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The Family Toxic:
Triaging Obligation in Post-Welfare Chicago

Given the chance, what resident of Chicago's troubled public housing projects *wouldn't* leap at the possibility of landing an apartment in a gleaming new condominium tower? Especially if rent on that apartment was heavily subsidized and if it stood in a building that featured amenities unheard of in the city's housing projects? That, anyway, is what managers and developers of Westhaven Park Tower assumed as they prepared for the mixed-income building's first cohort of impoverished tenants in 2006. So as managers ran personal tours of the building for prospective tenants from the Governor Henry Horner public housing complex that spring, they made sure to linger on its most impressive features, the ones that contrasted with the disrepair and neglect that beset Horner in the 1980s and 1990s.

Those tours always started outside, in front of the building's plateglass doors. "Unless you're buzzed in, *nobody* is getting in without this," the manager would usually begin, waving a gray plastic key fob across a metal plate. The locks would click open and the small group—a prospective tenant, her lawyer, her case manager, and I, a graduate student of anthropology—would all enter the spotless lobby. The manager would point us to a

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desk where a security officer would soon sit. His job would be to screen and sign in all visitors. He would also, she insisted, deter troublemakers from entering the building. Finally, we would board the elevators, walk down hallways covered in fresh carpet, and enter the unit slated for the prospective tenant.

Developers had set aside a third of the building's 113 units for "single" people transitioning out of Horner, primarily African American women in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. These units did not boast the finishes reserved for the building's market-rate units. Yet they were neat and airy just the same. A compact kitchen with a built-in dining bar overlooked a modest living room, which in turn opened onto a full bathroom, a bedroom, and a private outdoor space. The manager would invite us to turn the dials of new stoves and thermostats, peer into new cabinets, refrigerators, and ovens, and slide open the door to a private balcony. Just as the tour wound down, she would pull back the doors of a small utility closet. Still empty that spring, each contained hookups for a high-efficiency washer and dryer set. The developers, she would tell a prospective tenant, had decided to donate each to every low-income tenant in the building. The prospective tenant would usually smile with this news. Sometimes she would even cry. Chicago's housing projects had once boasted communal laundry rooms. Yet by the 1980s, neglect, disrepair, and vandalism had laid waste to those at Horner. If they couldn't bear cumbersome and expensive trips to the seedy local Laundromat, residents did their washing at home, in the bathtub.

Surely life at Westhaven Park Tower would be a welcome change for the single seniors and older adults who were leaving Horner behind. So imagine the frustration of developers and managers as a substantial number of prospective tenants passed on the offer. But friends who were in the midst of leaving Horner were not at all surprised when word got around. What senior in her right mind, they insisted, would accept an apartment to which she could not bring a disabled daughter, a homeless nephew, or a grandchild whose parents might be "away"—sick, incarcerated, or otherwise indisposed?



Developers, managers, prospective tenants, and their advocates allowed me to tag along on these Westhaven Park Tower tours as part of an ethnographic and historical study I conducted primarily between 2003 and 2010 on Chicago's Near West Side. That study sought to understand how a singularly ambitious urban planning effort to demolish and rebuild troubled public housing projects also aimed to build the kinds of citizens who might prove



Figure 1. Horner under phased demolition and redevelopment, 2005. Replacement housing in the foreground, original Horner building in the background. Photograph by the author

capable of caring for themselves and one another, far better than any failed welfare bureaucracy had. I examined these problems by following the transformation of a modernist-era public housing project that once stood on Chicago's Near West Side—Horner—into a much smaller, mixed-income, neighborhood-based development now known as Westhaven (see figure 1).¹

Horner opened between the late 1950s and the late 1960s. At the height of its occupancy in the late 1970s, at least eighty-four hundred residents called it home, most of them African Americans with roots in the South. In a city whose largest housing projects sheltered over twenty thousand people, Horner weighed in as a medium-size development. Like other housing projects opening in Chicago during those years, Horner's residents included many pulled to the city during the Great Migration. With its four- and five-bedroom apartments, Horner was a boon especially for larger households that had trouble locating housing within the city's racially restricted housing market. Horner's earliest residents had come chasing economic, social, and political opportunities unavailable to them in the Jim Crow, segregated South. Those who remained, as well as their children and

grandchildren, ended up living with the racial segregation, economic inequality, and physical abandonment that Chicago's housing projects shored up in urban space.

