomes, and may also impact the ability to engage in advocacy and the policymaking relationships being described here. Further, while the “lived experience” identity

category has created more access to power and decision-making forums for some, it is also subject to privilege and stratification, such as planning efforts that favor the involvement of lived experts that are viewed as “less disruptive” (Voronoka 2016).

Fig. 2: A spectrum of “housedness”



Following the lead of generations of critical theorists, I use the term not to imply that terms such as “housed” or “houseless” have static meaning but represent a fluid and subjective identity that also encompasses intersecting identities around race, gender, ableism and neurotypicality. Therefore, I strategically constitute the “lived experience” and “housed” positions. I use these terms, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, “not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything” (Spivak and Harasym, 1990, p. 51). For example, the nature of being *housed*, in the sense of never having experienced homelessness, is very much “the norm.” As Fellows and Razack (1998) argue, “to be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others” (p. 12). This thesis seeks to name the “norm” -- the housed position -- to explore mechanisms of power along the axes of social difference.

## Difference, knowledge, and power

Surfacing the complexity of social position raises critical questions about knowledge, experience, and the distribution of power. Power serves to substantiate certain forms of knowledge and marginalize others (Foucault 1972). By controlling the base of knowledge, scientists – and generally, people in power – also control political power (Sutton-Smith, 2009). Power relationships also manifest spatially, dividing and separating populations and casting unhoused residents as simultaneously invisible and a problem (Fopp 2008).

As Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire contended in his foundational work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), social change requires upending power dynamics and leading dominant group members to work *with*, not *for*, those who are oppressed. “Oppressed” in this case describes those who are limited in their ability to pursue lives where they can thrive, and whose knowledge is deliberately suppressed and marginalized because of the way it may threaten the structures and benefits accrued to the dominant group. In this way, the dominant group has a vested interest in suppressing the *conscientização*, or consciousness-raising, of those experiencing social marginality such as extreme poverty. Freire further suggests that those “on the margins” have never in fact been marginal or outside, but deeply embedded a “structure that made them ‘beings for others’”; the project is to transform not the individuals, but the structure itself (p. 74). This transformation process accrues to ideas about political power and knowledge.

*Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.*

— Freire 1970 (p. 85)

Counter-hegemonic interpretations of knowledge, and its subjectivities and ambiguities, manifest in the realm of participatory action research (PAR). PAR represents a critique of the historically top-down, “objective,” and “expert” positioning of academics, educators, and practitioners. Research originating from the standpoint of those who have been shunted to the margins of society makes it possible to surface “the social mechanisms through which power relations are made to appear

obviously natural and necessary” (Harding 1992, p. 584, quoted in Fopp 2008). Participatory action research moves toward the unsettling of the traditional hegemonic knowledge relationships of researcher “experts” through collaborative co-research and power-sharing arrangements with members of marginalized communities (Reason and Bradbury 2008).

## Foundations in justice

Conceptualizations of identity and oppression connect intrinsically to ideas of justice. I follow Amartya Sen’s definition of justice as the “substantive” freedom to pursue both well-being and agency (Sen 2009). The opportunity to enjoy wellbeing is central to justice the context of housing.<sup>2</sup> I conceive of “wellbeing” in the Indigenous sense of being with All My Relations, as identified by Thistle (2017): a safe and adequate physical structure *and* “healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships” (p. 7). Far from a basic material good, housing is a fundamental manifestation of a human relationships.

The freedom of an individual to pursue wellbeing is a function of their capability, or *agency*. In the context of justice, capability concerns itself not only with the human achievement of material goods, but the substantive opportunity to do the things we value (Sen 2009). This focus directs attention to housing as not just a *means* to do other things – an end in itself -- but as an *opportunity* that reflects a person’s ability to pursue what they value, like finding the living situation of their choice. We are concerned here not only with the physical structure that a person ends up in, but the person’s ability to choose that structure and its surrounding environment in the context of a holistic wellbeing.

Justice also corresponds to the freedom to identify as one of many different groups along the lines of race, gender, class, language, profession, religion, hobbies, and nationality (to name a few). Two people that differ in their identities with one group may of course intersect in others, creating the social context for collaboration. Seeing or designating a person “merely as a member of one particular group would be a major denial of freedom of each person to decide how exactly to see himself or herself” (Sen 2009, p. 246-247).

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Joanne Baldine for helping develop these ideas.



## Epistemic privilege and “lived experience”

Even as we negotiate the complexities of identity and experience, group membership serves a strategic value in challenging power relationships. Notably, policymakers and organizations have been confronted by increasingly unified calls to collaborate with “people with lived experience of homelessness” in developing housing plans and policy. These efforts grew out of the organizing efforts of the disability justice movement, and its slogan, “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Nelson 2020, MacIntosh 2018). Advocates suggest collaborations across epistemic lines will foster more effective and sustainable housing policies by harnessing the insight and knowledge one gains from being unhoused, while also working to reduce the marginalization and dehumanization that surrounds people who are unhoused (Nelson 2020, Soh 2019).

While various committees across the United States contain representatives with lived experience, researchers have established distinctions between *inclusion* – a seat at the table -- and *collaboration*, which, in my interpretation, inherently acknowledges power relationships and difference. In a scoping literature review, Canadian researchers Norman and Pauley (2013) found little evidence of practices that effectively included those with lived experience of homelessness in the development of policy responses to homelessness or accounted for differences in race and gender. Those with lived experience wanted to participate in efforts to develop strategies and solutions for ending homelessness, but doing so risked their survival and wellbeing. The authors concluded that those who are *already included* bear the responsibility for fostering inclusion in policymaking spaces among those with lived experience. Numerous works position the importance of relationality and collaboration, with Gerlach (2018) proposing that these relationships serve as the “epistemological scaffolding” for work that is both critically oriented and decolonizing. At the same time, lived experts have recognized the ways in which these relationships can be co-opted or imbalanced, and offered suggestions for mitigating these risks. Bee Lee Soh, an activist with living and lived experience of poverty, observes that “lived/living experience” is a common and even trendy word in organizational discourse, but suggested there may be less understanding around its meaning (Soh 2019). Compensation for lived experts and empowerment through training and support would strengthen the involvement process and orient it ethically to overcome barriers (Soh 2019). Soh (2019) also suggests that those with living and lived experience should be given the same weight as “traditional experts.” The Canadian Lived Experience Network (CLEN), a network comprising

individuals with lived experience of homelessness from across Canada, released principles for inclusion in fall 2020:

- 1. Bring the perspective of our lived experience to the forefront.*
- 2. Include people with lived experience at all levels of the organization.*
- 3. Value our time and provide appropriate supports.*
- 4. Challenge stigma, confront oppression, and promote dignity.*
- 5. Recognize our expertise and engage us in decision-making.*
- 6. Work together towards our equitable representation.*
- 7. Build authentic relationships between people with and without lived experience.*

— The Canadian Lived Experience Network, 2020

As suggested by Soh and the CLEN, those with lived experience of homelessness face unequal risks that are tied to legacies of domination. The risks of speaking, for example, are not easily shared (Narayan 1988, Spivak and Harasym 1990). As Arlene Schenke (1991) wrote: “It matters fundamentally who speaks and who listens, under what conditions of possibility, and along the lines of which political and pedagogical agendas” (p. 47, quoted in Mawhinney 1998). It is suggested here that simply seeking to “include” those with lived experience contains many risks, including the appropriation of knowledge by those who are housed, for purposes that reproduce inequities. In this vein, a tendency of progressive organizations to “rush to the margins” becomes an attempt to alleviate discomfort and maintain innocence, in the place of critically examining and dismantling the underlying structures that led to the marginalization in the first place (Mawhinney 1998, Tuck and Yang 2009). Knowledge from the margins also does not consist of absolute truths, nor is it unimplicated in power; rather, “it should be received, heard and taken up in a politically nuanced manner” (Mawhinney 1998, p. 129). The nature of experience, its history, and how it operates in the world carries value, but there is a risk of the experience itself becoming a “fact of difference” (Scott 1991, p. 777) While a person’s experience reflects knowledge of the daily experiences and emotions as a result of marginalization, it does not necessarily communicate or clarify the precise causes of the

oppression itself, which may better be illuminated or surfaced by members of the dominant group (Narayan, 1988).

