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Dimitrakou, Ifigeneia ; Hilbrandt, Hanna

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2157040>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-224824>

Journal Article

Accepted Version



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Originally published at:

Dimitrakou, Ifigeneia; Hilbrandt, Hanna (2024). Legal and cultural geographies of displacement: home unmaking through material belongings. *Social Cultural Geography*, 25(3):385-403.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2157040>

Social & Cultural Geography

Legal and cultural geographies of displacement: home *un*making through material belongings

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou^{a*} and Hanna Hilbrandt^a

^a *Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland.*

*Corresponding author: Ifigeneia Dimitrakou Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland. Email: ifigeneia.dimitrakou@geo.uzh.ch

Legal and cultural geographies of displacement: Home *un*making through material belongings

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou^{a*} and Hanna Hilbrandt^a

^a *Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland.*

This article examines the role that material belongings play in displacement processes. Following the evacuation of the housing complex Hannibal II in Dortmund (Germany), the displacement of its 753 tenants, and the conflicts that ensued over the belongings they were forced to leave behind, we ask how the governance of material belongings shapes processes and experiences of displacement. Through an approach that brings in dialogue the cultural and legal significance of material belongings, we focus on the practices governing relationships between subjects, things, and place in displacement processes. Drawing on interviews with tenants, the legal framework governing property and possessions, and the proceedings around the tenants' claims regarding their belongings, the findings disentangle a dual function of material belongings in displacement processes: First, they consider how belongings and their legal governance complicate the temporalities of displacement; second, they examine how the negotiation of the cultural significance of things has an impact on tenants' subjectivities. The paper concludes that in displacement processes, tenants' precarious claims to ownership over their stuff are, at the same time, voicing claims to social and spatial belonging that oppose broader domestic injustices.

Keywords: displacement; belonging; subjectivity; material cultures; property; possessions

1. Introduction: the (legal) matters of displacement

In November 2020, German newspapers reported that a group of teenagers broke into the long-vacated housing complex Hannibal II (hereafter: Hannibal) in Dortmund-Dorstfeld, Germany. After neighbours had witnessed how the burglars threw furniture, kitchen appliances and the tenants' material belongings out of the windows of the high-rise buildings,

police were called to the site. These damaged material remnants of past inhabitations brought the forgotten dispossession histories that mark the housing complex back into the spotlight. In September 2017, the city of Dortmund had evacuated Hannibal in response to violations of the building code. For years, tenants had suffered from the aftermath of housing privatization and the strategic neglect of their homes by various corporate landlords, and the buildings gradually fell into disrepair: elevators broke down, door systems failed, and mould grew on interior walls. As these material deficits had raised serious fire safety concerns, they led the city to fear for the ‘life and limb’ of the buildings’ residents (Sierau, 2017). The same day that the city authorities identified the fire-protection defects, 753 tenants were asked to vacate the complex at once. Given this alleged immediacy, they were forced to leave their material belongings behind. In this paper, we argue that the material things that make up a home – the tenants’ furniture, fixtures, and possessions crucially shape displacement processes.

Displacement processes are profoundly material: When people are forcibly deprived of their houses, they frequently suffer the loss of the things that constitute both housing and home. As Nicholas Blomley and his colleagues observe, ‘the loss or destruction of possessions is endemic’ (2020, p. 167) to contemporary experiences of urban inhabitation, particularly for the poor and precariously housed in times of globally increasing displacement processes. Recent displacement literatures offer valuable insights into the material and processual dimensions of displacement and how these shape experiences of belonging (Adey et al., 2020; Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Yet, these literatures pay less attention to mundane home objects and the fixtures that furnish the home. Consequently, these material belongings appear as an unproblematic good that moves together with tenants, thereby ending the displacement processes. This paper shows how the governance of belongings crucially shapes tenants’ experiences of displacement. In doing so, it seeks to advance literatures on displacement by thinking through the cultural and legal geographies of material belongings.

Inspired by debates calling for a closer dialogue between cultural and legal geographies (Braverman et al., 2014; Brickell, 2020; Brickell et al., 2021), our approach combines a material culture lens (Miller, 2010) focused on the significance of objects in the everyday performance of home and belonging, with a socio-legal lens, centred on the norms and legal practices which govern tenants' belongings (Blomley et al., 2020; Dozier, 2019). Belongings are governed by specific socio-legal relations, practices, and power asymmetries organized around property and tenure categories (Blomley, 2019), and they matter as material cultures of home (Buchli, 2010; Miller, 2010, 2001). On the one hand, one's material belongings (e.g., movables such as furniture) are placed in land, buildings, and flats (e.g., real property) which are often owned and regulated by other parties. Thus, through land regulations, building codes, and tenancy and property laws, people's connections to the material things that make up their homes depend on legal relations with others. Reading these legal relations together with the cultural significance of 'stuff' (Miller, 2010) reveals the entanglement of the personal processes of home *un*making with extra-domestic interests and legal relations. It highlights not only who matters as a propertied subject (Roy, 2017) but also how the legal governance and valuation of material belongings determine displaced subjects' sense of belonging and their possibilities to re-embed in long-lasting ways.

