



THE MUSEUM OF RESILIENCE: Raising a Sympathetic Public in Postwelfare Chicago

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“A PLACE FOR CONVERSATION”

One morning in 2006, two-dozen artists, architects, curators, historians, anthropologists, and journalists convened in Chicago to discuss an unusual proposal—a public housing museum. They began with a tour of the Jane Addams Homes, a New Deal-era housing project that once stood on Chicago’s West Side. The group tramped around a vacant and rubble-strewn building, the last one that remains today, with flashlights and cameras in hand (see Figure 1). Once home to European immigrants, war veterans, and African American migrants, this building is slated to reopen in 2013 as the National Public Housing Museum (NPHM). Yet an experiential history museum dedicated to “illuminat[ing] the resilience of poor and working class families of every race and ethnicity to realize the promise of America” was still far off that fall morning (NPHM 2011).

At the working lunch that followed the tour, nobody minced words about the ironies of bringing a public housing museum to a city in the midst of obliterating its housing projects. The Chicago Housing Authority stood then halfway through a 15-year plan to replace its troubled projects with smaller, mixed-income, and racially integrated neighborhoods called “new communities.” To date, this plan has demolished approximately 19,000 apartments. By the time it winds down in 2015, it will have displaced at least 25,000 impoverished households, most headed by African American women. The lunch guests worried openly about “museuming” this controversial process. Daniel, a middle-age writer, pushed against these misgivings.



FIGURE 1. The last building remaining at the Jane Addams Homes in 2008, now slated to house the National Public Housing Museum. (Photo by author.)

He mentioned another museum that had harnessed “the power of place” toward politically relevant discussions:

[New York’s] Tenement Museum tells the tale of the immigrant experience, but it’s not a glorified view. When you go into the rooms and hear the stories of people who lived there, there are sad endings. So we tell the entire story of public housing: The idealism, failures, struggles, successes, tragic ends. Unless there’s a place that looks back and forwards, how will we come up with solutions?¹

Carol, a middle-age philanthropist, soon echoed Daniel: “This place humanizes public housing. It’s not like reading a book. You feel something when you go in. That’s important for public housing residents and their grandchildren, and everybody else. It really becomes a place for conversation.”

* * *

I observed this exchange while conducting research on Chicago’s public housing reforms as a range of Chicagoans struggled to navigate the disappearing built environments of the Fordist welfare state and the emerging ones of a neoliberal

communitarianism. As I followed the museum's earliest stages of development between 2004 and 2006, I documented many efforts to leverage emotionally and viscerally intense encounters with ruined public housing into conversations about social exclusion and human struggle.² In Chicago, aspirations for personally and nationally transformative conversations about poverty had become tangled up in wrecked homes. What can these hopes tell us about how citizens learn the obligations of belonging to a polity no longer able to guarantee them basic forms of protection, like housing?

Chicago's public housing reforms unfolded alongside the national overhaul of welfare in the 1990s, reforms that President Bill Clinton repeatedly characterized as "The end of welfare as we know it."³ At that time, the federal government restricted welfare benefits for poor people and tasked individual states with more oversight of poverty programs. State agencies slashed welfare rolls by forcing recipients into regular employment and by recruiting private agencies, charities, and volunteers to help care for them.⁴ Chicago's housing reforms have followed suit. Design and poverty experts touted them as a national model of housing and welfare reform. They expected that everyday interactions within the new communities would prod low-income residents to assume habits that lead to employment and their better-off neighbors to become more involved in local initiatives to combat poverty.

Anthropologists and others have observed similar trends in North America and Western Europe and, through them, have begun to elaborate the cultural transformation of Fordist welfare states. Many have interrogated how citizens' innermost feelings have become targeted for remediation: as poor people become beholden to feelings of self-sufficiency, others learn the compassion necessary to assume the work of caring for the poor (Elisha 2008; Fairbanks 2009; Muehlebach 2011; Rose 1999). They have situated these compulsions within longer trajectories of religious devotion, liberal communitarianism, and labor solidarities. But as Daniel's and Carol's words suggest, what stands out about Chicago's reforms is how much they have rendered the textures of place a platform for reeducating all citizens about the ethics of belonging to their polity. This emphasis on place challenges us to ask what more, besides compulsions to work, underwrites citizens' obligations in the wake of Fordist welfare states and their particular material infrastructures.⁵

This article provides a form-sensitive account of how emplacement summons citizens to publics and the ethical stances they enliven. I explore this problem by developing an understanding of a "sympathetic public." Like any public, the sympathetic one anticipated by the NPHM supporters would emerge through strangers' shared attention to circulating forms—in this case, publicity surrounding

ruined public housing. I focus on something slightly different. I want to understand how strangers recognize any given form, which I understand to be a thing that moves within a particular logic of circulation, as noteworthy. How do they come to understand encounters with this form as relevant beyond themselves, even binding them to far-flung strangers they will likely never meet? If, as Charles Taylor suggests, people come to imagine their citizenship through publics that orient them toward common objects of contemplation, discussion, and political action, these are questions we must ask (2004).

To get at them, I work with a materialist concept of sympathy, in which proximity makes unlike entities alike by transferring properties between them (Frazer 2002; Ribot 1914; Rutherford 2009; Taussig 1993). In Chicago, sympathy became a medium for socializing citizens into the attention necessary to assume different stances on poverty, and citizens cultivated these stances by learning how to move through the built environments changing around them. In other words, for the museum's supporters, the emotional and physical textures of decay became the very stuff of citizen mobilization. I see those oriented toward this decay as the earliest outlines of a public, an expansive "we" that anticipates and summons citizens moved to think somewhat differently about poverty. After locating the museum's emergence in a discussion of sympathy and publics, I examine three ethnographic moments that illustrate the contours of the sympathetic public anticipated by its supporters.