Following Narayan (1988), I do not suggest a person who is housed can never come to understand the experiences and insights of someone who has been houseless. Yet, a housed person without lived experience of homelessness will “have to make a great deal of effort to come to grips with the details of lived oppression” (Narayan 1988, p. 37). It becomes the responsibility of the outsider — the housed — to educate themselves on these details, rather than relying or calling on the person with lived experience. These observations foreground the case in this thesis for a particularly thoughtful and nuanced blending of methodological humility, sensitivity and reflexivity in advocacy by people who see themselves as allies working to end homelessness.

## Critical reflexivity

*For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are the result of those structures.*

— Lorde 1984 (p. 123)

A substantive body of theory and praxis, from anti-racist pedagogy to feminist geography to theology to social work, respond to uneven relations of power and knowledge with a calls for a praxis named *critical reflexivity*. A core positioning of feminist geography, the call to be reflexive stems from recognizing social position in complex webs of power, or one’s “positionality”. While this theoretical framing exhibits a wide range of applications and definitions in the literature, the application in this thesis dovetails with one used in a management and organization context outlined by Cunliffe and Jun (2005). Here reflexivity, in a *critical* sense, describes a process of unsettling the assumptions underlying theoretical, moral and ideological positions in order to think more critically about social policies and practice, creating “a basis for examining taken for granted assumptions, who may be excluded or marginalized by policy and practice, and the responsibility for ethical action at the organizational and societal levels” (Cunliffe and Jun 2005, p. 228). Reflexivity attempts to put into practice critical theorist reconstructions of knowledge and power, introducing “new possibilities

for patterns of bureaucracy and transforming hierarchical values into new, more democratic and socially relevant values” (Jun 1994, p. 20). In the context of decolonizing research, Nicholls (2009) identifies three layers of reflexivity: self-reflexivity, in which Nicholls identifies the underlying assumptions to the research, and the context of power and privilege; relational reflexivity, or acknowledging the researcher’s position within a collaboration and recognizing the depth of relationships; and collective reflexivity, which asks the terms of participation in an inquiry, who participated and who didn’t, and the outcomes for social change. In that case, collective reflexivity considers the extent to which the participants experienced a transformative or empowering collaborative research process. For the researcher – or the reflexive practitioner – moving through these complex positions may feel “like juggling: requiring concentration, movement, balance and coordination” (Nicholls 2009, p. 124).

In this application, reflexivity diverges from *reflection* -- similar terms that are used interchangeably in some discourses, but here constitute differing assumptions and processes. Reflection mirrors a past reality from which the practitioner can separate themselves in the interest of applying “lessons learned” (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). While useful for the purposes of problem-solving (Cunliffe and Jun 2005), this practice does not ask the practitioner to surface or challenge the underlying premise of a particular practice or decision — in effect, reflexivity, an “unsettling of the basic assumptions, discourse and practice used in describing reality” (Pollner 1991, p. 370, also quoted in Cunliffe and Jun 2005). This process of continuously critiquing beliefs creates more responsiveness and possibility for new ways of acting while simultaneously recognizing one’s own limitations (Cunliffe and Jun 2005).

Concepts of reflexivity build on premises offered by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), in the potential for reflexivity to reveal the ways in which we are inclined or predisposed to move in one direction over another; in its possibilities, in a decolonizing context, for learning *from* difference, rather simply learning *about* someone who is different (Jones with Jenkins, 2008); for critically engaging with opportunities for dialogue and communication (Shotter 2005); and for building collaborative relationships that are accountable to people who are struggling for representation and rights to self-determination (Nagar and Ali 2003). Much of critical reflexivity concerns the grounded, practical and relational aspects of working across differences (Nicholls 2009). Cunliffe (2002) observed the ways we can be “struck” in everyday conversations and experiences to disrupt the reliance on “expert”

forms of knowledge. Other scholarship has considered the role of moral reflexivity, drawing from spiritual practice such as Buddhism or Quakerism to emphasize our position in the world, the contextual nature of our interactions and the imperative to act responsibly and ethically (Vu and Burton, 2020).

Critical reflexivity is not exclusive to the realm of those with privilege. Any engagement of working across difference requires reflexivity on both sides (Narayan, 1988). When used as a mechanism for social change, critical reflexivity leads to emotional discomfort and contradiction (Idahosa and Bradbury, 2020). Like engaging with knowledge from the margins, a praxis of critical reflexivity contains various risks, limitations and pitfalls. It is easier said than done to question managers or organizational decisions in spaces where conformity and stability are normalized (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). Critical reflexivity among dominant group members has been critiqued for its indulgence and the risks of re-centering dominant discourses (Kobayshi 2003). It can lead to problematic participatory agendas, treating participation as both liberating and regulating (Nethercote 2014). Rose (1997) called for attention to the “gaps and fissures” that exist in reflexivity, suggesting the practice is destined to fail in its assumptions of totality, when in fact, identity is constructed relationally, and knowledge is therefore partial. Another risk concerns an incomplete form of critical reflexivity, or a “move to innocence,” in which implicated members of the powerful group fail to act on the surfaced assumptions (Fellows and Razack 1998, Mawhinney 1998, Tuck and Yang 2009). Here the challenges of working across difference become intimately connected to the challenge of unsettling “taken-for-granted” norms (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). The lessons of participatory action research again become salient, in its concern with producing ethical knowledge through both reflexivity *and* action (Reason and Bradbury 2008).

While recognizing the risks and limitations, I am interested in exploring the potential for critical reflexivity to serve as an orientation to housing praxis, in surfacing and unsettling the taken-for-granted norms and ideologies that comprise the *rhetoric* of housed professionals and allies working to end homelessness – and its implications for collaborative relationships that seek to learn from and across difference (Jones with Jenkins 2008). I am interested in understanding, through the lens of critical reflexivity and deconstructions of knowledge and power, how the decentering of a rhetoric of housedness may create new pathways of creative or dynamic solutions even among allies working to end homelessness.

## Related works

This thesis contributes to a nascent field of literature that contemplates the engagement of lived experience of homelessness. A more nascent field enjoins this approach with critical reflexivity for practitioners and allies in the context of ending homelessness. Perhaps not coincidentally, much of the most directly related work I encountered is situated in Canada; on a practical level I do see various applications in a U.S. context, and particularly in Alaska, with its degree of lived and living experience of Indigenous homelessness stemming from the impacts of colonization.

In recent decades, groups and coalitions of unhoused and tenuously housed people have mobilized resistance to political conditions that aggressively police unhoused populations without adequately attending to the larger circumstances that precipitate widespread housing insecurity. Cress and Snow (2000) conducted field research on more than two dozen “homeless social movement organizations” that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s, emblematic of a larger pattern of organization in U.S. cities in response to a dramatic rise in the number of unsheltered people and families. Outcomes sought by these groups largely took the form of representation (positions on task forces addressing homelessness and on the board of service providers); resources (office space and supplies); rights (reducing police harassment and discrimination by merchants and service providers); and relief (mitigating the conditions of homelessness through expanded facilities and programs, from shelters to permanent housing). Williams (2005) examined the political organizing strategies of a homeless advocacy organization in Denver, and observed the challenges of power dynamics, where social service agencies and police held considerable power over basic material needs and the ability of houseless people to physically locate.

A less-developed field of research turns a focus directly back to practitioners and allies. Gurstein and Small (2005) examined narratives around housing those who are deemed “hard to house” in the city of Vancouver in western Canada. They find housing service providers spoke the language of “housing”: the exercise of everyday policies relating to guests: eviction, drug use, pets, acceptable and unacceptable behavior. These narratives were marked by power relations that allowed providers to scrutinize and evict tenants for violating rules. Tenants conceptualized narratives of “home,” which Gurstein and Small describe for one woman as “the embodiment of a yearning for a home where she can be accepted for who she is” (p. 729). The authors found a diametric tension where

one side “is trying to rehabilitate the other towards the policy while the other is just trying to exist” (Gurstein and Small 2005, p. 729) Organization policies limited relationship-building between staff and tenants, and therefore the prospect of staff reflexivity. Norman and Pauley (2013), cited previously in this thesis, conducted a scoping literature review on inclusive practices for people with lived experience of homelessness, asserting that understandings essential to developing effective policies will otherwise remain obscured. The study found that the “roots of social exclusion” lie in unequal power relations, and recommended the development of clear guidelines for social inclusion. Norman (2015) applied a structural violence framework in an activist ethnography to research inter-group dynamics between those with lived experience and housed allies. Using participant-observer methods, the author researched a committee in Victoria, Canada, that comprised unhoused individuals and housed allies and focused on developing solutions to houselessness. Insights included the role allies can play in reproducing structures of violence while simultaneously contributing to efforts to tear those structures down. Direct relationships were identified as one way of navigating unequal power relations. Norman also reflects on her position as a white, housed ally of privilege, with the ability to “turn off” the work in ways that those who had experienced houselessness could not.