Based on a qualitative study of the role of material belongings in the Hannibal case, our analysis points to their dual function in the displacement process: first, as legal and cultural elements of home unmaking processes (Baxter & Brickell, 2014); and second, as instrumental to tenants' efforts to stay in place while being forcibly and legally displaced. Foregrounding things in an analysis of displacement thus reveals how material belongings frame displaced subjects' subjectivities; it also highlights the long-lasting nature of displacement processes, which start from a building's decay and proceed in tenants' struggles to remake a home, long after the event of eviction. Our conclusion is that in displacement

processes tenants' precarious claims to ownership simultaneously voice claims to belonging that oppose broader domestic injustices.

The paper is structured into two main sections: First, we contextualize the role of materiality in geographies of home *unmaking* and discuss research on material cultures of home and the legal governance of possessions in order to develop this paper's analytical approach. Second, the empirical section disentangles the role of material belongings in displacement processes, drawing on interviews with tenants, the legal framework governing property and possessions and the proceedings around tenants' claims over their belongings. The section focuses on three processes at the core of tenants' eviction and post-eviction experiences: the loss of fixtures, the struggles for access to their belongings that had remained in the complex, and the devaluation of tenants' material belongings that marked their rehousing process.

2. Towards a cultural and legal geography of material belongings in processes of home *unmaking*

2.1. Materiality, displacement, home unmaking

Material belongings are rarely the subject of displacement debates, but recent urban and cultural geographies offer useful insights into the wider role of materiality in these processes. We draw particularly on feminist and cultural perspectives (Adey et al., 2020; Baker, 2020) that view displacement as an affective process – one that jeopardizes the experience of social and spatial belonging, as it disrupts people's subjectivities and their relations to place and home (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019; Valli, 2015). Accordingly, Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell (2014, p. 134) conceptualize displacement as home *unmaking*: a process by which 'material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately,

temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed’.

In this view, the space of the house emerges as an important site for scrutinizing how materiality mediates displacement in intimate ways (Adey et al., 2020, p. 24, Brickell, 2020; Vasudevan & Smith, 2020). Reading displacement as home *unmaking* supports an understanding of how spatial and temporal uncertainty is spread through dirt, broken infrastructures, and mould-infested home interiors (Desmond, 2016; van Lanen, 2022) in processes of property neglect (Soaita & McKee, 2019), disrepair (Fernández Arrigoitia, 2014) and vacancy (Dimitrakou, 2022). Moreover, thinking materially about displacement fosters a grounded understanding of displacement experiences (Adey et al., 2020; Mizrokhi, 2021; Pain, 2018). Displaced subjects experience home *unmaking* as an alienating process in which familiar places (i.e., physical and social spaces) can no longer be identified as home (Valli, 2015, p. 1195). Thinking through these experiences, in turn, highlights how material relations shape subjectivities (Doshi, 2013) and people’s embodied sense of (no longer) belonging (Brickell et al., 2017; Butcher & Dickens, 2016). In this reading, displacement deprives residents of agency and legitimacy in the making of place and home (Ferreri, 2020), thus also affecting practices contesting displacement (Baker, 2020; Lancione, 2017).

Yet, despite these fruitful insights, few studies on home *unmaking* processes have been attentive to the role played by the multiple things that constitute a home (exceptions Harris et al., 2020; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Leaving material belongings out of the picture implies that these are conceptualized as either an unproblematic good that moves together and simultaneously with the displaced subjects or as an object that is seemingly independent of social relations and does not itself affect the subjectivities and displacement experiences. This divide between subjects and objects, between social and material worlds, has implications on how agency and temporality are understood in displacement processes. Assuming that mobile people and movables relocate together frames displacement as a

process with an end (Porteous & Smith, 2001; Pull & Richard, 2019). This framing, in turn, limits analysis to the more dramatic event in displacement processes: the physical removal of people (and presumably of their belongings) from land and housing. Thus, it obscures some of the haunting displacement effects on people's lives (Pain, 2018) as well as the resistances to displacement (Baker, 2020) that may accompany tenants' later struggles to remake a home (Lancione, 2017). Furthermore, assuming objects' neutrality in displacement processes or narrowing an understanding of belongings to the physical dimension of their materiality, strips them of their cultural meanings and omits the power relations that govern the social, legal and physical spaces in which belongings are placed. As we seek to demonstrate, these legal and cultural dimensions complicate the temporalities and subjectivities of displacement. Moreover, they foster an understanding of the interplay between displacement and emplacement, as they indicate the multiple ways in which tenants contest displacement.

2.2. Material belongings at home: material cultures and socio-legal relations

In responding to these gaps in literatures on home *unmaking*, we broaden the focus to consider how a wide range of material, legal, and cultural practices shape the making and *unmaking* of home. First, literature on material cultures (Miller, 2010) supports an analysis of how belongings matter in people's lives as they have an impact on people's relationships with the world. Second, the socio-legal geography of possessions permits us to scrutinize the statutory frameworks and power relations in which material belongings are enmeshed.

Material cultures of homemaking

Across anthropology, sociology, and cultural geography, research on material cultures has long stressed the need to place objects at the centre of social analyses of domestic space (Appadurai, 1986; Ingold, 2012; Miller, 2010, 2001). In Daniel Miller's words (2010), houses are 'elephants of stuff': assemblages of things that tangle intimate and personal relations with

extra-domestic interests and powers in social practice. In conceptualizing these objects as embedded in social relations, studies have pinpointed their key role in shaping people's practices and subjectivities.