By the early 1990s, publicity surrounding Chicago public housing's severe decay, grinding poverty, and rampant crime had transformed the city's projects into a national spectacle. Such publicity helped propel the intense backlash already brewing against the expansion of welfare benefits under President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.⁶ Preeminent newspapers, nonfiction best sellers, and even a horror film offered Americans lurid glimpses of Chicago's rotting homes and apparently equally rotten social structures.⁷ Much of this publicity depicted public housing residents as both victims and perpetrators of the ruin that engulfed their homes. These ambivalences speak to wider disputes raging in 20th-century U.S. politics and letters centered on two arguments about persistent poverty and its causes: "culture of poverty" paradigms and "Civil Rights" paradigms. The former explains entrenched poverty by analyzing patterns of personal behaviors and beliefs thought to be endemic to poor communities. The latter focuses on redressing social, legal, and economic inequalities.⁸

Any public raised from ruined public housing cannot avoid these disputes and their legacies. As its recruits learn to navigate such ruin, they may come to pity or blame public housing's disappearing residents. These feelings might well

compel actions that harden the hierarchies and distances associated with projects that traffic in compassionate recognition (Berlant 2004; Fassin 2005; Muehlebach 2011). What I explore below is not compassion and its limits or exclusions *per se*, but the pleasures of vulnerability that the NPHM might produce for public housing's outsiders. I want to think about what challenges these pleasures pose for grasping the emerging grounds of inclusion within postwelfare polities.

Before I take up these concerns, let me describe this article's "who." Former and current public housing residents have supported the museum. I focus instead on those who did not hail from Chicago's public housing but nevertheless threw their weight behind the museum because they found the idea compelling. These supporters formed a group whose membership cut across the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. Still, they were mostly middle-age, white, well-educated, and financially secure professionals with commitments to progressive social and political causes. I focus on them for two reasons. First, the museum's long-term viability depended on appealing to people with no biographical connections to public housing. So, supporters drew on their own experiences and tastes to shape the museum. Second, these outsiders repeatedly invoked the other major "who" at stake: the public they aspired to conjure through emplacement, a "we" disposed to reckon differently about postwelfare social protection.

SYMPATHY, WRECKAGE, AND PUBLICS

One theme animating the growing scholarship on affect across several disciplines, including anthropology, is that forces that pull together matter and movement relay visceral intensities and sensory impressions in ways that elude linguistic capture and give rise to new forms (Berlant 2006; Gould 2009; Massumi 2002; Stewart 2010). A strand of this work focuses on the role that matter, including the built environment, plays within form-giving processes (de Vega 2010; Thrift 2004). Some scholars working in this area have characterized things as "leaky" or "vibrant" entities instead of discrete and bounded objects (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2010). The constituent properties bundled in a thing constantly reach beyond the surfaces that temporarily house them. As these properties become entangled in those of other things, they gather persons and matter into assemblages that have effects within our worlds. Because things are vibrant, their properties are never, as Jane Bennett notes, "entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics" (Bennett 2010:5).

Looking toward things and their generative capacities brings invaluable insights to the anthropological study of urban built environments. For one, instead of

focusing on the play of human rationalities, interests, and unintended consequences, we're steered toward the contingent interface of a built environment and the people and things moving through it. Still, I hesitate to transpose the autonomously generative capacities of things to a context like public housing. U.S. welfare meted out protections unevenly, in a way that gave salience especially to categories of race, class, and gender. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, this process had a heavy spatial component. Institutions that facilitated this uneven protection carved up cities and their surrounding regions into places that restricted citizens' spatial movements. These restrictions had violent edges (see, e.g., Hirsch 1998; Sugrue 1996). The solidarities and sensibilities accumulated through these restricted movements linger in the subjects constituted through them, even as the built environments that anchored them in place now fluctuate dramatically. My interlocutors were not always able to put these sensibilities and solidarities into words, let alone engage them consciously. Yet these sensibilities and solidarities shaped how my interlocutors have moved through Chicago's wrecked and emerging built environments. In short, I don't see the properties of things, and whatever forms their generative capacities give rise to, as unconstrained by the weight of mediation. Both become efficacious precisely because they emerge and are qualified within some institutionalized system of value.⁹

Consider Susan, a journalist. Susan intensified her reporting about public housing in 2004, just at the time its demolition had picked up pace. She saw this work as a modest corrective to its impending disappearance. When I asked about a museum, she replied, "Even if you are white, well off, and never went into [a housing project], it's not like you could ever miss it. It was just there. Just passing by, you just felt it. And that never let you forget that there are people who are deeply without in our society." Susan never became involved in the museum. Yet like many of its supporters, she claimed that encounters with moldering public housing could set off feelings that strengthened the ethical footing of both individuals and their society. For them, the visceral weight of public housing struck immediately and ineluctably. At the same time, they shared intuitions that these feelings required some mediation—be that through narrative journalism, everyday movements through the city, or a curator's imagination. Intuitions that something could be "just there" and "just felt" are, as William Mazarella points out, both the outcome of mediation and the means of its occlusion (2009:303). One way to begin understanding the work of such "immediation" is by turning from discussions of vibrant things toward a materialist understanding of sympathy.