Fewer works have explicitly incorporated reflexive orientations to dismantle assumptions around lived experience and the social position of housed practitioners. Masuda et. al. (2014) explored bridging a relationship of critical inquiry and reflexive practice among “knowledge stakeholders” to recognize whose knowledge is recognized or excluded, and the conditions under which that knowledge is produced, legitimized, communicated and acted upon. The authors referred to this concept as “equitable knowledge translation” (EqKT), drawing from longer theoretical traditions of knowledge translation. In a dissertation work, Phipps (2020) extended the EqKT concept into a more comprehensive methodology called Equitable Intersectoral Practice (EquIP), which sought to create collaborative relationships that centered lived experience while also fostering critical reflexivity among a wide variety of housed practitioners in a rural part of Canada. Phipps (2020) posits that “centering the grounded experience of community members facing adverse housing conditions would trigger critical reflection among professionalized actors and disrupt conventional approaches to problematization, opening up new solution pathways” (p. 61). This process was called “reversing the gaze,” where the privileging of lived voices and experiences served to disrupt hierarchical knowledge production and reflect systemic shortcomings back to practitioners. In this

case, the framework included a “learning exchange” and a multiple-day retreat, co-hosted by tenants with lived experience of homelessness. Phipps (2020) observed that empirical work on collaborative processes have up to this point focused largely on the institutional and organizational level rather than individuals and individual relationships; the purpose of the events was to build relationships, in the way that indigenous governance traditions emphasize being “in relation” with others and with the environment (as seen in Smylie, 2014, quoted in Phipps 2020).

Nelson (2020) also calls for the critical interrogation of the role and reproduction of power in collaborative advocacy contexts related to homelessness. Sustained relationship-building becomes vital. Systems of anonymous care, a concept first developed by Stevenson (2014), deliver care regardless of who is being cared for (Nelson 2020). The cared-for become burdens, without desires and “agentic capacity” (Nelson 2020, pp. 92). By contrast, Nelson (2020) advocates for *revolutionary care*, a mode of care that “aims to mobilize the transformational potential of lived experts, while helping to dismantle systems of oppression” (pg. 92). This form of care works to establish respectful relationships with lived experts as part of collective action, and moves toward collaboration where power flows both ways (Nelson 2020, p. 85). Similar to warnings of “moves to innocence,” Nelson notes that progressive allies may deal with feelings of shame or discomfort by seeking to create inclusive spaces without challenging the structures that contribute to inequities in the first place. As a potential model, Nelson elevates “Safe at Home,” a 2017 community action plan to end and prevent homelessness in Whitehorse, Yukon (Safe at Home Working Group, 2017). The plan constitutes an example of centering lived experience while also creating paths to equitable collaboration (as cited by Nelson 2020). It identified “equal and respectful” relationships between people with lived experience, governments and community partners and the creation of coordinating bodies or roundtables to further collaborative action (Safe at Home Working Group, pg. 28).

I seek to contribute to these works and the power enacted through language, identity, and collective action by naming and exploring the social position of being *housed* in a housing advocacy and policymaking context.



## Chapter II: Assembling Bridge Materials

This thesis seeks to contribute to a growing literature that explores collaborative relationships across experiences of being housed, by specifically surfacing the rhetoric, or ideological values, of being *housed*, a social position in the context of housing advocacy. Through a case study approach, I consider the question of whether housed approaches to policy perpetuate outcomes that nobody wants, in part because of unsurfaced ideologies and assumptions that occur in the absence of relational work across difference. In the following section, I describe the qualitative methodology of the case study.

### Methods

I set out to build a sample of a subculture of housing advocacy in Anchorage. I wanted to identify individuals or members of groups or organizations that participate in advocacy, planning or institutional knowledge production about houselessness. I identified this sample initially through my own knowledge of Anchorage community organizations, and then through “snowball” sampling, where interviewees suggested other people to contact. I sought to create a composite of advocates who had been involved in various ways in local efforts to end homelessness. This sample in no way represents all relevant individuals in Anchorage who are involved in housing and houselessness advocacy; it is merely a subset of many valuable perspectives in the community. In all, I conducted 14 interviews between December 2020 and March 2021.

This thesis contends that a person’s reality is constructed from local and relational experience, and direct interaction, through interviewing, serves as a form of inquiry to derive these constructions (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). Qualitative methodologies facilitated this interaction and allowed flexibility in identifying and developing themes and findings as they emerged. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on research activities, these interviews were conducted over the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Audio was recorded with the permission of interviewees. Interviewees with lived experience of houselessness and/or were currently experiencing financial hardship were compensated with a \$25 online gift card in recognition of the time and expertise contributed to this project.

Each interviewee was stably housed at the time of the interview but differed in personal experiences of housedness and housed stability over time. Eleven of the 14 interviewees (Bradie, Tobias, Salem, Harper, Whitney, Rory, Jay, Ash, Embry, Kory and Marley — names changed to preserve anonymity) reported having never experienced homelessness. At the same time, within this group, there were experiences of housing insecurity, such as couch-surfing. Interviewees reflected on what it means to be housed for them, their perceptions of what it means for others, and the systemic relationships between housed and unhoused individuals. Three interviewees (Gray, Vee, and Leslie — names changed to preserve anonymity) identified as having lived experience of homelessness, under varying conditions. While sharing perceptions of the meaning of being housed with housed interviewees, the interviewees with lived experience offered different ways of thinking about what it means to be housed.

**Identified as having lived experience**

Gray  
Vee  
Leslie

**No lived experience identified**

Bradie	Harper	Jay	Kory
Zee	Whitney	Ash	Marley
Salem	Rory	Embry	

Questions were designed to prompt critical reflexivity about social position and experience. This is a version of a central question posed during the 11 interviews with people who were housed, or did not identify as having lived experience:

*You spend a lot of time thinking about the causes of homelessness. I'm going to flip the question a bit and see if you could reflect on why you have always been housed.*

— Version of interview question

To identify key themes and findings, I coded interviews using a combination of descriptive and “In Vivo” methods identified by Saldana (2009). Interview passages gave rise to general descriptive