Material belongings are elements in conducting various social practices (Shove et al., 2009). Following Iris Marion Young (2005), dwelling happens in space and with things through practices of making and preserving home and place. The houses people live in, the material belongings they own and the arrangement of those belongings in space support people's daily routines and reflect personal values, histories and narratives. Crucially then, the material things that constitute a home are not a neutral background in which social practices take place; they condition how people practice belonging and structure relations at home and with the world (Jacobs & Gabriel, 2013; Miller, 2010; Pink, 2004).

Moreover, people's relations with material belongings are central to identities (Young, 2005, pp. 130-131). Material belongings are one key medium through which identities are constructed (Miller, 2010), negotiated (Holton & Riley, 2016; Pink, 2004), and reconciled (Gorman-Murray, 2008). They anchor and are anchored in complex spatio-temporal arrangements of belonging (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), even after leaving a house. As Divya Tolia-Kelly suggests, belongings 'constitute precipitates of re-memories and narrated histories' (2004, p. 314). Her analysis reveals that belongings accompanying British Asian women in their migration trajectories enable them to keep or recreate memories of their homes elsewhere and, through that, to reconstruct their postcolonial identities. By linking present to past inhabitation spaces and experiences, material cultures of home shape trans-local (ibid.) and cross-temporal arrangements of belonging.

Material belongings can be part of homemaking practices, even without the physical housing infrastructure. As studies examining material cultures of homelessness reveal, the things that make up the home play a significant role in precariously housed people's practices

of belonging. When people are deprived of any other property form, material belongings become instrumental in placemaking (Harris et al., 2020; Marcoux, 2001). Following Michele Lancione's (2017) work on the resistance of dispossessed Roma people occupying a street in Bucharest, material belongings making up people's (former) homes become elements of resistance: devices through which evicted tenants gain visibility and practice solidarity in the aftermath of their eviction. Together, material belongings support precariously housed subjects to negotiate in/exclusion (Bourlessas, 2022) and cope with vulnerability (Blomley et al., 2020; Lancione, 2017; McCarthy, 2020).

The meanings and values ascribed to material belongings are open to change; they are recreated in the continuous efforts and labour of turning a house into a home (Miller, 2010; Young, 2005). Indeed, as Andrew Gorman-Murray writes, homes are 'remade over and over again through everyday homemaking practices that reflect changing personal identities' (2008, p. 287). However, homemaking 'can also imply the need to change ourselves in order to suit our accommodation' (Miller, 2010, p. 173). For instance, by breaking down, by decaying, or simply because they carry other people's histories and traces of their actions (Pink, 2004), material belongings alter conditions of everyday domesticity in ways that can disrupt spatial, social, and political belonging (Fernández Arrigoitia, 2014; Miller, 2010).

Socio-legal geography of possessions

The cultural importance of material belongings as resources of practical and emotional significance heightens the importance of understanding their legal significance. In distinction to assemblage-inspired approaches, which emphasize material agency (Harris et al., 2020; Soaita & McKee, 2019), a socio-legal lens accounts for the rules and power relations that organize the appropriation and loss of people's things, as well as how these rules and relations are practiced. Home, as David Delaney (2010, p. 65) proposes, is a 'nomic setting'

embedded in different regulating projects and legal practices. Therefore, the capacity to make a home and to enjoy material belongings is contingent upon the legal relationships that people have with land and housing (Blomley et al., 2020; Clarke, 2001).

Norms and rules that govern social and material worlds (Brickell et al., 2021, p. 2) directly shape subjects' relations with their belongings. Legally speaking, material belongings are commonly considered possessions (Blomley et al., 2020; Sikor & Lund, 2009), a legal category than is not identical to the one of property. While both categories organize subject-object relations, possessions are associated with access and the actual use of (mostly tangible) things and property is associated with rights and entitlements. Both indicate the different degrees of control subjects have over things and subjects' membership and belonging in a community or a place (Cooper, 2013). However, legal hierarchies between possession and property and the primacy of the latter are built in most property regimes and affect relations of belonging. Through what Davina Cooper (2013, p.167) called the 'extroverted powers of property' (i.e., the capacity of property to act on other processes and relations, beyond the propertied object-subject relation), property can influence wider relations amongst people and between people and possessions, thereby shaping a sense of belonging.

People's ability to benefit from things (Ribot & Peluso, 2003) is socially mediated and unevenly distributed. As material belongings are often placed in buildings or on land, third parties affect people's relations with their things. For instance, landlords, state authorities, banks and building managers, influence the materiality of the domestic, when they decide on a level of dis/repair, define rules about housing standards, or set up conditions for accessing capital to make housing investments. These influences, in turn, organize the production of subjectivity (Buchli, 2010), as they have an impact on people's capacities to define their domesticity, to enjoy belongings, as well as their inhabitation practices (Miller, 2010).