By the 1980s, ballooning maintenance costs, falling rent receipts tied to an increasingly impoverished tenant base, and general disinvestment resulted in severe physical decline throughout Chicago's public housing. Horner was no exception. By 1991, nearly half its units stood vacant, unfit for human habitation. What was exceptional, however, about Horner was the class action lawsuit that a group of tenants brought against the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) that same year. They alleged that these agencies in effect had demolished Horner by allowing the complex to fall into severe decline and that this demolition violated the terms of the 1937 US Housing Act. Parties settled in 1995. A consent decree has governed Horner's phased demolition and redevelopment ever since. Today just one original Horner building remains, cast adrift in the parking lots that surround the United Center, a massive sports and entertainment complex that opened in 1994.

Horner's experimental redevelopment paved the way for something much larger: the demolition of Chicago's severely distressed public housing projects and their redevelopment into mixed-income "new communities." To date, this fifteen-year experiment has demolished some twenty thousand public housing units and necessitated the relocation of at least twenty-five thousand households, many headed by impoverished African American women. Proponents of the Plan for Transformation, as this effort was known throughout my research, expected that public housing residents who transitioned into developments like Westhaven would take on normative employment practices once they had regular contact with more affluent neighbors who went to work daily. In turn, such employment would wean public housing tenants off welfare dependency. These reforms, however, did not just target public housing residents. Adherents to the broader urban planning philosophies that inspired them hoped that everyday movements within less dense, smaller-scaled developments would foster the interpersonal bonds that an economically and socially diverse set of neighbors would leverage to bolster neighborhood life, safety, and resources themselves.² In theory at least, by living in "new communities" like Westhaven, impoverished people *and* their better-off neighbors would learn to rely less on state and municipal institutions and instead turn toward each other in ways that reinforced mutual aid and security. In theory at least, employment and neighborliness would become rejoinders to the high-profile failures of Chicago's public

housing and, more broadly, Fordist-Keynesian welfare policies. When Democratic Party faithful gathered at the United Center in 1996 to nominate Bill Clinton for a second term, and celebrate his first term's crowning domestic achievement—the legislative overhaul of welfare—they had quite the arresting backdrop. Horner's demolition and redevelopment was in full swing, just across the street.

The aspirations that guided public housing reform will come as no surprise to those familiar with welfare state retrenchment in North America and Western Europe during the final decades of the twentieth century. These policies involved measures demanding that individual citizens practice personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, even as the programs that instituted them championed highly localized forms of intimacy and interdependency (Rose 1999; Cruikshank 1999; Fairbanks 2009; Wacquant 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Muehlebach 2012). These seemingly contradictory ends, as sociologist Nikolas Rose (1999: 171–72) points out, were buoyed by the revival of a civic republicanism that valorized a citizenship ethos characterized by active commitments to community—a nebulous space of emotional relationships in which microcultures of values and meanings are the bedrock for individual identities and obligations. Chicago's public housing reforms unfolded during the very years that politicians on the left and right passed legislation that overhauled federal welfare programs. In particular, legislation targeted Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a program that provided cash benefits to indigent mothers. Residents leaving Horner in the decade following the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (more colloquially known as “welfare reform”) grappled with restricted cash benefits, demands that they move toward regular employment, and physical displacement at the same time that “grassroots” organizations sought to draw them in to voluntarism, civic engagement, and neighborly relations. Yet while public housing and, more broadly, welfare reforms promoted intimate interdependencies, obligations long anchored by households and the networks that orbited them grew increasingly more fraught.³ My interlocutors seemed equal parts anxious over, ambivalent about, and attached to their obligations toward friends and kin.