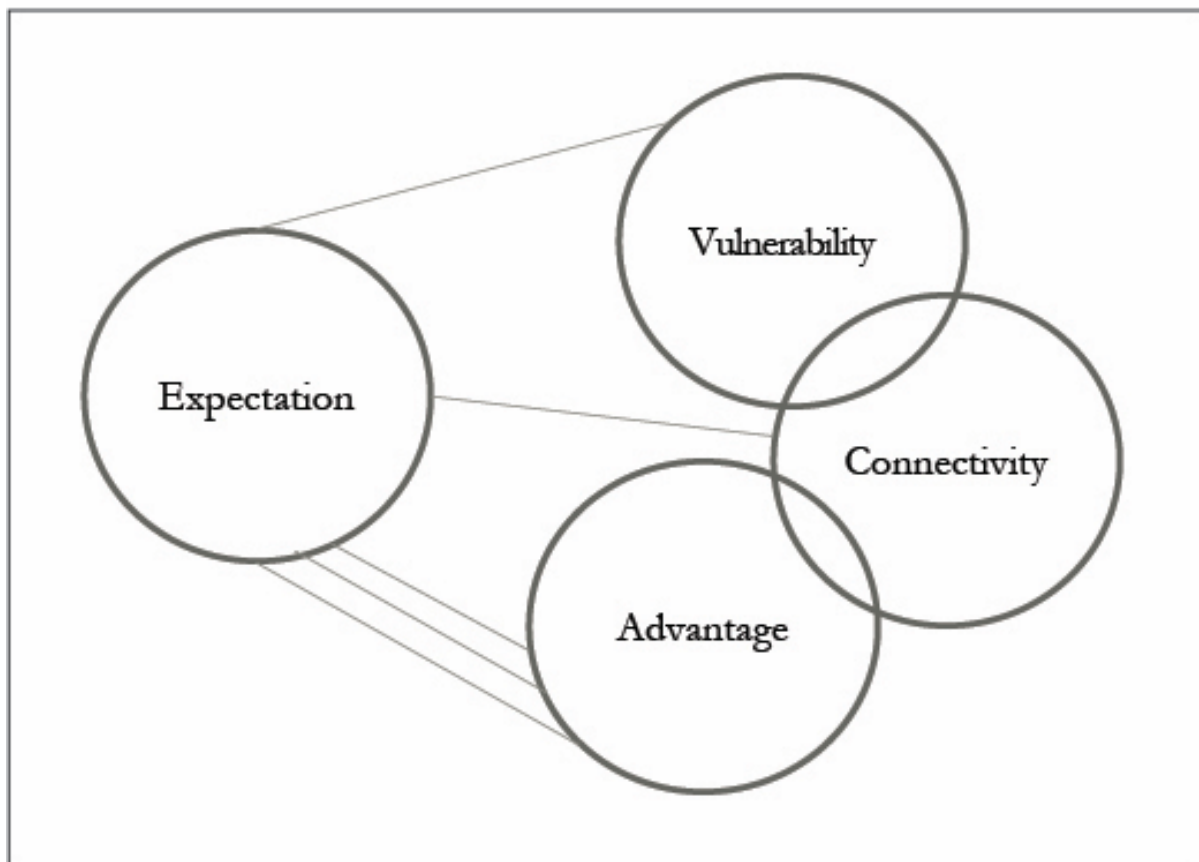
themes and subthemes, and I also noted the recurrence of specific phrases that were used organically by multiple interviewees. I also observed the constructions and presence of stories in the interviews as a narrative device. I discuss the findings and implications in more detail in the following chapter. To identify interviewees while preserving anonymity, I used a random string generator in the application R to assign random initials to each person, and then applied gender-neutral names created through a random online generator.

Interviewee reflections are true for a particular moment and context, and I do not necessarily intend for its findings and meditations to be generalized beyond the particular context in question. Readers, however, may recognize similarities to their own contexts. Finally, while these findings seek to interrogate and better understand aspects of what may appear to be a static “housed” identity, I again recognize the fluidity and intersectionality of a person’s identity, and the possibilities for shared experiences and alternative enclaves across many aspects of identity. This, in fact, may be an essential part of connection.

## Chapter III: Building The Bridge

The intention of this chapter is to build the scaffolding of a *housed rhetoric* as an interlocking set of relations that I describe as *blueprints*. Blueprints, from Lorde (1984), constitute the “patterns of expectation and response” that may accompany a lifetime of being stably housed, and may shape the way a person shows up, collaborates, or otherwise attempts to work as an ally to people with lived or living experience of homelessness. Through the qualitative coding process, I identified four structural conditions that constitute *blueprints* of housedness: **Expectation**, **Advantage**, **Vulnerability**, and **Connectivity**. I note here that these are not free-standing pillars, but intersecting conditions that uphold one another in some ways, but also serve to unpack or unsettle in other ways. Blueprints operated or manifested through a series of *modes*, as identified through this particular interview set.

Fig. 3: Blueprints as a set of conditions



As I visualize the contours of these relationships (see Fig. 3), I draw multiple lines to indicate a more fundamental relationship between Expectation and Advantage but note the connections to the other two blueprints. Vulnerability and Connectivity overlap in spatial and emotional contexts. The disassociation between Vulnerability and Advantage suggests that one makes the other less attainable, but that this hurdle can be mitigated by Connectivity.

This section will walk through each of the blueprints as they surfaced in interviews and identify key learnings.

## Blueprint 1: Expectation

The blueprint of **expectation** surfaced in relation to a wide range of cultural and ideological assumptions and judgments that shape day-to-day interactions and decisions in the context of housing and homelessness work. Expectation connected to core considerations of identity, knowledge, power, and agency. It manifested in both examined and unexamined norms around independence, self-sufficiency, and employment, both necessary features of not only obtaining but *sustaining* formal housing in the present system. Expectation extended to public narratives, to the built environment, and to the physical form and structure of “housing.” Housed expectations could also be **“disrupted,”** in moments that served as openings for critically reflexive disruptions of taken-for-granted assumptions or ideologies about housing.

At a broader level, expectation connects with the idea of **what should be done** about homelessness.

Expectation and disruption of expectation manifested in a series of *modes*: Home shock and housing plus, housing in form, hardworkingness/deservingness, meetings, and data.

Mode: “Home shock” and housing plus

As noted at the beginning of this thesis, the idea of producing more affordable housing in the face of shortages tops policy agendas for communities across the United States. Some interviewees, however, drew attention to the expectations that surround what seems to be a straightforward proposition. Vee, a practitioner with lived experience, identified “home shock” as a form of cultural shock that comes with being housed after a long period of being on the street: “How do you go

from being in survival mode every day, to just being okay with being okay? That's scary to me.... Being on my own gave me anxiety, having my own place gave me anxiety. Being an adult.”

Gray, a practitioner with lived experience, recalled being in meetings where housed advocates have brought up that the solution is to give everybody housing. For Gray, that is just one of the solutions, in a landscape where no one size fits all.: There may still be a long way to go until young people or adults who have experienced homelessness are ready to be housed without supports. Supportive housing structures that provide continuity, relationships, and permanency, while not the norm, help mitigate “home shock,” Gray suggested. Tobias, a housed practitioner, agreed that it can take a person more time to get comfortable being housed on their own. Tobias identified transitional housing, such as a modified hotel with several roommates, as being the system’s current answer to that issue. Tobias also expressed concern that transitional housing becomes an endpoint, and an expression of a person’s worth. Finding the right balance point is challenging, Tobias added.

In these examples, we can see the way that expectation is central to forming understandings of these types of experiences. In the need to “be an adult,” Vee encountered first-hand the deeply normative expectations around autonomy and independence in housing. That is to say: “Housing,” as described here, comes with a raft of social and financial expectations that dictate the extent to which the person can keep the housing. Multiple interviewees reflected on the many social structures that accompany housing beyond the basic shelter, that may or may not be supported due to the dominant culture’s ideas around individual achievement and autonomy. Interviewees identified the expectation that simply finding an apartment for someone who has been unhoused will result in stability and wellbeing, when in fact the truth is more interdependent, a function of the health of All My Relations (Thistle 2017).

The term “housing plus” has been used in other research to describe the ways in which a physical structure alone does not create stability and safety, particularly after periods of serial displacement and rough sleeping, and in cases of trauma or health challenges (Bratt 2008). A general “no-eviction” ethic underlies the few permanent, supportive housing in communities across the country, including in Anchorage, but the larger rental housing market does not operate this way (Gurstein and Small 2005). In this way, Bratt (2008) described our national housing policy as “housing alone,” that is to say: The expectation of conformity to a particular context, despite a non-uniform set of people.

## Mode: Housing in form

Some interviewees raised the idea that people who are unhoused have limited choices and difficult tradeoffs: living in a tent in the woods may provide more freedom and space than the shelter downtown, but less safety and the risk of being forced to move at any moment. In the summer of 2019, tents popped up on the Delaney Park Strip near downtown Anchorage as part of a protest in response to deep state budget cuts in social services. After being vacated from the original location, camp participants ended up at one point in a standoff with local police, and ultimately dispersed as cold weather came, according to several interviewees. This event came up in multiple interviews, with interviewees sharing different memories and reactions. Both housed allies and unhoused community residents participated in the camp: Kory, a housed interviewee, remembered it as a moment of solidarity and relationship-building. Bradie, who is also housed, recalled that unhoused people who joined the protest were not experiencing “survival mode,” and organizers had provided a safe space to live in community with people who were housed.