Institutions, such as tenure, by organizing access to and exclusion from housing, order relations between people, homes, and material belongings (Bate, 2020; Easthope, 2014; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Beyond cultural assumptions suggesting causalities between tenure-specific cultures and individual practices of home maintenance, i.e., that care for the living space is a virtue of middle-class homeowners (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), tenure, class inequalities and structural conditions of housing precarity all influence homemaking. These conditions affect the capacity to materially engage in homemaking, as they can deprive certain people of appropriating and enjoying their things (Blomley et al., 2020, Pink, 2004; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Thereby, propertyless subjects with only provisional access to housing are more vulnerable to frequent residential relocations. When dislocated, their relation to their belongings depends on their capacities to move with their possessions (Marcoux, 2001) and to negotiate access to spatial resources (Ownen, 2022), such as storage spaces, public spaces, or new housing (Sullivan, 2018).

Finally, thinking about material belongings through a socio-legal lens invites us to consider the implications of legal abstractions on experiences of belonging (Graham et al., 2017). It asks what counts as property and possession (Blomley, 2004; Roy, 2017) and who, and whose things, matter in dispossession processes. Following Blomley et al. (2020), the value of material belongings is socially and legally constructed. For instance, most legal regimes differentiate landed property from belongings, regulate them differently (Robinson, 2004), and often give greater protection (and thus attribute higher value) to the former rather than the latter. Yet the value of material belongings is not inherent in the objects themselves; rather, it depends on social and legal practices, dominant discourses, and ideologies that produce value and social difference. Deshonay Dozier's (2019) analysis of the dispossession and resistance of houseless people in Los Angeles' Skid Row demonstrates how policing practices and dominant legal and policy discourses render houseless people's belongings into

waste in order to justify their destruction and, in turn, deprive houseless people of the means to reproduce their lives. Considering that property and personhood are co-constituted, as Ananya Roy (2017) notes, material belongings' social-legal underpinnings reflect and further shape how certain lives and subjectivities are framed and de/valued vis-à-vis others. Together these lenses allow new light to be shed on the role of material belongings in the Hannibal case.

3. Unmaking home in Hannibal: tracing material belongings

The *unmaking* of their homes accompanied Hannibal's tenants long before the 2017 evacuation, throughout a protracted disinvestment process. The buildings' privatization in the mid-2000s led to speculative investment, the bankruptcy of an owner, and a period of austerity management; its subsequent foreclosure, and continuous disinvestment, were followed by resale. All had an impact on tenants' living standards. However, in Dortmund's tight rental market the demand for cheap housing was high. Despite its chronic decay, Hannibal retained its inhabitants – middle- and low-income households, with the latter being first- and second-generation immigrants, students, and recently arrived refugees.

According to city officials, the 'evacuation' was without alternative (interview, city official, 01.2021), as fire-security defects had been identified in earlier inspections (Verwaltungsgericht Gelsenkirchen, 2021) yet had remained as the landlord took no repair measures. However, until the city of Dortmund issued a prohibition of use order (§61 BauO NRW) in September 2017, the tenants had never been informed about these developments, and the immediate evacuation caught tenants off guard: Told that 'in an hour you must be out of here' (Voss, 2018), tenants left their homes and their belongings behind, without knowing where to go or whether and when they could return. In this context, the following conflict emerged: As the evacuation had classified the structure as inappropriate for housing, its

unsupervised access was prohibited. Both the city of Dortmund and the landlord supported the closure of Hannibal after the evacuation. Yet the tenants, who had been displaced through legal means, remained bound to their flats by both their material belongings and their rental contracts.

A word is in order about tenants' material belongings in the German legal system, and tenants' abilities to make rented housing into a home. In comparison to other legal contexts, the German Tenancy Law is remarkable regarding tenants' relative security and the possibility for them to undertake repairs and deduct the associated costs from their rent (Easthope, 2014). However, apart from basic maintenance, tenants' additions and changes in the physical structure of private property are contested, as they interfere with landlords' interests. Regarding the legal status of belongings, the German Civil Code (BGB) treats (tenants') movable personal, and (landlords') immovable real property in the same way. For instance, the claim against interference with ownership (§1004 BGB), through which usually landlords claim against trespassing, applies to both land and movables (Rahmatian, 2010). However, in the realm of housing, tenants' belongings are assumed to be exclusively movables. Consequently, home improvements – painting walls, placing tiles, and laying floors– install fixtures that become property of the owner (§946 BGB), even after forced evictions and irrespective of whom they were financed by.

Against this background, our analysis highlights three processes in which material belongings – as objects of cultural and legal significance – tangle with the enactment, perpetuation, and contestation of the displacement process: First, we discuss how the legal governance of fixtures normalizes tenants' material losses. Second, we consider how tenants' access to their material belongings that were left in the housing complex became entangled in claims over their rights to ownership and rights to dwell. Third, we explore the effects of belongings' assessment in compensation claims and post-eviction recovery measures.