I began being asked about low-income leaseholders and their households while writing up my research. What about “the families” reviewers would ask, who lives with them? How do they survive? Where do their resources come from? Are those resources licit? As one reviewer put it, ethnographers of public housing must take pains to “penetrate the domestic sphere.” This was well-intentioned advice, yet it took me off guard for two

reasons. First, it mirrored the gendered logics that have long managed these households. Just as a researcher might “penetrate” households headed by impoverished women, so too might welfare bureaucracies probe households that seemed to lack a legitimate male breadwinner. Second, this advice suggested that everything a scholar needed to know about impoverished households lay *behind* the worn apartment doors of a housing project. Yet what struck me was the extent to which anxieties concerning obligations among members of a particular household were rarely confined within domestic space. The work of interpersonal care was rarely a “private” matter in a redevelopment where households had long been objects of scrutiny and study—by welfare bureaucrats, by police, by poverty scholars, and even by neighbors.

This essay takes up the anxieties that gathered in and around households in Westhaven between 2003 and 2009. Over the years I followed Horner’s transformation, these concerns became more palpable as transitioning Horner residents navigated a competing set of demands. On the one hand, leaseholders continued to feel beholden to expectations that they redistribute all resources to which they had access among kin and friends. On the other hand, at a moment in which external providers began to monitor dwindling resources more carefully, these expectations became increasingly difficult to meet. After sketching the shape of households leaving Horner for Westhaven, I examine the apprehensions growing within and around them. I pay close attention to how residents managed obligations toward kith and kin alongside avid speculation about those obligations. Here I draw inspiration from a perhaps unlikely source: anthropological studies of witchcraft. Working with ethnographic material, I argue that what was at play in the manifestation and subsequent management of such anxieties over scarce resources was not impoverished tenants’ “dysfunction,” “disorganization,” or “cooperation” but something far less straightforward and far more explosive: the constant triaging of intimate obligations in relation to the risks they could pose at any moment. To put this a bit differently: even though public housing in Chicago was woefully inadequate by the early 1990s, it *did* provide the good of basic shelter for those who had absolutely no other options. In this respect, the rollback of housing and other welfare benefits *did* compel transitioning Horner residents to lean on themselves and proximate others, like friends and kin, to guarantee basic care. Yet in a context of want and surveillance, expressions of such care were anything but sanguine. Even as such expressions reasserted local norms concerning the care of others, they could and did grow incredibly destructive. That ever-present possibility drew

many households into the fraught and difficult task of constantly assessing and excising their riskier members.

“All Our Kin,” All Our Kith, and Then Some

Many of the transitioning Horner residents whom I got to know in Westhaven placed enormous stock in interpersonal obligations, which they construed quite broadly as “family.” They explained to me that the capaciousness of such a category reached back to the race- and class-based practices of discrimination that had circumscribed their social worlds. Horner was built in an area undergoing intense “racial turnover” in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Planners and politicians sited the complex to rein that turnover in. Like many of the housing projects built in Chicago after World War II, working- and even middle-class blacks called Horner home when it first opened. Yet as housing opportunities opened up in other parts of the city, those with any means left, leaving behind a much poorer and younger tenant base.⁴ As many transitioning Horner residents noted, the somewhat better-off African American neighbors who settled just south and east of the complex in privately owned homes tended to look down on them. They all filed into local schools, churches, and recreation centers together. Yet as “project people,” Horner residents had a difficult time establishing enduring relationships across real and perceived economic divides. They turned their energies inward, developing a dense web of obligations that brought proximity to bear on blood and affinity. Here was how many narrated the result to me: Most of your friends and kinfolk probably hailed from Horner. Your sexual trysts likely hailed from Horner. So did your husband or wife, your child’s father or mother, or, if you were part of a younger generation, your “baby daddy” or “baby mamma.” Special legal arrangements allowed a much higher proportion of original residents to remain on-site, meaning that as much as Horner’s phased demolition and redevelopment disturbed these dense webs of relations, it did not dismember them. They extended into Westhaven, where they continued to structure everyday life and obligation.