Contemporary usage treats sympathy as compassion or understanding provoked at witnessing another's suffering. These feelings I characterize as empathy. I reserve *sympathy* for something more plastic and materially grounded, closer to what 19th-century psychophysicist Théodule Ribot characterized as its "etymological sense": "The existence of identical conditions in two or more individuals of the same, or different, species" (1914:230). *Sympathy* operates as a psychological and physiological correspondence that can emerge when entities move into range of one other. This view resonates with recent work on vibrant matter, but it departs on one critical point. Sympathetic encounters, particularly those involving humans, cannot fuse entities in any lasting or consequential way unless they are coordinated. This becomes especially clear in James Frazer's discussion of "contagious magic" (2002).

For Frazer, those who subscribe to contagious magic believe that as entities come into contact, their characteristic properties can become communicable. One entity may assume, even indelibly, the properties of a radically different class of person, animal, plant or other thing. Frazer's sympathy opens up a world pulsating with animate things whose contagious properties push and bind beyond the forms that anchor them in place, all the while reconfiguring these forms. Yet Frazer never takes the contagiousness of these forms as a given. Instead, contagion hinges on moments that properly initiate or call attention to proximity. Proper initiation and attention are so important that he exhaustively catalogs instances in which sympathetic transfers ride on matters as delicate as the habitual avoidance of stranded footprints or the correct burial of lost teeth (Frazer 2002:37–45). Sandy indentations and scattered teeth can press into the world, binding and reconfiguring persons, places, and things as they do. Yet it is rituals and habits of attention cultivated, coordinated, and reinforced within particular environs that steer if and then how these entities will press and bind.

Frazer doesn't discuss how sympathy might bind beyond once-proximate entities. Instead, sympathy's potential to bind expansively comes to the fore in accounts that move between its status as a material medium of transfer and its capacity to condition moral obligations. For instance, in Ribot's account, sympathy expands and stabilizes as it moves beyond reflex or the simple agreement of emotions. Sympathy at these rudimentary stages can only transfer properties among entities that already share the same basic temperament (1914:231–234). When sympathy enters its most "evolved" stage, representations coordinated with specific feelings can open windows across temperaments or, read more broadly, social divides. Members of this "community of representations or ideas, connected with feelings and movements" can then come to resemble *everyone* and *everything* they

encounter (1914:231). Ribot goes on to suggest that the evolution of sympathy into a medium that forges expansive bonds and moral obligations relies on the handiwork of figures like poets and prophets. As these figures coordinate representational and moral planes, sympathy awakens and enlarges people's altruistic tendencies. At stake for Ribot is the problem not merely of proximity but of properly aligning proximate entities.¹⁰ Through such alignment, qualities flow between entities, allowing persons, things, resemblances, sensations, and feelings to congeal into a moral whole. Sympathy and its resonances become the preconditions and expanding forces of social and ethical cohesion.

This is exactly the kind of cohesion that Susan and the NPHM supporters pursued, and they were far from alone. Both drew on several already available frameworks for mediating visceral experiences of mass harm that extended beyond Chicago's public housing: an international commemoration movement centered on human tragedy, and long-standing publicity centered on Chicago's spectacularly wrecked homes.

On Chicago's West Side, residents, architects, and developers have kicked around the idea of preserving decaying projects for housing since the 1980s. These efforts tanked. Yet as the impending demolition of the Addams Homes ran aground of national heritage commitments, a proposed museum of housing grew legs. Built during the Great Depression, this housing project paired New Deal social ideals with sleek Bauhaus aesthetics. It became eligible for national landmark status in 1994. Its eligibility threw a wrench into redevelopment plans, and tenant leaders seized this wrench by insisting on a museum. When a Chicago-based foundation with granting priorities in arts and architecture adopted the floundering museum proposal in 2005, the NPHM finally took off.

The Driehaus foundation's staff breathed new life into the proposal by situating it within an international movement that has emphasized experiential encounters with mass harm such as genocide, enslavement, intolerance, and political terror. This movement aims to bolster democratic values by stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues through emplacement (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience 2011). Visitors move through sites like a Soviet gulag or a Nazi concentration camp poised to be overcome by the lapses in human conscience thought to still resonate there. The museum's supporters turned to the Tenement Museum for inspiration on crafting a site that might speak to the failures of state-mediated care. This institution chronicles immigrants in 19th- and 20th-century New York, their struggles with ethnic intolerance and substandard residential and working conditions, and the emergence of regulations and institutions to address

both. Summing up its success, Driehaus's director observed to me, "Some people [have to be] carried out because they are so overwrought, because the emotion is so present."

It's tempting to attribute the NPHM traction to consumer tastes shaped by the success of Holocaust commemoration museums or the place commodification that keeps some postindustrial urban economies humming along.¹¹ Yet there is a long tradition of publicity within the United States that renders the homes of poor people a tangible, public spectacle.¹² Over the past 80 years in Chicago, narrative journalism, tours, and photographs have repeatedly pulled Chicagoans into deteriorating homes. Along the way, this publicity has supported spatial interventions that have overhauled both Chicago and other U.S. cities.