Jay, a housed advocate recalling the story, said the episode ultimately damaged political goodwill in the community for unhoused campers. Leslie, a practitioner with lived experience, was unsure exactly who was asking for a sanctioned camp, saying they had not personally met anyone actively living in a camp who wanted a permanent camp structure. Formerly unhoused residents were interested in a camp, as well as a number of well-intentioned housed people, Leslie said. Leslie described an offer from housed policymakers to create a formal camp structure that was rejected and met instead with a request for a building, where camp members could live as a self-governing community. But there was very little chance of finding a building for a group of unhoused people who asked for one, Leslie said.

As this thesis constructs and deconstructs the binary oppositions of “houseless” and “housed,” it is also relevant to consider the prescriptive attachments to the ideas of a *house*. When I type the word “*house*” into *Google*, the images tell a story: Rows of stand-alone, single-family homes, with multiple floors and rooms, dozens of windows, decks, lawns. It is a normative, but also aspirational and culturally-defined picture, one rooted deeply in conceptions of citizenship and merit (Reid 2014). The ideological values attached to the word “house” become deeply embedded in the expective cultural rhetoric, one in which individuals and families are expected to autonomously maintain an

existence in a particular structural form. Alternative housing forms that embrace more communal and self-governing aspects, such as tiny house villages, emerged as a recurrent disruption of expectation in these interviews. Examples of affordable self-governing villages have been directly proposed by residents with lived experience in Anchorage, according to Tobias. But these proposals had generally failed to gain traction among financial institutions and housed leadership. **Salem, a housed practitioner, said that they had a hard time with the idea of simply letting people camp as opposed to strategies that would move people into a permanent home with four walls, identifying this as a personal bias they were unsure how to navigate.** Housed interviewees described performing an expectation-maintaining role that I will refer to here as gatekeeping: that is, being in a position of receiving such requests, and turning them down. For example, in the form of a protest camp, Bradie identified the inadvertent creation of a safe space where people felt protected and not worried about surviving. The camp, in its prominent location near downtown, of course clashed with the expectation of housed residents and policymakers. But as Leslie noted, perhaps the core question was not the physical form of a sanctioned camp, but a desire for property that could be self-governed, and where people had the capability to express their own values through housing.

I want to be clear that the intention here is not to advocate on behalf of any particular solution, but identify the ways housed rhetoric may depart from the demands and desires of people with lived or living experience, as well as the underlying core issues at play.

Mode: Hardworkingness/deservingness

Housing solutions embody the individualizing American mythology of “pulling oneself up by their bootstraps,” as well as the use of barometers of “hardworkingness” and “deservingness” to justify which unhoused residents were deserving of services and support, as several interviewees observed. At the same time, Kory, a housed advocate, suggested that narratives of hardworkingness also lead to misplaced resentment: A housed person may feel, explicitly or implicitly, that an unhoused person does not deserve shelter because it didn’t appear they had worked for it, whereas the housed person did. And yet, being required to work and pay a disproportionate amount of income to maintain housing can cause its own forms of difficulty or damage, Kory observed. Kory shared memories of family members holding difficult jobs and being absent from family life to maintain housing and observed that housed people (Kory included) have worked jobs they disliked just to keep a roof over



their head.

Ingrained ideologies around employment and hard work were frequently discussed as a component of housed rhetoric. These ideologies, emblematic of larger American cultural ideologies, intimately connected with ideas of worthiness and deservingness: Housing is something you must earn. Larger structures of capital accumulation and speculative market housing shaped expectation around what housing is, and who is entitled to it, according to this set of interviews. Expectation is embedded in the pervasive term “self-sufficiency,” which is also common in welfare reform, and which Bratt (2008) suggests “is misleading, because nobody is truly self-sufficient...the phrases economic security or personal and family stability...might express the concept more precisely” (pg. 108).

Housed expectation as expressed through the hardworkingness/deservingness mode connect to a greater comfort with charity rather than solidarity, that is, supporting people’s assimilation into existing inequitable or harmful systems rather than working collaboratively to change the systems that produce the inequities or harms in the first place. In the context of homelessness policy and practice, I suggest that discomfort signals a shift away from the status quo and a prevailing orientation toward charity (“helping the helpless”) rather than solidarity (“working together to challenge unfair social systems, from which I myself may benefit”). Of the two, charity, which does the least to change power dynamics and marginalization, appeared to feel the most comfortable (one could say, therapeutic). Solidarity in housing, approached through critical reflexivity, is likely to engender feelings of discomfort or shame, similar to confronting racial privilege associated with whiteness. The latter process challenges the routine distribution of resources to those who are perceived as most deserving.

**Reciprocity could take other forms, however. Marley, a housed advocate, expressed a belief that housing, even if provided free of cost, should be accompanied by some form of social exchange or relationship.**

Mode: Meetings and presence

Expectation also surfaced in the arena of meetings, the ubiquitous spaces where people come together for some form of discussion. In particular, housed allies and houseless group members come to coalition groups with different purposes and needing different things (as also seen in

Norman, 2015). Leslie recalled coming to meetings with the intention of taking action or soliciting a particular form of feedback on a particular plan. Those with lived experience, on the other hand, wanted to create space for healing and recognition, Leslie said. In another case, a housed practitioner, Whitney, who was convening a meeting space, sought to introduce a series of rules and parameters. Houseless participants quickly disrupted this expectation and called instead for an open group focused on sharing collective experiences of trauma. Whitney did introduce other elements, such as regular meeting times and facilitation tools, but observed that the overarching intention of the meeting changed somewhat from original expectations.

Interviewees with lived experience recalled having to actively assert themselves in meetings and draw attention to core issues. This sometimes took the form of collective action or intervention. Gray described being a member of a group that worked to make itself known when coming into meeting spaces, after becoming accustomed to not being heard or even acknowledged by other housed practitioners or leadership. In one meeting, a conversation about funding devolved into an argument between two different service providers. A participant with lived experience who was present at the meeting physically slammed the table and raised their voice, calling the point of the meeting into sharp relief – that there were unhoused people in need of care and support, as Gray recalled.

As we can see here, the expectation of housed allies shaped the structure, goals, and culture of meetings around issues related to ending homelessness. These expectations could be disrupted when people with lived experience had agency in establishing norms.

#### Mode: Data

Housed interviewees described themselves as being in the position of using quantitative data to connect, influence, and identify systemic gaps. As detailed in Chapter 1, data forms the backbone of Anchorage’s homelessness response. **The varying capabilities of anonymized data, from revealing patterns and communicating ideas to funders, to the ability to disaggregate the data to analyze impacts on various groups within the homelessness population, emerged often among housed interviewees.** Jay expressed an abiding faith in this form of data to guide decision-making, saying that individual people with lived or living experience could not accurately impart systemic solutions and that broad data would offer the best path forward. In addition to trust

in housed experts, Jay suggested individual anecdotes and conversations with lived experts could be misleading, whereas anonymized data would lead to better and more comprehensive solutions.

At the same time, interviewees with and without lived experience cited *qualitative* data as a critical tool to impact public narratives. Vee, who has lived experience, troubled the primacy of quantitative data alone, saying it failed to capture the plurality and humanity of qualitative experience: “Living through it is different from statistics and data.” Kory, who is housed, felt that numerical data around homelessness can be abstracted and dehumanizing, directing public narratives toward statistical metrics and away from individual human experiences. For example, Kory said, public narratives around the number of unauthorized encampments along city greenbelts characterize camps as a number that needs to be manipulated, rather than a larger manifestation of a system that gives people in extreme poverty a series of inadequate options.

These examples demonstrate the ways in which expectation is threaded into the use of data. Housed interviewees expressed reliance and faith in quantitative data as the driving force for solutions in resolving homelessness and housing affordability challenges – that is to say, more positivist approaches relying on measurement and metrics. At the same time, other interviewees, including those with lived experience, sought to disrupt this expectation with a focus on the way qualitative data captures and relays the complexities of human experience.

## Blueprint 2: Advantage

Salient and ingrained blueprints of housedness identified by interviewees fell under a second theme I call **advantage**. This theme encompasses the intersection of social and racial advantage that accompany a position of having been consistently securely housed since childhood. Also described as “privilege” in interviews, these sets of advantages that had accrued to housed interviewees were attributed to not only the ability to maintain housing but to the idea of **who should lead** on the issue of ending homelessness. As with expectation, I identified several modes of advantage based on interview coding.

