

Hidden Homelessness: Exploring Silences

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1.

Incredibly, three weeks into a PhD researching women's experiences of homelessness, I was blindsided by the realisation that my own childhood housing precarity was, in fact, a type of homelessness. I was reading about hidden homelessness: how some people's experiences of being unhoused go uncaptured by the official statistics. Often, these people are staying with friends or family, sofa-surfing, living in squats or vehicles, occupying buildings which aren't fit for human habitation.¹ They are handling their housing situations informally, and they don't figure in the policy and provision data because they either don't approach formal services or their Local Housing Authority or because - once they do seek out this sort of support - they are deemed ineligible. I knew already that a lot of the data which charity and academic researchers collect replicates this partial picture because it relies on these same official statistics and on night counts, which quantify homelessness based on the hypervisible tip of the iceberg: people sleeping rough, bedded down in plain sight in urban spaces. These approaches all too often elide women's and children's homelessness because so many women rely on informal support networks to put a roof over their heads and, even when they do sleep on the streets, are forced to do so out of sight for their safety.² I knew all of this, and had proposed to interview women with lived experience in the knowledge that personal testimonies can challenge perspectives - what's visible and what vantage points are approached. However, by suddenly confronting distressing elements of my childhood that I had compartmentalised and sought to forget, I found myself on an uncomfortable faultline between personal memory and these issues of perception. It opened

¹ Kesia Reeve, 'The Hidden Truth About Homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England', (Crisis, 2011); The Homelessness Monitor: England (Crisis, 2018); The Homelessness Monitor: England (Crisis, 2022). See also: Volker Busch-Geertsema, 'Defining and Measuring Homelessness' in Bill Edget and Joe Doherty, *Homelessness Research in Europe* (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2010).

² Joanne Bretherton, 'Women's Experiences of Homelessness: a Longitudinal Study', *Social Policy and Society* Vol. 19, Issue 2 (2020); Nicholas Pleace, 'Exclusion by definition: the under-representation of women in European homelessness statistics' in Paula Maycock and Joanne Bretherton (eds.), *Women's Homelessness in Europe* (Palgrave, 2016), pp. 105-26.

up complicated insights into silence, trauma, disclosure and the many ways in which homelessness gets hidden.

The memories which I found myself grappling with were that, when I was ten, my parents and I sofa-surfed with two different friends of my mum's. One of them set her son up on a fold-out bed in her kitchen so that the three of us could sleep in his bedroom. And then, after these options dried up, we lived in the session house of a church. It was tiny and we weren't meant to be there; we would have to listen at the front door for passers-by and couldn't leave if there was anyone in the graveyard. There was no oven, and we lived off what my mum could make in a microwave. I could wash my hair and shower weekly at the local leisure centre because my school went swimming there every Friday. I felt intensely embarrassed and exposed, and never explained any of this in school, not even to my closest friends.

I was certainly somewhat silenced by shame and by an amorphous fear that something terrifying could happen if anyone discovered we were living there. But, even as I knew it was a harmful situation, for years I couldn't countenance this being as bad as homelessness. I marshalled big and small details which delegitimised the reality that we couldn't find anywhere affordable to rent: my parents could still pay for the leisure centre trips; my Dad would pick me up in the car every Friday and usually brought me a chocolate éclair as a 'shivery bite'; and, crucially, my parents owned the derelict church and its session house, bought with money my Mum had inherited. In this way, I was clinging onto anything that looked like agency. It was easier for me to pretend that everything happening to us wasn't *really* so bad if it was all some sort of idiosyncratic set of choices my parents had made. Before this, we had spent periods of time living in a house-truck they had converted, which really *had* been a choice on their part, and I fervently wanted this to be more of the same.

Beyond these personal details, I was drawing on family history but also on the pervasive popular imagination which elides homelessness with literal rooflessness and invalidates

experiences beyond this.³ My father has experienced what I thought of as true poverty and homelessness. He had slept rough and lived in a night shelter and temporary accommodation. I didn't know many details about this as a child, but I had a strong sense, even in the midst of all the upheaval, that mine was a comparatively privileged and lucky childhood. I thought then that there was a sort of wedge of insecure housing: I was at the thicker, safer end, whereas people like my Dad had been or were at the thin end. I still think now of a spectrum of housing need and urgency, which can encompass both the hypervisible and the 'hidden', but I have tried to dispense with the delegitimising internalised definitions which further conceal certain experiences. Politically, these hierarchies can serve to undermine solidarity whereas highlighting the spectrum of homelessness experiences shows the connection between absolute rooflessness and 'hidden' but deeply unsuitable accommodation: the structural insufficiency of the welfare state and, specifically, housing provision in Britain.

2.