Consider Diane, a middle-aged woman who was born and raised in Horner, had left as a young adult and, in 2006, had returned to Westhaven because she missed “her people.” She had a steady administrative job with a local nonprofit and qualified to rent an apartment in the development at the “affordable rate.” She often observed, with a hint of pride in her voice, that she had kinfolk in every building at Horner, thanks to her large extended family and an especially amorous uncle. Whenever we walked or drove

around Westhaven together, we couldn't get far without running into relations who had moved into the development's new townhomes or duplexes. "Let's stop!" she'd say, pointing to someone along the sidewalk, "that's family." And so we always slowed to talk. These conversations often turned to petitions for advice or other resources. Diane had a "good job" and access to resources that others might not have. She took these petitions in stride because she enjoyed helping her kinfolk. Yet the idiom of family stretched beyond individual rituals of reckoning and renewing ties. Local political leaders, including tenant leadership, described their work as "taking care of family." Indeed, while the countless Family Reunions, Family Skate Jams, Family Picnics, and Family Fun Days that political and tenant leaders organized for constituents were social events in and of themselves, they were also occasions for the distribution of important resources: food, clothing, school supplies. "Family" stretched even further still. The longer I stayed in Westhaven, the more often I heard my own work cast as kinship work. To an aspiring anthropologist, such endearments could not but feel like a badge of pride. Ethnographers, after all, traffic in intimacy. Yet like anyone else called "family," I would learn that this term of endearment also came with significant obligations.

Even though *family* in Westhaven was an expansive term, I noticed that transitioning Horner residents grew hesitant whenever conversations moved from generalizations about "family" to the specific configuration of their households at that moment. Conversations between residents and the staff of the social services agency where I volunteered came to an abrupt halt whenever these specifics arose. And more than a few transitioning residents preferred to receive calls from case workers and members of the management or maintenance staff at the door, rather than admit them inside. This wariness was aimed not just at those who called in an official capacity. In any tolerable weather, many took social calls from neighbors and friends *outside* their homes, lest details about their housekeeping habits, their possessions, and "off lease" kin became grist for a local rumor mill. Such rumors, many suspected, would reflect negatively on them, affecting their capacity to retain welfare benefits. Despite such guardedness, rampant speculation nevertheless ensued among neighbors. That speculation often circulated widely and at times even incited aggression. Over the years I witnessed many arguments and fights erupt as leaseholders accused neighbors of getting too close to their "business." To make sense of the charged line that separated the household from the world beyond it, you need to know something about leasing practices within Chicago's projects.

The overall number of people displaced by Chicago's public housing reforms is notoriously difficult to reckon. Throughout my research, estimates ran from fifty thousand to over seventy-five thousand persons. Most resident leaders and advocates I worked with referenced the latter figure, based on the fact that the Plan for Transformation had displaced twenty-five thousand households and that the CHA reported that its households averaged three members each. But uncertainty still shrouds the overall figure fifteen years after the plan got under way. That uncertainty boils down to a simple fact: over the past few decades, the CHA has not had a firm handle on how many people live in its housing complexes. During the 1980s, skyrocketing vacancies and lax building security provided opportunities for squatters to settle in. Yet I found that many legal households had long included people who did not appear on the lease. Regulations barred "off lease" arrangements, but enforcement was lax. In a context of such extreme poverty, residents opened their doors to extended friends and family to make ends meet.⁵

Lax lease enforcement changed as Horner came down and Westhaven emerged. Westhaven's private developers anticipated that market- and affordable-rate renters and home buyers would feel unnerved at the prospect of living alongside lower-income households that appeared to be in constant flux, with people joining and departing households seemingly at random. By the time of my research, the fortunes of the Near West Side had improved. Yet the area was still socioeconomically depressed. Newcomers *and* long-term residents worried over a not-so-distant past riddled by prolonged disinvestment, drug epidemics, and related violence. These worries lingered in ways that often reframed a household's unfamiliar figures or activities as illicit. Because buy-in of market- and affordable-rate renters and buyers was absolutely critical for meeting the financing arrangements that structured mixed-income developments, developers worked with the CHA to rein in Westhaven's low-income households. In Westhaven, one- or two-bedroom units became the norm. Management staff stepped up lease enforcement and became especially vigilant about extended visits by people not on the lease. Developers worked with the CHA to refine occupancy standards that limited which relatives might fall under "kin" or "guardian care." Finally, Westhaven's low-income leaseholders were mindful of federal policies concerning the illicit activities of dependents and guests. Convictions related to such activities on *but also off* the premises could result in the eviction not just of the perpetrator but also of the *entire* household.⁶ Taken together, these developments limited the capacity of leaseholders to open their homes to others.