## Mode: Family and networks

Housed interviewees described having extensive family and supportive resources. In one case of job and housing loss, family members stepped in and provided months of housing. Family members paid for college and were able to take on debt. Still another interviewee benefitted from the inheritance of a role in a family business, ensuring employment and economic stability. Salem reflexively contrasted the expectation mode of hardworkingness/deservingness, or the attitudes that surround who merits being housed, to the substantial but quieter role of accumulated advantage and solid social connections: “I had to work and be a good person and be in a good job, but I had a ton of connections that allowed me to be the person I am right now and be housed.”

Even in an emergency, Embry, a housed practitioner, described having total confidence in their ability to secure the resources necessary to weather the disruption. If there were a job loss or other crisis, Embry felt they would be taken care of by somebody. Because of those relationships, Embry said, it had never been a thought in their mind that they would be jobless, let alone homeless.

Harper, a housed practitioner, described a survey that found users of a local youth shelter shared the following characteristics: A disabling condition, a lack of income, and fewer than two permanent connections in their life. Harper was struck by the findings, particularly that of the lack of permanent connections. Harper reflected that while they had not themselves escaped family tragedy and dysfunction, they had always had a strong network of family members to lift them up.

Contrastingly, stories of lived experiences of homelessness or housing instability were accompanied by stories of family dynamics and social disadvantages, rather than individual actions. Vee described experiencing racial inequities while growing up on public assistance. Gray described having a family-oriented, non-white culture that emerged as a liability when they became unhoused, in the sense that they had not developed the “independence” necessary to navigate a dominant culture that revolves around that particular ideological value.

Housed people are also, of course, afforded far greater political access and decision-making authority, particularly over funding streams and the distribution of financial resources. The Anchorage Homeless Leadership Council, a group identified earlier in this thesis, came into

existence as an advocacy and funding arm. This group did not invite people with lived experience, however. Interviewees who were familiar with the group suggested that such an invitation was either not considered, or that there were specific expectations around what the group's membership would look like.

Interviewees also described a relationship between being housed and *systems connection*, or the access to services. The social services system is notoriously oriented toward providers rather than consumers, Salem observed. Local forms of government are the same way: Whitney raised concern over the effective disenfranchisement of people who are unhoused because of a lack of a fixed address, and the difficulty participating in local institutions like community councils, which have influence over neighborhood development and policy.

In these ways, we see how advantage through strong family or social networks shapes housed rhetoric. Many housed interviewees described a broader web of *social connections*, that is, access to networks, both in terms of institutions and of family and friends. These connections were noted as being critically important to the person's level of wellbeing and housedness. As previously constituted as a form of *advantage*, I recast it here as a pressure point that sheds light on the ways in which social connection supports housedness. The duality of hard work and social connection reflects a balance between the ideologies of the predominant culture and the benefits it accumulates for members, which come to the surface through critical reflexivity.

#### Mode: Whiteness and racial advantage

The question of why an interviewee had been able to maintain housing over the years prompted, in several cases, direct reflexiveness around race. Jay described the levels of safety, opportunity and advantage that accompany the social position of being white and male; other interviewees made similar statements. Salem noted the systemic privilege afforded by white parents who were able to take on debt and invest in property. Other interviewees, while not directly mentioning race, described parents and grandparents who were able to buy homes and other property and accumulate wealth in the decades where, as history shows us, federal home loans and entire neighborhoods were off-limits to people of color (Rothstein 2017). For example, many homes in Anchorage still carry restrictive covenants barring sale to Black or Alaska Native residents, which, while legally

unenforceable today, represent closed-off pathways of generational wealth that were open to white residents (Hartman 2019).

Gray described a white-dominant leadership culture in the housing advocacy space. Bradie described a general lack of cultural identity awareness, citing an instance where white staffers gave a well-intentioned gift to an unhoused person, but it came from the wrong cultural tradition. A lack of awareness, which also translates into erasure, inhibits the ability for non-white unhoused residents to heal, Bradie said.

These examples show how whiteness and its corresponding advantage in a U.S. context relate to housed position. While many people of many different races have been stably housed for entire lifetimes, interviewees suggested that whiteness was a generational advantage that made it easier to not only acquire but sustain housing for the long term. Being housed intersected with whiteness in ways that were advantageous in the context of providing leadership. In this way, interviewees suggested critical reflexivity and introspection about white racial advantage is a necessary element of equitable and racially just housing policymaking.

#### Mode: Bandwidth

A person's bandwidth, or capacity to engage in activities that contribute to wellbeing, arose in interviews as an advantage for those who are securely housed. Housed people are less familiar with the "survival mode" that sets in when food, quality sleep and physical security and cleanliness are not readily available, according to Bradie. Energy can be readily directed to the ventures that ensure well-being: Not being in survival mode helps with academics, art, and other forms of self-nurturing and healing, which may be less recognized by organizations and housed residents.

Vee similarly described "survival mode" as a distressing mentality that can make it difficult to transition into a house, and maintain that housing, when coming off the streets.

Housed advantage translates into possessing the sheer energy required to ensure basic existence. As Norman (2015) noted, being unhoused is a full-time job. These descriptions of advantage contrasted in striking ways with conventional attitudes and public narratives, identified in this set of interviews,

around those who are unhoused -- that is, that a person becomes unhoused because they simply did not work hard enough. In this interview sample, however, housing status emerged as less a function of individual hard work than the accumulated and often intersecting privileges of race, generational financial security, and the backstop of a family and relationship network that was willing and able to mobilize resources to prevent sustained houselessness.

### Blueprint 3: Vulnerability

Just as housed people have access to the walls of a house and its corresponding privacy and boundaries, housed people may also erect emotional walls that protect against **vulnerability**. Vulnerability describes **the literal and emotional walls** that accompany housedness, and the discomfort that comes with reflexivity. This blueprint has implications for **relationships** across difference and seeing humanity in others.

#### Mode: Reservoirs

Housed interviewees expressed feeling guarded about personal relationships in the context of engaging with people with lived experience. Jay described love as a reservoir, that had to be tended and reserved for family members. The ability to go home and lock the door at the end of the day represents a form of a safety barrier that is available to housed residents, Jay added. Salem observed that some community members, by abstracting homelessness as a choice, find a reason to not become directly involved.

Such examples suggest a sense that vulnerability, or the willingness to engage in a relationship across differences of being housed, is a particular challenge to navigate.

#### Mode: Fear

Fear emerged in interviews as a mode of vulnerability. For those who are unhoused or very near to becoming so, fear damages relationship capacity and relational thinking, said Embry, who works in the homelessness prevention field. For the housed, the fear of the “Other” is palpable, Kory said, most specifically of people who look differently and fail to conform to expectation. Tobias cited a fear of people who have other lived experience, and a fear of people who appeared to be unclean or

unkempt. Interviewees connected the experience of fear to a deep vulnerability: in Kory's view, a visceral worry of someday ending up in the same place, on the outside of a system.

In general, fear constituted a related and substantive emotion in the relations that define housed and unhoused interaction. That is, it illustrates the inherent discomfort that comes with working across difference (Narayan 1988).

Mode: Empathy as action

Vee, who has lived experience, described empathy as an action. Vulnerability, the uncomfortable experience of connecting with another human across difference, embodies courage, not weakness, Vee added. "Humanizing yourself toward another human is not weakness, it's a strength."

Equitably drawing out vulnerability for housed people in relationship with people with experience being unhoused, then, may come in the form of connection in brave spaces.

## Blueprint 4: Connectivity

In describing interactions and relationships, interviewees communicated the extent to which **connection and connectivity** occur in the context of being housed. Connectivity describes **the relational** aspects of being housed: where connection occurs between individuals and systems. It has implications for **practice**. It also addresses what came up in interviews as a housed tendency to assess people who are unhoused are isolated and marginalized, and absent of culture or individual history.

While social connection emerged in relation to the blueprint of advantage, I recast it here as a point of leverage, resource, and access to vulnerability.



Mode: Face-to-face connection

Interviewees told stories of *face-to-face connection* that changed minds and created space for reflexivity. Marley, while visiting a different state, encountered a person who was unhoused and had a conversation about their material needs. This person related that they did not need money, *vis a vis* charity, but an opportunity for pay and a roof over their head. For Marley, this face-to-face interaction sparked a sustained personal campaign around ending homelessness.