This discussion is part of a broader qualitative study conducted between 2018 and 2021 that employed the following methods and data sets: participant observations of the Tenant Association’s meetings; fourteen interviews with key actors (including city officials, tenants, Tenant Association representatives, and real estate experts); the analysis of the Tenant Association’s archive about the Hannibal case that documented controversies from the initial construction to the post-evacuation conflicts; the analysis of relevant legal and policy documents about the governance and regulation of property neglect and evacuation; as well as the review of newspaper articles reporting of the tenants’ eviction and the actions taken by the city to manage this emergency. In this paper, we draw particularly on three narrative interviews, lasting between one and three hours, with Hannibal’s former tenants, as well as interviews with the Tenant Association. These interviews aimed at exploring tenants’ experiences, lives, and housing trajectories during the evacuation, as well as the legal conflicts that followed. Moreover, we rely on a content analysis of a sub-folder in the Tenants Association archive that included the legal proceedings around the tenants’ claims regarding their belongings after the eviction. Finally, we refer to an analysis of the legal rules regulating property, possessions, and rent relations in the study context. Across this material, our analysis focuses on legal and cultural practices, which govern relationships between subjects, belongings, and place in displacement processes.

3.1 Material loss and the theft of personal investments

In discussing displacement experiences, tenants revealed that material losses had continuously shaped their everyday lives before and after their eviction. These gradual losses concerned their homes, their personal belongings, and a wide range of material fixtures of inhabitation that tenants had to leave behind after the eviction. Fixtures – the home improvements tenants made during their inhabitation that became attached to and integrated with the building – are not legally recognized as part of tenants’ possessions. Yet they are, as

we seek to show, of great importance for tenants' sense of belonging, particularly when living in a decaying building.

The poor maintenance conditions, for which Hannibal was known throughout its recent history, did not imply the lack of housing care. On the contrary, interviewees proposed that homemaking in a decaying building inevitably involved repair practices, through both major and minor refurbishments taken over by the residents (Hilbrandt & Dimitrakou, 2022), thereby challenging conventional wisdom that tenants do not do maintenance work. Yet, in Hannibal, claiming repairs and deductions from an absent management company was not always possible. Consequently, tenants took on burdens and responsibilities of doing home improvements. Overall, tenants had access to affordable rent but had to live with negligence and disrepair. Some tenants interpreted this blatant lack of care marking the landlord's management strategy as a possibility 'to dwell' (Young, 2005): to invest more than the minimum in home improvements. As one interviewee described it, by remaking her flat tip to toe she could choose the floors, colours, tiles, and wallpapers, overhaul the bathroom and kitchen, and make her flat in Hannibal her 'castle' (interview, tenant, 08.2018). Yet, she still had to live in a damp and cold flat. These insights demonstrate how the landlord's strategic neglect – the very practices that promote housing precarity – fosters an ambiguous sense of agency when people perform their ideal homes, where the tenant's *sense* of ownership (Thorpe, 2020) becomes frustrated by the *laws* of ownership. Moreover, they highlight how the political economies of housing disinvestment interplay with the making and unmaking of domesticity and home (Baxter & Brickell, 2014).

Considering that home improvements were constitutive of homemaking (Miller 2010), they become central in tenants' home *unmaking* experiences. Against this background, fixtures put into home spaces informed interviewees' narratives long after the eviction. Although tenants' adaptations were by no means a claim to legal rights to the landlord's

property, our interviews uncovered that tenants handled their loss with feelings of disappointment, regret, and self-blame: As one interviewee pointed out, ‘It’s your own fault when you put so much into a flat to make it beautiful. [...] If I knew that we had to move out, I wouldn’t have put in those glass mosaic tiles.’ (interview, tenant, 07.2018). Investing in fixtures is an individualized risk that precariously housed tenants take unwillingly (and often unknowingly) in their homemaking efforts. Looking at the role of fixtures in the displacement process shows that precarious homemaking involves the danger of tenants losing their investments, given the lack of legal protection or the lack of enforcement of existing laws regarding tenants’ compensation for investment into the property. Yet these entanglements, and the unequal legal recognition, between propertied and non-propertied interests, configure relations of belonging (Cooper, 2013) and a sense of self as a displaced subject. As tenants’ risks are normalized by law, tenants interpret taking these risks and experiencing related losses as a personal failure, rather than blaming the landlord or dominant legal understandings of property. In this view, emplacement practices – for which tenants lack formal rights – become seen as a risky miscalculation.

At other times, interviewees spoke of investments they made in their homes in the form of money, materials, and personal labour as a stake in and an entanglement with Hannibal: a ‘thing’ that was unjustly taken away from tenants. In the aftermath of the eviction, a woman who had been living in Hannibal for fourteen years, felt lucky she had not done too much to a flat that ‘doesn’t belong’ to her. She suggested that her former neighbours in Hannibal had experienced material and financial losses as harm that prevented them from moving on:

Many have made so much investment in the flats and didn’t want to give up. I know a few tenants who moved in three months before the evacuation; they put in new floors and renovated the bathrooms at their own expense...You must give up your flat, but you can’t

do that. One tenant also said that he had invested €10,000. Now, all this is garbage.
(interview, tenant, 06.2018)

As the interviewee suggests, tenants did not want to ‘give up’ their flats, as quitting their rental contracts would have implied accepting the terms of displacement that were unjustly imposed on them. As money and materials invested, labour and time spent, and efforts put into home spaces shape a sense of belonging (Chevalier, 2002; Cooper, 2013), they prefigure a sense of (and an insurgent claim to) ownership (Blomley, 2004; Thorpe, 2020) that lies beyond the current legal framework. Although such investments were legally seized in the eviction, tenants experienced the loss of these investments as their being wrongfully stolen.