As a child in the early 1970s, my Dad, his little brother and their parents slept rough on the streets of London and in metal bunk beds at the Soho Centrepont shelter. My Dad and his brother were the only children there. They were 12 and seven. The family moved on into temporary accommodation, crammed in with other families, and eventually into a succession of council flats and, later, squats. By the time I was born, my Grandfather had long since passed away and Nana was living in an old schoolhouse, back in Ireland, which she owned through squatters' rights.

My grandparents were young Irish immigrants who met in a London boarding house, rapidly got married, and had my Dad in 1959. He was born in a heavy snowfall in North London, where my Grandad worked as a binman and my Nana cleaned houses, and then they lived in what I can only picture as a succession of cramped inner-city slums. But neither this hardship nor

³ Paula Mayoock, Sarah Sheridan and Sarah Parker, "It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing..." The dynamics of women's unresolved homelessness', *Housing Studies* 30 / 6 (2015), pp. 877-900; Bretherton, 'Homelessness and Gender Reconsidered', *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 / 1, pp.1-22.

the later homelessness were talked about: I never got to meet my Grandad, and Nana talked mainly about her work (with pride) and maintained a silence around homelessness.

By the time my Dad's younger brother was born, Dad was five and the family had moved to Glasgow; they were living in an over-crowded tenement block in the inner city without running water and the baby kept getting dangerously ill. His memories of Glasgow are more clear than those of London. The thing that helps me get a sense of the continuity of that early part of my Dad's life, from which there are no pictures, is the documentary photographer Nick Hedges' work for Shelter.⁴ He travelled around Scotland and England photographing cities' slums and their inhabitants - including in Islington and the Gorbals - and together they present a picture of one common experience of hardship and hopelessness across the UK. The series 'Slum Housing and Poverty' labels what my Nana resisted labelling. 'Children playing in a patch of Gorbals wasteland (1970)' could be an image of my father and his friends. But, where the slum child found magic even among the detritus and sewage of Townhead or the discarded fruit of the Barras Market (or, at least, where the adult, my father, presents in the telling a memory of finding magic), the photographer captures a vision of, quite simply, deprivation. Maybe some of my resistance to telling these stories comes not from my Nana's reticence to speak of any of it, but from my Dad's resistance to presenting it as a wholly miserable time. For a long while, he told me these stories of exploration and enjoyment, skirting around the violence, illness and general danger which was an inescapable part of his childhood.

When the Glasgow slums were cleared in the 1960s, men like my Grandad got work building the new high-rises. They also lived in them. I don't know how or why the family returned to London, but I know that, once they were there, their landlord evicted them and the other families because he wanted to sell the house. And they were left on the streets. My Dad has told me fragments of his story; it's painful for him to talk about and, consequently, rather painful for me to pry into. I try to let him tell me what he is able when he wants.

⁴ Nick Hedges, 'Slum Housing and Poverty' series: see online (<http://www.nickhedgesphotography.co.uk/photo-gallery/slum-housing-and-poverty>) and in *Home* (Bluecoat Press, 2021).

I don't have all the facts about what Nana or my Dad lived through. Much of the information about her experience is gleaned second-hand from conversations with my parents and fleshed out by my imagination of the historical picture. It's all in fragments. Trying to reconstruct this and learn more about Nana feels like an expression of my love for her, but I have to wonder if it isn't a little disloyal to dig into these experiences she kept quiet - and especially to write about them. Fundamentally, I think she was quietened by more than pain, and the external forces which weighed on her - chiefly, probably, shame - need to be pushed back against. I wish I had tried to gently introduce more conversations about this, see if I could ever get to a point where she might open up. Maybe I could have asked to interview her. Maybe she would never have agreed. There are gaps and silences which she wanted to keep. There are missing explanations, secrets she always kept.

3.

Where did my silence - about this episode in my own life story but also, crucially, about family history - come from?

Sometimes, silence is self-protection, self-preservation.

But what about when silence also plays into maintaining the narrow and stigmatising worldview and knowledge produced by the powerful?

It's messy. Trying to disentangle it opens up more faultlines, and my thinking becomes more fragmentary.

Maintaining silence can be an act of complicity in oppression, a type of collusion. But surely it can also be a type of care and a protection we afford ourselves and others.

4.

My own elisions - about my childhood, about my family history - may have been partly generated by feeling vulnerable and not wanting to have to disclose anything that would bring home this vulnerability. But they were also part of a broader project of self-protection and adolescent self-making I began to engage in as I developed ambitions to become a writer and break into journalism and academia, spheres where I felt like a complete outsider and where I needed a protective carapace. Both, but especially journalism, remain arenas where people from lower-income backgrounds are woefully under-represented.⁵ I was scared of discrimination and objectification, and I felt sick at the idea that disclosure could slip into instrumentalising my working-class family's stories.