Consider a spate of popular "housing exhibits" from the late 1940s, staged by prodevelopment groups just as local politicians and developers tinkered with the legal instruments that made federal urban renewal possible. As contributing photographer Mildred Mead notes, these exhibits "aimed to teach facts about housing in the city to the public" (Mead n.d.). Those "facts" appeared as tidy charts and statistics. Yet these exhibits also prodded visitors toward less abstracted, more emplaced modes of knowing. Take one that funneled visitors through wall charts and statistics into a slum tenement reerected at Chicago's main library. Visitors, Mead noted, were especially "shocked and interested" in this room and its faithfully re-created squalor, which included a taxidermy rat (see Figure 2). These exhibits were just one among many wrecked homes circulating throughout Chicago's 20th century. Through encounters with the exhibits, citizens' intimate experiences of urban blight were drawn into the U.S. Fordist welfare state's major spatial reconfigurations.

The NPHM emerges from historical investments in the public recognition of mass harm, this recognition's sympathetic resonances, and its capacity to pull together expansive moral wholes made up of people, things, and places. Yet is it appropriate to talk of these moral wholes and the sympathetic resonances that anchor them in some place as publics? Scholars have tended to approach publics as collective political subjects that emerge through the circulation, layering, and citation of textual address among strangers who will likely never meet (e.g., Gal and Woolard 2001; Habermas 1989; Warner 2002). This process involves an abstraction away from one's body and location into a larger social imaginary that spans social and geographic distances. In work that approaches publics through textual analysis, even nonlinguistic media such as visual images become textlike, segmented and "read" much like one reads a book (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). It



FIGURE 2. Re-created slum tenement mounted within a housing exhibit at the Chicago Public Library, circa 1948. (Photo: Mildred Mead, courtesy of the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago.)

is trickier to place collective feelings that are sparked by moving through something like a wrecked building, and that bind people because they are, in Carol's words, so "not like reading a book."

Yet they are not impossible to place. We can situate a range of forms in the communicative processes by which people come to assume that they already

belong to certain groups by asking how these intuitions involve both embodied and disembodied modes of knowing. Anthropologists have already begun to forge these accounts by implicating texts, speech, and images, but also visceral intensities and fleeting feelings in processes that solicit and hold attention (Hirschkind 2006; Stewart 2007). Through attention, one assumes a bond with strangers whose attention has also been piqued, and as Stewart notes “a weirdly floating ‘we’ snaps into a blurry focus” (2007:27). The question remaining is how the interpretative communities that cohere around circulating forms come into focus. In other words, we need to interrogate how engagements with circulating forms, which occur in some place, mediate, cultivate, and renew the practices of attention and reflexivity that constitute publics and their world-making dimensions.¹³

My point here is not just that all publics involve affect and matter or even that they project what Michael Warner describes as a “demanding social phenomenology” (2002:14). Rather, keeping in mind the insights offered by materialist concepts of sympathy, it is that a demanding social and material phenomenology must be carefully wrought and managed before any public can summon and bind strangers across geographical and social distances. By no means do I dismiss accounts that have productively attributed the reflexivity of modern stranger relations to a circularity between the empirical context in which one encounters public forms and an abstract whole presumed and renewed through public addresses (Warner 2002:50–51). I suggest only that attention is not a given but rather is a fragile and complicated achievement, especially in projects that harbor socially transformative ambitions.

Below, I return to the museum’s supporters as they sought to fashion a wrecked building into a crucible for forging a demanding social and material phenomenology. I focus on three moments that illustrate how supporters worked to realign visitors’ attention (not just visual) to public housing, its things, and their qualities in ways that simultaneously foregrounded bitter racial divides and leveraged them into an appreciation for human vulnerability. The first moment is an encounter between visitors and a table at an early open house for the museum in 2009. The second hinges on a conversation provoked during a tour in 2006. The final one involves the imagination of an ideal exhibit, described to me in 2006. Through these moments, I show how emplacement marked the public anticipated by the supporters with a communicable vulnerability that made decay the raw material of citizens’ mobilization. For them, this vulnerability could not be set off without careful curating.

CURATING ETHNORACIAL AFFINITIES

The museum's early supporters stared down substantial challenges. They needed a brand appealing enough to attract donations, grants, and tourists. Further, the brand had to navigate the public disparagement of welfare recipients that raged during the 1980s and 1990s in response to earlier expansions of welfare benefits to impoverished black women and their children. In a policy climate grounded on behaviorist arguments about poverty, public housing residents faced derision for having apparently destroyed their homes, housed criminals, and plunged their neighborhoods into chaos. Even in 2005, when these disputes had cooled some, few groups seemed less worthy of public commemoration. "Why in the world would we ever want to remember anything like *that*?" went the oft-repeated response to Driehaus staff as they courted local philanthropists for support.

The museum's supporters moved to resolve public housing's branding problem and empathy deficit by foregrounding the Addams Homes' most unusual feature—its "multiethnic" beginnings. Urban public housing is often associated with African Americans. Yet for a good third of the Addams Homes' life, few could be found there. The site housed first- and second-generation immigrants, especially Eastern European Jews and Italian Catholics. Supporters thus drew on consultants' recommendations that the museum fold African American public housing residents into this broader immigrant trajectory: "Many residents rose . . . to great things, others struggled to eke out a living; some survived, others were overcome. There is a profound human story to be told in these struggles, . . . [but it is] fundamentally an American experience" (Telesis Corporation and Austin n.d.:10). For public housing residents to become figures that inspired empathy, they would have to be located within the immigrant biography of struggle and mobility that has long been construed as the cultural heritage of all Americans.