As typical material registers of homemaking, fixtures frequently remain unnoticed. Yet, their loss unveils people’s tentative claims to belonging and unequal capacities for homemaking (Miller, 2010; Harris et al. 2020). Moreover, they further our understanding of what people are dispossessed of throughout displacement processes. In this regard, dispossession is not only about the loss of shelter and personal belongings but also about the erasure of the (emotional) labour required for making, maintaining, and caring for a home.

3.2 Spatial exclusion and the claims to belonging(s)

A month after the evacuation, when responsibility for the buildings’ security passed from city authorities back to the legal owner, the tenants were able to retain access to the things inside their flats. Under the pretext of the buildings’ insecurity, and despite having no legal basis for prohibiting access, Hannibal’s owner used the prohibition order to finalize tenants’ expulsion. In practicing his absolute right to exclude from his property (§903 BGB), the owner threatened to seal Hannibal for good. In addition, he installed a management regime according to which tenants could only enter Hannibal for fifteen minutes at a time. This hindered tenants from accessing their belongings and practically pushed them to withdraw

from their legal rights as tenants. Examining the negotiations of access to and exclusion from Hannibal offers insights into how tenants' material belongings entwine with enactments and contestations of displacement.

Tenants took different routes to deal with these access constraints. Some abandoned their belongings in order to disconnect from Hannibal. As interviews reveal, for many inhabitants, Hannibal had been an unhomely place, imbued with memories of suffering. Tenants had to deal with exploitative tactics and the neglect of various landlords on a daily basis. In light of a traumatic eviction, moving on became an urgent need for many. However, given that their belongings remained in Hannibal, the owner's exclusion tactics had a profound impact on former tenants' mobility. A young couple who had to move out was forced to separate temporarily to find housing after the eviction. One partner describes that the access protocol banned tenants from the buildings:

I burst into tears. 'But I have a new place, I want to get out of here!' How should I do that in 15 minutes, how should I move? So, they offered me a termination agreement. The manager summarized the terms for me: I would get back my deposit as a 'benefit'. Also, I wouldn't have to dispose of my stuff, so, the bulky waste. I could just leave the flat. (interview, tenant, 06.2018)

To dissociate from Hannibal, tenants engaged in bargains with the landlord: to be able to dispose their things and move on, tenants had to quit their rental contracts. Thus, they had to relinquish their right to claim compensation for damages and their right to return to Hannibal. Their fear of losing their deposits, their need for cash to cope with the expenses of relocation, and, above all, an urgency to distance themselves from the haunting memories (Pain, 2018) of their experiences of home *unmaking* (Fernández Arrigoitia, 2014), brought some to accept these unfavourable terms. As the experience above shows, the landlord governed tenants' lives also through their belongings. The legal obligations surrounding the disposal and abandonment of possessions (§931, 959, BGB) were bargained over using a

central element constructing tenants' political subjectivities, namely, their valid rental contacts.

Other tenants decided to keep their belongings in Hannibal: On the one hand, there was a need to retain hope about the temporariness of the evacuation and the possibility of returning to Hannibal; on the other hand, a sense of anxiety and frustration about being unsettled reinforced these tenants' need to remain attached. Many argued: 'My things only fit when I come back to Hannibal' (interview, Tenant Association, 11. 2020). Following the argument of Elizabeth Shove and her colleagues, 'things can be stabilizing devices which people employ to challenge certain temporal identities' (2009, p. 6), and tenants used their belongings to generate some fixity in their lives. We read these as translocal arrangements of belonging (Tolia-Kelly, 2004) that underscore displaced subjects' right to dwell (Davidson, 2009): as precarious practices of 'survivability' (Lees et al., 2017) that safeguard tenants' emplacement (Roy, 2017).

Some tenants fought the access restrictions in court. Supported by the Dortmund Tenant Association, tenants applied individually for interim injunction to retain their right to access their flats and to block the landlord's decision to shut off the electricity. Legal battles centred around claims to their material belongings. Tenants' legal files offer meticulous descriptions of the material things that made up their homes and evidence how the home as a 'nomic setting' (Delaney, 2010) entangles legal and cultural meanings of ownership (Cooper, 2013). Vivid illustrations of their furniture, musical instruments, tools, camping equipment, and clothes reconstructed the value of tenants' material worlds in the local court. Tenants' claims suggested that the landlord's tactics made it impossible to access and pack their belongings or care for pets and plants remaining in the housing complex. Moreover, without heating and electricity, the buildings provided insufficient protection to their belongings.

The court decision ruled that cooperation with the landlord was required for accessing the buildings, but it also ordered the reinstatement of tenants' access (Amtsgericht Dortmund, 2018, p. 7). It recognized that the landlord's ownership and the tenants' belongings were enmeshed, and indicated that the tenants' rights as well as the landlord's duties remained in place despite the prohibition of use of the buildings. As rental contracts remained valid (§574 BGB), the court decision suggested that Hannibal's closure implied interference with the tenants' possession over their flats. Yet while the court forced the landlord to ensure that the litigating tenants could remove their belongings, it did not oblige the landlord to keep the buildings functioning to safely house tenants' belongings. The ruling thus prioritized rights to real property vis-à-vis the tenants' rights to their material belongings, thereby evincing the uneven valuation of different kinds of property (Blomley et al., 2020; Dozier, 2019). In practice, it did not impede policies of exclusion, as tenants and their belongings had to be removed from Hannibal. However, these legal battles also speak of the tenants' wider claims to their right to have and enjoy belongings, their claims to stay in place, and to retain their political subjectivities as rights-holding subjects (Ferreri, 2020).