Bradie recalled visiting a store in Midtown Anchorage and encountering a man outside who asked for food. Bradie bought a cheeseburger and brought it back to give it to the man. The man immediately turned around and brought the cheeseburger to several of his friends, and broke it into pieces to share it with everyone. In this moment, Bradie described experiencing a disruption of expectation, feeling as if they had learned an important lesson. In this way, a relationship brought to light increased privilege associated with housed status and financial security may also limit empathy and the willingness to share limited resources.

At another time, Bradie met an unhoused man outside of an Anchorage restaurant. The man had looked emotionally distressed, and the conversation turned to relationship problems that had stranded him in Anchorage. Bradie asked what the man did, and learned the man was a wood carver. As the man talked more about his passion, he seemed to grow, creating a positive energy shift, Bradie said. Bradie identified a greater capability to connect to the self, and personal and cultural identity, as an aspect of being housed.

Mode: Listening and hearing

Connection occurred across several capacities and forums. Whitney identified listening as a key mode of connection that operated at various stages for housed and unhoused. Another interviewee, Ash, distinguished between listening that was intended to be purely therapeutic for the speaker — the mode of listening at the bottom of Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of civic participation, an example of paternalism — and listening oriented toward action, shared decision-making, and collaboration. In this case, Ash had realized that they were failing to deeply listen to a person with lived experience who was repeatedly trying to raise concerns, and their actions were part of a larger

pattern. As it turned out, not that many people were listening to that person, and Ash recalled the feeling of needing to be there to talk to them.

Ash reflected that simply *being listened to* is an aspect of being housed and having greater degrees of social access and connection: “I have a ton of people who really listen to me, because, either because of my job, or because I have great social supports. So they want to listen to me, because of my position with my job. And they have to listen to me.”

In one community meeting, Salem recalled observing how a housed voice was privileged over that of someone with lived experience. A person with lived experience spoke up and shared their story, and then left after some time, unnoticed; later, a housed person left the meeting in a moment of frustration, and other people in the group asked if the facilitator was going to retrieve them. Gray, as described earlier in this thesis, recalled a significant level of assertion required by those with lived experience to make their voices and opinions stand out, after repeated experiences of being unheard in spaces dominated by housed voices.

The concept of “giving voice” and the concept of “being heard” arose in interviews as a form of connection between housed allies and people with lived experience. As discussed in the theoretical section of this thesis, this framing raises fundamental ethical questions about why housed people hold the power to “give” the voice. It also raises questions about the extent to which the voice is not only heard but translated into *action*.

At the same time, Marley noted the ways in which homelessness negatively impacts people who are housed, and said they realized it was necessary to support both sides. This led to a personal interest for Marley in building spaces that would foster relationships and friendships between housed and unhoused residents.

### Mode: Ecosystems

In one moment of housed *disconnection*, Kory related feeling disconnected from larger natural ecosystems in modern housing typologies. This also applied in a social context, with their own family members being spread out all over the country: Kory said that in some sense, housed people in this century are homeless, too, because of an eroded sense of belonging to the land.

This observation raised the potential of connectivity to larger ecosystems as a democratizing space, one in which housed people and people with lived experience collectively contemplate what “homelessness” truly means.

In this blueprint, the idea of face-to-face connection emerged to disrupt expectation and create space for critical reflexivity on the part of housed practitioners. Modes of deep listening – and deep hearing – emerged as potential antidotes to the persistent “Othering” identified in housed people, as Tobias observed, and a prerequisite for collaboration. The idea of connection in the context of larger ecosystems served as another plane of collaboration. Together, these constitute critical questions about ethically working across difference to advance housing justice as a measure of wellbeing and agency.

## Concluding reflections

Through interviews with Anchorage housing advocates, this thesis surfaced elements of a rhetoric, a reflection of ideological values, embedded in the experience of being *housed*. In some cases, these values contrasted with perceptions of being unhoused. In other cases, these values represented an extension of broader cultural ideologies, reflecting the ways that housing is *shaped by* and a *manifestation of* the dominant culture in which we live. The four blueprints that emerged in interviews form a set of structural conditions. **Expectation and advantage concern ideas around what happens and who makes it happen.** They are supported, but can also be unsettled and unpacked by, vulnerability and connectivity. **Vulnerability describes the capacity to learn from and collaborate with neighbors both housed and unhoused.** **Connectivity addresses the connections that housed people have with others and with information and governance systems.** I posit that surfacing these blueprints of housedness constitute an essential aspect of critical reflexivity among housed advocates and allies. In short, this is the preparatory work for engaging in collaborative relationships that could open up new pathways to solutions and social change that advance wellbeing and agency for people with lived and living experience of homelessness.

## Chapter IV: Walking the Bridge

While not precluding the role of other forms of collective action to redress housing injustice, this final chapter considers specific tools for harnessing critical reflexivity in action. Collaborative settings across housed difference should work to advance equity and healing for all. In this chapter, I adapt a series of existing tools developed by the Presencing Institute at MIT that hold the potential to respond to the blueprints of being housed. I draw on Indigenous conceptual traditions of housing as a holistic manifestation of social relations and interdependence to frame these tools in the context of holistic wellbeing and agency. I close by sketching out what the “room” might look like after incorporating these tools into practice.

### A relations ecosystem

Over this past year, I became acquainted with a systems change methodology developed by the MIT Presencing Institute known as “Theory U.” Otto Scharmer, a core team member of the Institute, co-founded what is called the MITx u.lab in 2015 and has written several books on the Theory U methodology (see, for example, Scharmer 2009, Scharmer 2016). Theory U, from Scharmer (2016), departs from the view that our society is divided along social, ecological, and spiritual axes: from each other (social), from the environment (ecological) and from ourselves (spiritual). We often fail to sense deeper than what is immediately apparent on the surface, and cyclically produce outcomes that no one wants (Scharmer 2016). The methodologies of Theory U are aimed at sparking *presencing*, a process of sensing larger ecosystems and building the relational capacity to lead and effect change at all levels (Scharmer 2016). Scharmer (2016) outlines a series of stages, from “downloading” (repeating past behavior) to “prototyping” and “performing,” or exploring an emergent future through action. These processes are intended to encourage deep listening and more generative forms of dialogue.

I participated in u.lab, an introductory online course, in fall 2020, on an invitation from a colleague who has experienced houselessness. In December, we applied to an accelerator version of the course, called u.lab 2x, for spring 2021. As part of u.lab 2x, I have co-facilitated and participated in a

series of virtual workshops and conversations with a small, consistent, Anchorage-based group that generated insights into ways of creating spaces of mutual healing and vulnerability that also induce reflexivity among housed practitioners into their own practices. As part of this thesis work, I became interested in the way the tools of Theory U can advance *connection and vulnerability* blueprints of housedness, while surfacing the implicit blueprints of *expectation and advantage* that can serve to reproduce power structures and create results that are not wanted.

Below, I identify applications for specific methodologies introduced in the fall 2020 u.lab course in the context of housed blueprints (MIT Presencing Institute 2020). I list a primary blueprint addressed by each of these tools, but each of the tools may address multiple blueprints at once.

### Vulnerability: Coaching circles

A core element of “Theory U” is sustained connection in small, consistent groups. “Coaching circles” seek to foster new ways of listening and seeing while creating a shared vulnerability. In these spaces, a “case giver” (one of the members of the circle) describes a challenge that they are dealing with (MIT Presencing Institute 2020). The other people in the group become “coaches,” then reflect back their sense of “what came up” for them while the other person was talking, often in the form of images. (In one small group I participated in, I said I felt the case-giver was walking through a field and falling into holes). These engagements are possible over Zoom for those who have accessibility.

These spaces are designed to foster mutual support and opportunities for sustained relationships over a long period of time. I suggest such spaces have the potential to draw out vulnerability of housed allies and access new layers of listening and learning, rather than one-time engagements oriented at action or planning. These settings aim to support structures of mutual healing and support to occur in the pursuit of larger goals of community wellbeing.