Of course, transitioning Horner residents had long dealt with the effects of domestic scrutiny. As many have shown, the United States' "two-tier" system of welfare benefits was founded on the assumption that an able-bodied adult man should be able to support his family through regular employment. In the absence of a male breadwinner, the state would step in to support women and children. AFDC regulations made it difficult, if not impossible, for destitute households that included able-bodied adult men to claim benefits (see Piven and Cloward 1971; Gordon 1998; Franklin 1997; Mink 1998). Men remained, but in an unofficial capacity. My oldest interlocutors recalled the "public aid raids" of the 1950s and 1960s when public aid workers arrived at Horner at all hours, rifled through closets and drawers, counted toothbrushes, and asked about stereos and cars. They looked for signs of unreported income in the form of men who did not appear in a household's file but might nevertheless be contributing to it. Yet paranoia concerning a household's members extended beyond the presence of adult men. It was not uncommon for low-income leaseholders in Westhaven to be summoned to the local public aid office to respond to charges that they had committed welfare fraud. There leaseholders were most often accused of claiming benefits to defray the cost of supporting a child who was not their legal dependent.

Despite this long history of surveillance, paranoia, and secrecy, my interlocutors in Westhaven claimed throughout my research that the situation was intensifying. This was not just because private entities involved in the redevelopment of public housing moved to enforce leases. It was also because the stepped-up enforcement dovetailed with pressures to house relatives returning from prison or jail. In 2005, the middle of my research, 80 percent of the forty-two thousand inmates released by the Illinois Department of Corrections returned to Chicago's South and West Sides—the most economically disadvantaged and predominantly black neighborhoods in the city. More specifically, former inmates returned home to just seven zip codes (Peck and Theodore 2008). One of these included the westernmost edge of Westhaven. Without adequate housing and employment, many would soon end up reincarcerated.⁷ Over the past decade, the Near West Side has been entangled in a development boom that has drawn newcomers to the area. Yet it has also been the site of a carceral boom that has drawn many younger men out of the neighborhood, only to return them with records that have made obtaining housing or steady employment extremely difficult. The immediate consequence of this boom has been a legion of men, and increasingly women, in their twenties, thirties, and forties who are, as one interlocutor—one of the few middle-aged men I knew in Westhaven who was a leaseholder—referred

to as “couch homeless”—homeless but for the couch that a sister, auntie, daughter, or old friend allowed them to stretch out on every night.

Transitioning Horner residents were well aware of the risks that came with housing anyone off lease, especially someone with a criminal background. But most balked at suggestions that they should turn their relatives, old friends, and neighbors away. “That’s family,” they would usually protest. “Your own flesh and blood. You never know when you might be the one needing them.” Indeed, off-lease members of a household did contribute. Some took on child care duties, helped with cooking and cleaning, or handed over income from odd jobs or government assistance. Still others ran enterprises out of a given unit. They shared the profits from selling candy, homemade meals, services like day care, hairdressing, and tailoring, and even on occasion cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. These activities helped sustain a household. But for those entangled within domestic economies, such efforts exceeded straightforward, strategic, or instrumental exchanges.

Consider Brenda, a middle-aged and a lifelong Horner resident, who in 2004 moved to a Horner replacement unit on the western edge of Westhaven. One afternoon in the fall of 2006 she and I sat on her front steps talking about several elderly people who had turned down the option to move into the CHA’s dedicated senior housing. Brenda began criticizing a recent effort by social workers to remove one such woman from one of the last original Horner buildings, where she stayed, awaiting the next phase of construction and the new units that it would bring on line. The elderly woman’s household had expanded as she took in a young relative, a nephew, and his partner. We had both heard the gossip many times from many different sources: this couple had apparently moved into the choicest room, leaving only a tiny one for their elderly auntie. Rumor also had it that the couple regularly intercepted her “government check,” in this case Social Security.