Thinking through the governance of exclusion and of access indicates how material belongings participate in shaping forms of agency and tenants' political subjectivities (Miller, 2001). The governance of the belongings, as being entwined with territorialized property relations, enhanced precarity by shaping tenants' mobilities and their ability to retain rights as owners of things. However, their claims to the ownership of their belongings reinforced the tenants' fights to stay put and secured their legal rights as tenants to access their flats, to be compensated for damages, or to return to Hannibal in the future. These struggles for accessing their belongings speak of the long-lasting temporalities of displacement, where the processes of home *un*making are negotiated long after the singular eviction event.

3.3 Devaluation of losses and the haunting sense of displacement

In the rehousing process, the governance of the Hannibal tenants' material belongings reproduced tenants' experiences of being displaced. Interviewees suggested that having to be mobile while dealing with urgent matters of everyday reproduction that required a stable place (e.g., parenting) was distressing. Rehousing, let alone remaking a home, provided further challenges. Interviewees reported that tenants remained unsettled for months after the evacuation. Being hosted by friends or family, moving between homeless shelters, or staying in refugee camps, tenants had to downsize their lives. However, the reduced reliance on their former homes and their belongings, which was necessary for coping with temporary relocations, haunted tenants as it impeded their capacity to remake a home.

Further, we witnessed how the discursive devaluation of tenants' homes and belongings fundamentally shaped their experiences of displacement and rehousing. The city of Dortmund occupied an ambivalent role in this process. On the one hand, city authorities declared tenants' homes as dangerous for inhabitation and enforced the evacuation of Hannibal by suggesting that violations of the building code were caused by the landlord's misconduct and tenants' misuse (Deimel, 2017; Verwaltungsgericht Gelsenkirchen, 2021). On the other hand, the city has been the main provider of support in the rehousing of evictees, through offering temporary accommodation and in seeking replacement rental flats on tenants' behalf, for example.

Many interviewees explained that they felt that their losses were not properly recognized and devalued, as the support provided by the city after the evacuation was minimal. They reported that the replacement flats found by the city were overpriced, smaller in size, and lower in quality dwellings that did not provide enough space for rehousing their belongings. We, therefore, suppose that the city's assistance was undergirded by the assumption that the inhabitants of Hannibal – by way of being non-owners – were people

without (the need of) belongings. We interviewed a woman in her mid-fifties who had changed accommodations three times following her eviction. In our interview she indicated that the assistance the city provided in her search for new housing sustained her conditions of displacement:

They [the city] said that the flat was furnished. Do you know what they meant by furnished? Two steel beds with spring frames and a thin mattress. You wouldn't believe the back pain my husband had after nine months. But we couldn't put our own furniture there. The flat was much smaller than ours. [...]. Anyway, I would never have been able to fit in. (interview, tenant, 07.2018)

Tenants' new flats resembled temporary accommodations, rather than permanent housing solutions where tenants could settle. The types of new dwellings offered to tenants impeded them from moving with their belongings. This had practical, material, and bodily effects on the tenants' experience of rehousing. Even if the basic need for shelter was covered, the city's support for rehousing contributed to the tenants' spatial and temporal uncertainty (Ferreri, 2020). Being forced to move without belongings, tenants felt suspended between two places (i.e., their current dwelling and the old flat housing their belongings). As the flats provided were only fit for tenants without (many) possessions, Hannibal's former inhabitants were not able to fit their belongings and their *selves* into these new places.

Moreover, our interviewees suggested that the bad reputation of Hannibal (Beushausen, 2011; WR, 1998, 2011) played a role in tenants' capacity to remake a home, as it informed the assessment necessary for the financial support that tenants could claim from the city. Due to the dominant imaginary of living in Hannibal, interviewees felt they were depicted as being already materially deprived. As one tenant explained: 'It's again the same thing they used to say: "If you live in Hannibal, you don't have electricity or the internet." These are all lies!' (interview, tenant, 08.2018) . Similarly, tenants expressed their frustration

about the outdated assessment scheme of the city for calculating the financial support tenants could claim for replacing the most basic belongings lost in the evacuation.

They [city] calculated compensations based on a formula. For instance, according to that, a wardrobe is worth €39. I honestly don't know where someone can buy such a wardrobe... With €39? I saw the table and thought that the estimated amounts were so ridiculous! Completely outdated. Honestly, I don't know how a person can buy back her stuff. From where? (interview, tenant, 06.2018)

As Blomley et al. (2020, p. 174) propose, the assessment of belongings and the evaluation of persons are entangled and tied, in turn, to the evaluation of the places that both find themselves in. Accordingly, the city's technical valuations reproduced homogenizing propertyless identities, implying that the tenants of Hannibal do not have or do not deserve a good house or nice things. Considering that material belongings matter in people's lives, it is evident that they shape how residents relate to place and how they practice belonging. If the governance of belongings in post-eviction proceedings perpetuates the devaluation of tenants' losses and frames tenants as people without property, it consequently protracts a sense of displacement as it inhibits people's ability to be emplaced.