Heritage consumables abounded in the museum's earliest formulations. For instance, early consultants envisioned its main attraction as a series of apartments restored according to the living memories of actual Italian, Jewish, and black immigrant and migrant families who had lived in them. Moving through these apartments would prod visitors to recognize that all American groups had struggled for a toehold in their society. Another early contributor, an anthropologist, rallied behind a soul food restaurant for the museum to attract the food tourists who frequented the area's local Italian eateries. These heritage-inflected proposals seem to downplay what made the Addams Homes' African American residents so unlike their immigrant counterparts: the U.S. history of race-based residential segregation. Anthropologists especially have worried that because such heritage politics organize



FIGURE 3. Images from an earlier era of Chicago Public Housing projected onto mottled walls at an open house in the spring of 2009. (Photo by author; projected photo by Bob Natkin for the Chicago Housing Authority, 1949, courtesy of Paul Natkin.)

all differences under a ruling sign of ethnicity, they sidestep a critical interrogation of how institutionalized racism reproduces inequality (di Leonardo 1994; Trouillot 2003). A “benign multiculturalism” ensues that softens threatening differences by celebrating group compatibility and shared national community (Handler and Gable 1996).

The museum’s supporters hoped that the site would conjure a sense of shared national community, but they wanted that feeling to be anything but benign. An early “open house” captures how they aimed at this feeling by directing visitors to the unsettling familiarity of domestic things. Held on a spring evening in 2009, about 50 curious visitors showed up and moved through a series of rooms. Most were empty, save for a few domestic items donated by former residents. Visitors’ attention drifted to the walls. Images of buildings, everyday domestic and community activities, and resident portraits from the past 70 years flashed across their mottled surfaces (see Figure 3). Acoustic ballads and oral histories detailing everyday life in the projects played on a loop. These intimate glimpses into the homes and domestic routines of absent others transfixed many visitors. Several ran their fingers across the walls, trading speculations about their fissures, flakes,

and gaps: Neglect? Self-destruction? Gunshots? They shuffled by the smattering of domestic things with far less interest.

Organizers then herded everyone to the bar across the street and encouraged us to swap impressions with strangers. I attached myself to a 30-something white couple, and we chatted with one organizer. The couple praised the audiovisual installations, raving about how their textured images pulled them into the “layers of history” and made them feel closer to people too often silenced by history and society. But the domestic objects, they noted, paled in comparison. Singling out a midcentury formica-topped kitchen table as absurdly unremarkable, the man joked, “I’ve seen that table everywhere! *We* had a table like it.” His companion nodded. Even I owned up to sitting at a version of this mass-produced table every day. The organizer waved his hands excitedly at us and exclaimed, “That’s the point! That table belonged to a public housing family. But all of you have eaten at *that* table. This isn’t just about *that* family.”

If that table wasn’t just about “*that family*,” then who and what was it about? As he redirected our attention to it, the organizer suggested that we were bound to bygone residents by something other than compatible cultural origins or compassion for their sufferings. Asking us to attend to that humble table’s resonance within our own lives, several possibilities emerged. First and foremost, its unremarkable qualities might push back on arguments about residents’ dysfunctional behaviors. Nothing after all seemed more normal making than a family’s shared meals. Moreover, our contact with the table might extend this thing into all the times we had and would spread meals across its surfaces, to all the times we had and would gather around its edges. Feelings set off by the table’s familiarity demanded that we grasp our domestic movements not as comparable but as identical to those of bygone residents. Coupled with the right kind of proximity to the right kind of objects, the right kind of attention could dissolve our positions as curious yet removed spectators, and bind us to every stranger who had ever sat across such a table.

The table joined a host of banal domestic items (children’s toys, lace curtains) collected, discussed, and even later displayed by supporters. Critically, moving alongside these things would never level what supporters called public housing’s “hard stories.” They called for exhibits that openly tackled “systemic” issues like racism’s influence on housing policy, welfare benefits’ production of single-parent households, or the relationship between urban crime and disinvestment. Yet as supporters supplemented the early ethnic heritage and struggle focus by orienting visitors to domestic things and routines, public housing’s complex trajectory became a matter of narrating and reflecting on a particular group’s practices, beliefs,

and noxious experiences—what Wendy Brown has discussed as the “culturization” of injury and inequality (2008:116). I turn next to how supporters imagined the likeness established through sympathetic contact with public housing as the basis for prodding visitors to narrate their own part in the processes that had made its residents so unlike themselves.

CURATING CIVIC DIALOGUES

Ribot argued that “unaided” sympathetic contact could just as easily provoke tender feelings toward other people as it could spark the disgust that caused people to retreat into themselves and their own kind (1914:233). The museum’s supporters worked with the ever-present possibility that the museum would cause disgust. They sought to manage this possibility by channeling visitors’ movements into unnervingly difficult, inclusive, and personal conversations about visitors’ own contribution to public housing’s fate. They took to calling these conversations “civic dialogues.” The modifier *civic* is significant, as it relates participants’ antipathies to their most immediate environs and the people found there. As unspeakable antipathies set off by moving through the site provoked “civic dialogues,” outsiders’ own responsibility for public housing’s ruin became thinkable through narratives of family and neighborly intimacy.

Consider a conversation that early supporters trumpeted as a model “civic dialogue.” Regular tours of the site ran between 2006 and 2008, in which facilitators guided small groups through the empty building. At some point during the tours, the facilitator would pause to highlight the transformative conversations that the site, even in its unrealized state, had already inspired. Most often the facilitator offered the story of two septuagenarians who had taken a similar tour. I had witnessed the original tour in 2006 and heard it relayed again and again over the following years.