In these environments, I have found a particular sort of invisibilising force at work, hiding homelessness and messy, precarious housing experiences. All too often, people in academia and journalism assume that those with lived experience of poverty and precarity, let alone homelessness, are *other*; outside the environment in which we're speaking; people we are talking about. The issue is a deep problem of prejudice, of what they imagine and what they look for; it is an urgent inequality in and of itself, but it is also a practical problem for the production and dissemination of knowledge coming from journalistic and academic research both.

An aside, borrowed from Arundhati Roy: 'We know of course that there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard'⁶

And another aside, by way of personal anecdote: I'm getting better at drawing attention to the invisibilising imaginations these days, and to calling them out. I am doing my PhD at Oxford and a fellow PhD student, who was researching the historic learning experiences of women educated here, once told me she was sorry it must be so much harder in practical terms for me to reach women with historic experiences of homelessness - and was askance to hear that

⁵ Daniel Laurison and Sam Friedman, *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (Policy Press, 2020)

⁶ Arundhati Roy, 'Peace & The New Corporate Liberation Theology', City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture (2004)

no, people with lived experience can be anywhere and everywhere, and might even be among her own research participants. This was a particularly unpleasant example of someone's failure to imagine that, in these spaces, they might encounter anyone different. But I did not provide my own experiences as evidence for her. Sometimes self-preservation and your own wellbeing run contrary to disclosing very personal stories.

You have every right not to tell a story.

Sometimes silence can be a mechanism by which you exert agency.

But how do you know if the desire for silence makes you feel safer, or if you have internalised the idea that your story lacks value and significance? Where do you draw the line, or can it be both?

5.

Ultimately, when it comes to homelessness, any dichotomy between visible / hidden and heard / silenced is somewhat paradoxical. People experiencing homelessness, especially in its most visible form on the city streets, get looked at without being truly seen all the time. The philosopher Gottfried Schweiger has astutely observed that purported invisibility is partly about being overlooked, not engaged with, marginalised from the dominant policy, provision and even academic discourses.⁷ Likewise, they get heard without truly being listened to; people with lived experience have been raising their voices over and over again to articulate criticisms and raise awareness and call for changes. Simple yet urgent calls for more truly affordable housing. Insightful and clear articulations of the need for trauma-informed, wrap-around care have not translated into policy priorities. Even the words we can draw on are loaded; cultural concepts and language follow the meanings, interests and experiences of the socially-dominant and powerful groups. Schweiger and other philosophers, most prominently Miranda Fricker, have talked about this as *epistemic injustice*: a type of inequality and harm done to people and social groups specifically against their ability to generate knowledge about the world or even about themselves

⁷ Gottfried Schweiger, 'Absolute Poverty in European Welfare States' in Valentin Beck et al. (eds.), *Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism* (Springer, 2020)

and to be taken seriously.⁸ This is a powerful way to think about why and how the expertise of people with lived experience is not taken on board even when they are advocating for the structural changes they know are necessary. Fricker writes:

‘At the extreme, there can be cases where even the subject herself is radically unable to make sense of her own experience; or, by contrast, there can be cases at the other extreme in which the subject herself is entirely clear what is happening to her, and can perhaps expect to communicate her experience with ease to other members of her community or social group, but (owing to the collective hermeneutical gap pertaining to the wider community as a whole) still cannot expect to communicate it successfully to significant social agencies - notably, relevant institutional bodies - in order to describe or protest the experience.’⁹

To circle back to shame and cultural stigma, which dovetails this epistemic injustice: the poet and critic Denise Riley identifies in writing the potential for ‘concealment tangled with unconcealment’.¹⁰ This feels apt. In her essay ‘Lyric Shame’, she suggests: ‘...if your shame is such that you can’t manage to speak, you might be able to *write* instead. Literary writing may function, for some, exactly as a means of *not* speaking - of avoiding face-to-face speech altogether.’

My own writing spun out into this personal self-exploration, which has become a fragmentary commentary on homelessness, silences and the meanings of being hidden. The personal is centred. I was always motivated by the personal connection to Nana and to my Dad, but this is the first time I have written about our stories. When I applied to my PhD programme, I felt that doing so would mean instrumentalising their life-stories in the hope of getting my project approved and funded. Not all writing offers equal value to raise your metaphorical voice. You have to do it on your own terms. Now I am doing it to try and open up a route through some of the layers of silencing and overlooking and invisibilizing, starting with shared lived experience.

⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁹ Miranda Fricker, ‘Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom?’ *Synthesis* Vol, 190, No. 7 (2013), pp. 1319

¹⁰ Denise Riley, ‘Lyric Shame’, *Shame and Modern Writing* (Routledge, 2018)