4. Conclusion

Focussing the analysis on the role that material belongings play in displacement processes highlights how the things that constitute a home become entangled in practices that enact, sustain, or contest displacement. Through those practices, belongings come to symbolize and construct values that societies ascribe to places and subjects (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010), for instance, which places matter as homes, or whose losses matter in displacement processes. As objects mediate practices of spatial exclusion and people's right to dwell, their destruction, devaluation, and seizure are shaped by unequal power relations and have an impact on people's displacement experiences. Across the different forms of dispossession we

analyzed, the destruction of material and personal wealth constrains people's capacities to rehouse and remake a home. Yet our findings also suggest that belongings are means through which residents negotiate displacement. While these negotiations deepen their precarization, they may also at times empower displaced subjects.

Our analysis disentangled three ways in which the social and legal function of material belongings and their governance shape displaced tenants' subjectivities and reproduce their sense of displacement. First, legal rules that organize the relation between tenants, their belongings, and their homes designate that tenants can be easily and tracelessly removed: as people with only a few and mobile possessions, who can move at any time from one place to another, and who shall not be made able to attach to a place. Second, property relations, related norms, and dominant discourses reflect and reinforce unequal power relations in housing. As we demonstrated, they influence the practices of governing material belongings (e.g., access) and through that, their value and the utility of home. Moreover, by conditioning tenants' capacities to move on or stay in place, belongings organize the production of subjectivity. As our findings show, Hannibal's tenants had to negotiate: between maintaining their identity as people with belongings and a home (although suspended between their old and new houses) or becoming propertyless and moving on with their lives. In remaking a home, displaced subjects are thus deprived of what Miller (2010, p. 174) has called the 'critical realignment of persons with their possessions, the selective discarding, keeping, and moving of material belongings that accompany voluntary residential mobilities and that enable people to reconstruct their personal histories, memories, and identities.

Bringing this cultural and legal analysis in dialogue with processual readings of displacement (Adey et al., 2020; Baxter & Brickell, 2014; Brickell et al., 2017) revealed that home making and *unmaking* are constituted through a wide range of material cultures of

home: a plurality of objects with different material and legal qualities, significance, and meaning. Therefore, we demonstrated that displacement is not only about people's physical relocation but also about the systematic erasure of the displaced subjects' stories, struggles, and material traces. These findings offer two main contributions to displacement debates. First, this paper sheds new light on the temporalities of displacement. Looking at the cultural and socio-legal entanglements of tenants and objects in displacement processes challenges the idea that displacement is a process with a clear-cut end (cf. Porteous & Smith, 2001). Instead, it complicates the temporalities of displacement (Mizrokhi, 2021). Our analysis pinpointed the asynchronous mobilities of tenants and their belongings; by demonstrating the lasting effects of post-eviction negotiations and contestations on tenants' lives, our approach fosters an understanding of the haunting effects of evictions. Second, thinking about displacement through material belongings elucidates emplacement processes: the precarious practices through which displaced subjects negotiate their belonging, seek possibilities to dwell, and contest displacement.

Bringing the socio-legal and cultural geographies of material belongings into dialogue provokes questions about the precarious politics (Delaney, 2010) and political potential (Brickell et al., 2021) that lie in home *unmaking*. It challenges legal abstractions about what counts as property and who matters as a propertied subject (Blomley, 2004; Roy, 2017). Moreover, it highlights the conflicted entanglements between legal and cultural forms of property: on the one hand, property as a legal categorization and practice (e.g., real property, movables, fixtures) and the concrete material context of the house appear interdependent; on the other hand, a 'sense of ownership' (Thorpe, 2020) emerges through the everyday struggle of belonging – of seeking and losing a home. These claims to maintain a 'sense of ownership' cannot be reduced to an individualistic private interest over things. Instead, we conclude that they also voice claims to belonging that contest domestic injustices. Yet, their articulation

into legal arguments is hindered by the precarious conditions people find themselves in after an eviction and by the unequal access to resources to individually pursue a legal process.

Nonetheless, valuing the moments in which these claims to belonging surface in personal and collective narratives and public debates opens possibilities to incorporate them in political practices aimed at subverting the dominant understandings of property and power relations that govern displacement.

Acknowledgments: Most cordially, we thank the former tenants of Hannibal II for supporting this research through their time and engagement, as well as Tobias Scholz from the Dortmund Tenant Association, for his sustained support. Further, we thank Nick Blomley and Alexandra Flynn for their feedback in the 2021 AAG session ‘Governing the belongings of the precariously housed: a critical legal geography’, and Eva Swyngedouw for her feedback in the 2021 RC21 session ‘Housing Evictions: Hidden expressions of extreme housing precarity’. We thank Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions for improving this manuscript. Lastly, we are grateful for Julie Ren, Luisa Gehrig, and Fritz-Julius Grafe’s helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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