Here’s how the story and its retellings often went: Two friends, Sam and Anthony, grew up in Chicago’s Italian neighborhoods in the 1930s and 1940s. They tour the building. Anthony emerges bristling. He tells the group that he had often visited the Addams Homes at the tail end of the Great Depression. His uncle lived there. Each year, as his uncle renewed his lease, public aid workers grilled him. Why had he not found a job? This shaming drove him to secure employment and move his family out. (At this point, the facilitator would pause, and listeners would nod their heads.) Anthony complains that the resolve of people who struggled to meet their obligations to themselves, their families, and their country would be lost in this “monument to unwed mothers,” referring to the black women who made

permanent homes there. (Now, some listeners would nod while others would shake their heads.)

But Sam emerges otherwise. Moved by the site's evocative ruin, he gently rebukes Anthony. What about the ugly racial slurs they had received growing up in the neighborhood as the children of Italian immigrants? The even uglier ones they lobbed at its black newcomers? Or the barriers erected to keep those new neighbors from local street festivals? (Here, many lean in.) Sam reminds Anthony that their own immigrant families and neighbors had to band together to withstand prejudice and poverty, as had those mothers. He urges everyone present to listen to how the site urged "us" back toward "the basics" of "family and community." (Finally the group would erupt into smiles and sighs.) The facilitator would close by reminding everyone about the site's unique capacity to draw out bitter feelings and antipathies surrounding public housing and urban decline. As unspeakable and contentious as these feelings might be, reckoning with them was the only way to advance discussions about contemporary welfare and racism.

Sam and Anthony's repeatedly narrated encounter served several pedagogical ends. On the one hand, it emplaced all visitors within a communal past characterized by local family and neighborly networks. Sam's narrated rebuke asked everyone to assume responsibility for the loss of these networks by implicating family and neighborly dramas in the perpetuation of racial inequalities and neighborhood ruin. This rebuke also suggested that listeners could mimic the "banding together" of unwed mothers to recapture their past and ameliorate the inequalities of the present. In this respect, the "moral" of this civic dialogue coheres with neoliberal governance strategies that empower citizens to meet their own needs by cultivating their capacity to act within small-scale groups and networks (Cruikshank 1999; Hyatt 2001; Rose 1999).

On the other hand, civic dialogues like this one also suggest citizenly duties that exceed a local network's responsibility for supporting its members. To make Sam's rebuke circulate beyond his tour, the facilitators needed to align its narration with both future tour takers and the site's ruin. Only then could all participants catch the rebuke's emotions, antipathies, and visceral impressions. This rebuke would do more than establish the fellow feeling that closed the gap between early and later visitors. Narrated in place, civic dialogues would also teach participants how to grapple with the deep-seated antipathies provoked by this place. Such antipathies would become legitimate and indispensable components of public reckoning. Yet to make visitors susceptible to civic dialogues and their provocations, visitors would need to practice the pleasures of divulging and resolving difficult feelings in place

and before an audience of fellow citizens. I turn to how such pleasures became anchored in public housing's decay by exploring how several supporters aimed to facilitate sympathetic transfers of vulnerability itself.

CURATING RESILIENCE

Although none of the supporters disputed the value of restoring the feel of public housing's heyday, they differed on the degree of decay that visitors would need to enter civic dialogues. Some worried that in an institution focused on individuals' stories and domestic practices, it would be all too easy for visitors to attribute decay to the group during whose tenure that decay peaked—namely, impoverished African Americans. Despite these disputes, many supporters insisted that re-creating some decay would throw into sharper relief the care that these residents had lavished on their homes, their neighborhoods, and one another. Some even suggested that intimate experiences of decay would help visitors recognize this group's vulnerability as exemplary, even worthy of imitation. This came up in my conversations with Paul, a middle-age housing advocate.

In the summer of 1996, Paul's work with indigent men led him into public housing, where he facilitated interviews between public housing residents and media crews in town to cover the Democratic National Convention.¹⁴ A decade later, when I asked about what a public housing museum could do, he replied by walking me through his ideal exhibit:

Something like going into this lady's apartment in the high-rises [in 1996]. Total mess, graffiti all over. That smell everywhere. Then you open her door and walk into an apartment that is bare, but not un-nice. She had pictures of Martin Luther King and John Kennedy on the wall, and we didn't even ask her to put them there!

Paul paused to show me around this conjured apartment, pointing out its tidiness and its photographs of Civil Rights-era icons: "Look! They are trying their best, within their limits, to make it nice. They couldn't be responsible for what was outside the door. But they certainly were for what was inside." Like Sam's rebuke, Paul imagined sympathetic contact with the museum as a means to liken the behaviors of bygone residents' to those that visitors might consider laudable.

More than that, though, Paul imagined that moving through the overwhelming contrast of stench, disrepair, and hominess would make the vulnerability of bygone residents contagious. This became clear when he argued that his exhibit would not "just tell stories":

That smell is really important. You could have a line like “and the halls were filled with the smell of urine.” But not everyone has smelled that. Hearing or reading that wouldn’t generate emotions, like, “God, that’s offensive. God, that smells bad. God, that people have to live that way.” Or have them lug groceries up six flights, because the elevator’s broken, again. How does that feel, being on edge, constantly?

A self-described “New Dealer,” Paul suggested that putting visitors “on edge” might make them amenable to conversations that could garner support for increased federal involvement in affordable housing. However, he never claimed this as a necessary outcome.