### Connectivity: Mindfulness and embodiment

Theory U harnesses the intuitive knowledge of mindfulness practice to support aspects of reflexivity, particularly uncovering blind spots or core assumptions that stand in the way of change. In particular, Social Presencing Theater, a body awareness approach that Arawana Hayashi, has

developed with the Presencing Institute, offers compelling opportunities for using greater attentiveness to the body to surface blind spots and move toward action and systems change (MIT Presencing Institute 2020).

In our u.lab 2x group meetings, mindfulness and embodiment practices became a regular part of opening the meeting. It became a critical moment of pause, to reset from the hurried pace of the day and to be more fully present with the other people in the Zoom room. In the u.lab process, mindfulness is designed to help individuals move into a more reflexive state and observe their own position and capacity in a larger ecosystem (MIT Presencing Institute 2020).

### Advantage: Participatory systems mapping

Participatory mapping is an accessible way of collaborating and accessing other ways of knowing to reveal strengths and weaknesses in a complex system. In one workshop, my group came together and placed photographs on an online white board to express the way the housing system currently works in Anchorage. Our task was to map the systems of housing and homelessness and consider the new system we wanted to create, across varying experiences of being housed. The first visual representation, in my case, prompted reflexivity about the ways in which pieces of the system (government, funders) were disconnected from other aspects that surfaced as important to a housing system that promotes wellbeing for all. In a follow-up workshop, we mapped a new system that we wanted to create, one that advanced greater wellbeing and agency for those with living experience of being unhoused. I found the shared exercises to be deeply accessible in a way that could mitigate housed advantage. Shared mapping created avenues for contributions across experience, and the expression of multiple ways of knowing through art and design. Mapping can include drawing, which is an artistic expression that can be engaged by participants with wide-ranging life experiences. The exercise, at least in my own reflections, generated valuable insights from different perspectives about a complex system, such as that of housing and shelter.

### Expectation: Ecological relationships

In our mapping workshop, I was struck by the organic emergence of the centrality of the environment in the housing and houselessness system. I had placed a photograph of a sunny, wooded environment at the center of our map. To me, the photo captured the use conflict and shifting histories that have surrounded Anchorage's public greenbelt: as a recreational space for

housed residents, like myself; as a shelter for people who lack housing and social supports; and its origins, more than a century ago, as lands that were expropriated from Alaska Native peoples. This thesis comes at a time of increasing disconnection from the environment, at a time of profound climate disruption (Scharmer 2016). Such disconnection is reinscribed in the blueprint of expectation that surrounds aspects of being housed, from modern housing typologies, as some interviewees raised earlier in this thesis, to conventional public processes, where public engagement occurs in chambers and boardrooms, before and around tables. The workshop surfaced some sense, at least for me, that reclaiming the environment as a shared space of belonging for both housed and houseless residents may be a necessary step in disrupting expectation and fostering healing and solutions.

## Critiques and applications

The primary barrier I see in these methods is scalability – the same issue that transitioned us from community relationships of homebuilding to impersonal markets. These are small group methods that entail sustained relationships, and there are open questions about whether it can be scaled to larger civic structures and involve people who are involved in a wide range of fields beyond direct housing. In a community with hundreds or thousands of people who are unhoused, what is the place for these approaches? Moving forward, I am interested in the replicability of these forums across different channels and in varying group sizes. Further, bandwidth, identified previously as a mode of housed advantage, or the additional energy and capacity that results from being housed, can work at cross-purposes with these endeavors. Extra bandwidth translates into safety and downtime, but that also becomes a resource to protect and conserve. In my view, this elevates the importance of constructing a scaffolding that collectively promotes support and healing across the spectrum of experiences.

## Sketching out “the room”

I close this section by sketching out a one-hour meeting that introduces these concepts. I want to preface by saying that housed allies have likely grown used to operating at a certain pace, but the fact is that working across difference and ways of knowing takes *time*. It also takes resources – such as compensation, supports and training for a wide range of lived experts. All of this will have been

budgeted ahead of time, bringing us to the beginning of a meeting that includes both housed allies and lived experts.

As identified earlier in this thesis, meetings, a key form of knowledge-sharing, follow a standardized format. There are introductions, warm-up exercises, and then moving through the points on an agenda. Meetings occur regularly in civic spaces and are often governed by specific rules of order. In this hypothetical meeting, we may begin with a 5-minute embodiment exercise. This exercise would be aimed at helping participants feel more aware of their bodies, and more aware of their own interior position. Perhaps, if the weather is good, this exercise is happening outside, in a shared public space. Or, in a place where people who are unhoused are already living or can easily access.

The meeting might in this case begin with a critically reflexive question of asking how people identify in terms of their experience of housing. Of those who identify as housed, we would ask: “Why have you always been housed?” This is part of the scaffolding of a language that I seek to introduce: A language explicitly of *housedness*, the unspoken norm of these relations. It is a version of a question that is posed so often to people who are unhoused, with an entire community seeking to understand. The role of this questioning is to move people into a reflexive state about their own advantages. The hope is to elicit openness and a reaffirmation of the external and structural basis on which we are housed. I suggest this reflexiveness plays a critical role in helping us make more compassionate, informed decisions. Rather than resorting to individual pathologies and scapegoating, we identify blind spots and the function of social barriers and luck, and the role of social relationships.

We may then move to the question at hand, such as a call to construct new supportive housing units in the community. Using a whiteboard, or digital tools if conducted remotely, we might spend the next 30 minutes in a collaborative exercise. Participants would identify aspects of the existing supportive housing system from their own experience, using drawings, photos or icons. We would then step back and reflect on the new system we want to create.

Do we move to action? Not necessarily. Plenty of meetings result in inconclusiveness, forming, instead, building blocks to future action. Approaching a meeting this way may appear to be less efficient, or an incomplete rendering of reality. But we created space for collaboration, for new



understandings, for a trickle-down of transformation and a repositioning of social relationships. We may even identify new ideas or leadership. It is an answer to exclusion and silencing -- one that must be constantly renegotiated in any given context.

## Chapter V: Conclusions

Housing is not just a physical structure with four walls, windows, a front door, and a roof. It is a manifestation of social relations, generational and multi-layered, that can be transformed into stability or instability.

This thesis unpacks how the complex and shifting reality of these relations become abstracted in politics and discourse. In opposition to an identity category of homelessness, I constructed the category of being housed. I explored how decisions about the provision of housing are made in the context of overlapping theories of knowledge, power, difference and justice. I returned to the binary and unsettled it as a complex spectrum, but also located the strategic value of using the *housed* category as a means of prompting critical reflexivity. Through interviews, reflexive questioning supported the identification of housed blueprints, ideological values that overlap and intersect, forming structural conditions of a rhetoric of being housed. In the final chapter, I walked through a series of ideas for advancing collaborative tools that involve sustained relationship-building by reflexive practitioners across difference, personal healing, different ways of knowing, and being present as part of a larger ecosystem.

As I noted previously, I see myself as a housed practitioner. I regard this work as my own personal theory of critically reflexive practice, an extension of the insights and positioning that I developed from examining my own advantages of being housed. I hope it sets the groundwork for moving toward relationships that illuminate the histories and humanity of people who lack adequate habitation. A meaningful next step would be to extend the research framework to all people living in an urban environment and who interact with homelessness on an informal basis, in the unscheduled ebb and flow of city life. Housed neighborhood residents, for example, might develop different insights from an examination of the privileges and power that are embedded in housed life. Further, the u.lab and Theory U methodologies outlined in Chapter 4 are warrant further exploration in this particular context. I hope to continue developing them in partnership with people of a wide range of experiences in various housing conditions.

I imagine meeting structures and planning approaches that center lived experience while drawing out vulnerability among those who are housed. I wonder whether new ways of doing and thinking could trickle through these spaces and cause chain effects of new perspectives and ideologies that lead to larger social change, and a more effective and democratic policymaking. I wonder, too, if I will be caught up in my own discomforts and fears, my vulnerabilities and expectations, the power that I have been led to believe that I possess in my own advantaged life. I wonder what accountability will look like, from those whom I wish to work with.

For the housed, the project of advancing wellbeing for all the dwellers of a city requires looking both inward and outward. We look inward, to the advantage accrued in a lifetime of stability and its production and reproduction in planning and space. We look outward, to see who is in the room, and who is not, and what it will take to meaningfully work across difference. And we look around, to the physical ecosystem of the world we inhabit, and our collective place within it.

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