Social service workers saw this situation as exploitative; Brenda insisted that this assessment wasn’t exactly right. The elderly woman’s “family” was taking care of her. Any effort to place her in a senior building would “just kill her” by severing the interpersonal obligations that guaranteed her emotional and physical well-being:

She’s someplace safe and warm, with people taking care of her. People don’t understand that here your family is everything. . . . I don’t care if the son is a drunk, the cousin a dope dealer. That’s still *family* and that’s the people who make sure everything’s OK. You can’t take a senior away from that. That’ll be it for them. That’s what’s going on though; people [are] getting disconnected from their family. I’m already starting to feel disconnected from mine, now that they get all over the place.

For Brenda, but also for many other former Horner residents I spoke with, obligations like these provided financial and emotional sustenance. Stepping away from them meant stepping into alienation, loneliness, even death. Yet meeting them also meant confronting the risks that accompanied an unstable or unsanctioned relative. That is why the rumors that circulated around this case and similar ones were just as likely to echo Brenda's sentiments as they were to involve contentions that someone should step in and "clean house"—that is, rid the household of members who had become liabilities to the lease.

Brenda's convictions *and* her neighbors' ambivalence about flexible households coincide with arguments that gained traction in US poverty and welfare studies during the 1960s and 1970s. These arguments orbit anthropologist Oscar Lewis's (1961) concept of the "culture of poverty." For Lewis, this "culture" was a "design for living" passed down from one generation to the next, something between a "rationale" and a "defense mechanism," that allowed impoverished people to nevertheless "carry on" within a national culture with which they were at odds (36). Its characteristics included everything from a resistance to foreplanning and disrespect for structures of authority to a propensity for matrifocal kinship structures. During the 1960s and 1970s, policy makers recast this list as the behavioral ailments of the "Negro family." Such ailments, they argued, had ceased to serve as coping mechanisms in a society where blacks, especially the poorest ones, had second-class citizenship. Instead, they had become so ingrained in behavioral and thought patterns as to *cause* ongoing marginalization. No matter what formal steps were taken to include such citizens, the thinking went, their entrenchment in a crumbling family structure would inhibit meaningful moves toward political and economic inclusion (Moynihan 1965).

Plenty of former Horner tenants reproduced versions of these arguments. They did not hesitate to excoriate "dysfunctional" women, criticizing them for bearing children outside of normative domestic arrangements, coddling and emasculating their partners and sons, and setting bad examples for their daughters. In this respect, they internalized the logics that undergirded welfare state retrenchment, logics that demanded self-responsibility and self-control. Others, however, disagreed, replicating what has become something of a standard response among empathetic scholars. They lauded the cooperative strategies and resourcefulness practiced within and across households and insisted that both allowed them to navigate times of uncertainty and need. Transitioning Horner residents knew that they did not have much. Yet they were rich in what anthropologist Carol B. Stack (1974:

107), in her study of poor black people's "survival strategies" in the urban Midwest, called "the fund of kin and friends obligated toward them" (see also Liebow 1967; Hill 1972; Valentine 1968). One contributed to this "fund" with the expectation that one would someday be drawing from it. Yet "pathological" behaviors recast as positive, practical, or reasonable adaptations, as a set of affective funds or a stock of social capital that individuals lean on to weather the vagaries of poverty, hardly transcend behaviorist paradigms. Rather, they remain two sides of the same coin, in that they locate the cessation and reproduction of poverty in individual behaviors and adaptations.

That coin continues to circulate in US welfare and poverty studies, even as scholars have taken pains to complicate it. Some have pointed out that arguments that orbit the "culture of poverty" invoke essentialized, even racialist readings that have attached themselves to the culture concept. Those readings evade a more rigorous analysis of the history and politics of inequality in the United States (see, e.g., Reed 1999; Trouillot 2003). Others have suggested that they *moralize* responses to poverty that are utterly consonant with policies of the past few decades, policies that have prodded impoverished people to mend the holes of fraying social safety nets themselves (see, e.g., Wacquant 2002). Scholars might stop celebrating practices of cooperation and reciprocity among impoverished people, sociologist Loïc Wacquant suggests, and instead begin to examine how a faltering social welfare state thrusts "kinship servitude" upon (sub)proletarian women (1496). In different ways, these criticisms all insist upon an engagement with the broader structures, meanings, and mechanisms that govern everyday life and obligation in places like Westhaven.