For Paul, the capacity of impoverished African Americans to weather repeated rounds of state-mediated neglect could not be separated from their exposure to its abject fallout. Their constant physical vulnerability had made them personally resilient, even as the gains of the Civil Rights movement began to stall. Helping visitors sympathetically inhabit and mimic bygone residents’ vulnerability, even just momentarily, could cultivate important dispositions within visitors. It could shake visitors from a spectator’s comfortable distance, allowing them to become disgusted, indignant, or even just moved. For visitors, encountering decay could unlock the pleasures not just of apprehending otherwise but, more strongly, of becoming otherwise.

Paul was by no means the only supporter to suggest that the museum’s most unusual feature would be its ability to deflate the empathic stances of visitors. For them, becoming attentive to a resilience born of vulnerability while also becoming more vulnerable oneself would be the museum’s key pedagogical outcome. When I pressed those who had taken to calling the site “The Museum of Resilience” about obligations that might emerge from this sympathetic pedagogy, I was struck by the similarity of their responses: It would be great if visitors initiated further conversations with neighbors and politicians about contemporary poverty, even better if these conversations compelled visitors to undertake actions in their own city, like donating time or money on behalf of poor people. It would be wonderful if the modest conversations and actions provoked by moving through the site snowballed into movements that resonated beyond their city. Visitors might then learn to meet the failure of government to protect citizens and their homes with the same dogged resilience executed by “poor and working-class families of every ethnicity” struggling to “realize the promise of America.”

Yet many supporters who I spoke with insisted that the museum's only necessary outcome was cultivating a physical and emotional connection to bygone public housing residents. Daniel, the writer quoted earlier, drove this point home when he insisted: "Maybe it's just that the next time you read about public housing, you know more about it. Whether or not you donate money or become involved, you become more human. You laugh, cry, or think a little more. That's enough." For Daniel, sympathetic contact was first and foremost an opportunity to get in touch with one's own humanness, as well as to become more self-conscious about an issue as weighty as the abandonment of one's fellow citizens. Yet these feelings do not obligate him to take any action on behalf of these fellows. He, and any anyone else compelled to emote more the next time he or she hears or reads about public housing, is no more beholden to the bygone residents who have renewed visitors' feelings of human vulnerability than a postwelfare state is beholden to protect any citizen.

Writing in the context of federal welfare reform in the 1990s, Lauren Berlant argues that the national public sphere had been replaced by a conservative conception of citizenship focused on personal feelings and intimacies (1997). By implying that the poverty that beset many Americans was exceptional, this conservative conception of citizenship suppressed inequality and vulnerability. Although related to this earlier moment, the affective and political structures of the museum are also novel. As it was conceived at the time of my fieldwork, the museum would render inequality and vulnerability more explicit, consumable, and communicable, even as the citizens who embody them are being displaced from central urban areas. Rather than being erased, vulnerability and inequality would become domesticated to a national belonging defined by the capacity to feel something, *anything*. Museumgoers would transform harm into a citizenly virtue by encountering and inhabiting the vulnerability experienced by others.

The pursuit of a communicable and pleasurable vulnerability raises difficult questions about the ethical obligations and political mobilizations possible within a sympathetic public. In many ways, the "culture of resilience" valorized by the museum supporters is an inverse image of the "culture of poverty": It seeks to ameliorate poverty by understanding and reshaping a particular set of behaviors and attitudes. The civic dialogues that the museum supporters hoped to incite would not call for a reinstatement of the Fordist welfare state's unraveling commitments to its citizens' basic well-being. They would not push back on neoliberal welfare regimes that, in the face of shrinking social protections, celebrate citizens' capacity to engage in mutual self-help. They would not demand swift structural interventions

on behalf of poor people, or redress for the harms they have borne. In short, the sympathetic public would not pose a serious challenge to a national belonging long predicated on differentiated citizenship, racism, and neglect.

Many museum supporters in fact welcomed these outcomes. But several also thought that staging unsettling conversations and the opportunity to feel vulnerable and emote would be “enough,” at least for the time being. For those citizens who would be socialized into such a sympathetic public, into noticing, catching, and sharing the pleasures of humanness and vulnerability, there is really just one necessary outcome. And that is reliable contact with a steady supply of wrecked places.

CONCLUSION

I have examined here how the public anticipated by the NPHM supporters would advance social and ethical cohesion through repeated and emplaced contact within the U.S. welfare state’s wreckage. I suggest that the museum’s supporters have aspired to a public whose members could reject a spectator’s compassionate or empathic remove from neglected bodies and places, in favor of the discomfiting pleasures of becoming vulnerable themselves. It is as tempting to speculate about the outcomes of partially realized projects as it is to let their stated intentions guide assessments of their impending successes or failures. I might speculate that in this case, the supporters’ efforts to mobilize citizens by making them vulnerable to fellow citizens’ pain and resilience will have no real transformative effects, as they take no direct aim at the structures of long-standing social and economic inequality that allow mass harm to continue apace. Or I could look to the contradictions and tensions bound up in the public anticipated by the museum’s supporters and see their ambitions to illuminate the “promise of America” as moribund as Chicago’s wrecked public housing.

Yet there is something else to be asked, especially if we want to better understand the discursive and material grounds that guide the creative, world-making dimensions of all publics in general, and the utopian one aspired to by the museum supporters in particular. One way that we might do this is by spending more time with the dark and difficult pleasures of consuming wreckage. Anthropologists have identified how mass-mediated sentiments like shame, guilt, and horror are mobilized to manage mass harm and its legacies in liberal polities and their publics. As these sentiments become public spectacles, significant political effects emerge. For instance, these effects have bound recognition and its resources to toothless rituals of redress, to impossible demands that harmed subjects embody their harm

convincingly, or to the reassurances that come with engaging suffering at a compassionate remove (Allen 2009; Povinelli 2002; Trouillot 2000). For good reasons, this work has critiqued the limits of publics that cohere around these spectacles, as well as the empathic relations they reinforce. Yet why should we also hesitate to interrogate the pleasures of a public that allows its members to disturb the calcified muck of subjective expectations? Does this more sympathetic mode of knowing and becoming hit too close to home for anthropologists?

Regardless, the “we” cohering both locally and nationally around public housing’s wreckage does not want to keep its vulnerability in check or project the immediacy of harm across other bodies, geographies, or times. Moreover, as I suggested above, visceral forms of publicity surrounding U.S. poverty are not exactly new. Michel Foucault made efforts to write the complex histories of “self relations” that summoned the individual to become the subject of his or her own ethical actions (1985). Keeping this effort in mind, how can we ethnographically pry open liberal political subjectivities and their publics to examine the pleasurable vulnerabilities and emplacements that seem now to animate mandates to care for—or simply be moved by—the poor?

ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of a “sympathetic public” cohering around the U.S. welfare state’s wreckage that is tuned to the material dimensions of emplacement. It does this through an exploration of efforts to bring a national public housing museum to Chicago. Museum supporters mobilized the properties of ruined public housing to summon affinities and identifications with the U.S. poor and to reconfigure public reckoning about poverty in the United States. The public examined here is an anticipated one. Conceptually, I depart from text-based understandings of publics and publicity. I follow how museum supporters sought to curate encounters with ruined housing in ways that would socialize beholders into the attentiveness necessary to reflect and act properly on poverty. The “sympathetic” dimensions of this anticipated public operate on two levels. First, future visitors’ identifications with the struggles of bygone residents would combat “unsympathetic” representations of U.S. poor. Second, visceral contact with a place once inhabited by bygone residents would render contagious the perspectives, values, and practices they used to navigate social inequality and state-mediated neglect. The anticipated public then also anticipates the kind of citizenry capable of managing social protection at a “postwelfare” moment. [built environment, publics, sympathy, race and ethnicity, postwelfare, United States]

NOTES

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1. All personal names are pseudonyms.
2. I followed the museum's early development most closely between 2004 and 2006, and in 2006, I volunteered as the museum initiative's secretary.
3. I do not see these reforms as the "end" of U.S. welfare. However, I use the term *postwelfare* here to flag how many Americans understood welfare to have ended with landmark legislation in 1996.
4. For a more comprehensive discussion of these reforms from an anthropological perspective, see Sandra Morgen and Jeff Maskovsky (2003).
5. Questions of labor have long grounded welfare studies and for good reason. Although substantial differences existed among states that have subscribed to welfare capitalism in the 20th century, all of them have grappled with the problem of how to guarantee well-being to citizens who participate in formal employment as well as to those who do not (see Esping-Anderson 1990). Historically, the U.S. model of welfare stigmatized those who were not employed through regular, salaried work. Scholars of U.S. welfare have thus tended to focus on issues surrounding salaried employment, especially among impoverished, black women (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Mink 1998; Schram 2000). Labor has continued to be a significant category of analysis within the emerging scholarship on post-Fordist affect (Berlant 2007; Muehlebach 2011). I want to widen such lenses to appreciate the affective aftermath of the U.S. Fordist welfare state's peculiar material moorings—housing infrastructures, and the spectacle of mass disaster (on the moral economy of disaster and relief within the U.S. context, see Dauber 2009).
6. For an account of these expansions, see Saul Levitan (1969).
7. For two accounts that captured especially widespread attention, see Alex Kotlowitz (1991) and Bernard Rose (1992).
8. For an overview of these debates, especially as they relate to knowledge production within the social sciences, see Reed (1999) and O'Connor (2001).
9. See Nancy Munn (1986) for a treatment of how qualities circulate among and transform bodies and other entities within conventionalized systems of value.
10. See also Danilyn Rutherford (2009) on how David Hume understands the role of government in orchestrating intimacy among distant citizens.
11. On Holocaust and human tragedy museums, see Wendy Brown (2008) and Paul Williams (2008). On the commodification of place within neoliberal urban economies, see Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002).
12. For two especially prominent and early examples of this genre see Jacob Riis (1971) and James Agee and Walker Evans (1988).
13. Theorists of publics have not ignored embodiment. For instance, Michael Warner notes that although publics appear open to indefinite strangers, various criteria always select their participants. These criteria inevitably have positive content. This inevitability makes the disembodied, abstract subject implied by modern publicity a shaky pretense (Warner 1992). Warner observes that these selection criteria may include shared social spaces and habitus. Yet because his discussion of mainstream publics focuses on criteria like linguistic style, reading practices, and idiolect, issues of embodiment, territorial location, and creativity become associated with the limited circulations of "counterpublics" (Warner 2002). This distinction illuminates projects that push against dominant or mainstream cultural horizons, but it can obscure the less patently discursive grounds of knowing and reflexivity that guide the "world-making" dimensions of any public. Even Jürgen Habermas, who

has been taken to task for his hyperrational conception of the public sphere, entertained how its disembodiments and abstractions hinged on attention and reflexivity trained as bourgeois men moved through the emerging spatial dimensions of their homes and towns (1989:45).

14. Keeping with the Clinton administration's promise to overhaul welfare, the convention paraded Chicago's public housing reform before national and international audiences.

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