Diagnoses of "kinship servitude" are provocative. Yet they do not exactly align with the way my interlocutors stepped toward their obligations with a mix of pleasure and trepidation. Subjection, servitude, or instrumentalization characterize neither the longings they had for family and the complex obligations they felt toward anyone classified as such nor the pride and ambivalence that surrounded the act of meeting those obligations. So rather than endorse analyses of individual efficacy that pit freedom against constraint, I want to ask a different kind of question. Just how did transitioning Horner residents manage obligations that could shift between those that enlarged the possibilities of everyday life and social reproduction and those that devoured them? One way to explore this question is to examine the anxieties that gathered within and around households and route that examination through recent anthropological discussions of witchcraft.

That anxious speculations, gossip, guardedness, and silences should characterize life in Westhaven's flexible households would surprise few anthropologists, raised as we are on the imperative to attend to the dynamics of group cohesion. In a classic essay, for instance, Max Gluckman (1963: 313) reads a broad anthropological archive to argue that "gossiping and scandalizing" among those in a "close social relationship" is a rule-bound practice with important social functions. Such activities foreground internal tensions within a group, demarcate its boundaries, and convey expectations concerning normative behavior for members. In the process they *renew* a social order, especially when the coherence of that order has been shaken. Reflecting on early research he conducted on council housing estates (British for "housing project"), Gluckman quipped: "Town planners are very anxious to turn housing estates into communities: they should develop scandal in them. Perhaps it is their duty to provide cause for it" (313). More than just helpful for maintaining group order, Gluckman argued, gossip and scandalizing were a necessary, even virtuous part of social life (311–13). This held even in what he saw as their most bitter and destructive manifestations in the anthropological record—witchcraft accusations.

Gossip and scandal may have been just the things to resolve social fractures on British housing projects. Yet for those leaving public housing on Chicago's West Side, they were the last thing that anyone wanted to attract, and the last thing that was easily resolved. More than a few transitioning Horner residents implicated gossip, suspicions, and "mean looks" regarding their households in a host of strange maladies. Inexplicable bouts of sleepwalking, rapidly swelling limbs, collisions with runaway baby strollers, fingernails that suddenly grew bright colors and fell out—I heard about them all. These claims made up the weirdest material I collected. I was more than happy to chalk them up to fear and paranoia involved in reorganizing households under conditions of displacement and surveillance. Yet as I reviewed my notes, I began to wonder what might happen if one were to linger on such assertions, instead of blithely folding them into the processes of group renewal.

It is precisely such questions that animate more recent studies of witchcraft (Munn 1986; Siegel 2005; Geschiere 2013). In this work, witches are figures that rear their heads within familiar social worlds. They embody a negative energy that inheres at the center of social life, and this energy can become corrosive. Peter Geschiere (2013), building on his previous work that positioned witchcraft as the "dark side" of kinship, develops a view of social intimacy that embraces ambivalence. This is a departure from prevailing

approaches to sociality within anthropology and, as Geschiere points out, increasingly fields like economics, sociology, and development studies. In a move that meshes quite well with post-welfare policy prescriptions, these approaches tend to valorize intimate relations as *havens* of solidarity, harmony, and reciprocity. In contrast, Geschiere insists that ambiguity is fundamental to all intimacies. Under specific conditions, it can grow destructive. What is helpful for my purposes is his attention to the *elasticity* of intimate relations in social and historical contexts where the nuclear family, often concretized as “the house,” cannot be construed as an enclosed and stable locus of security (130–33). Here the house, replete with its ambiguous relations, is “stretched,” so to speak, to incorporate a range of spatially proximate others. In some contexts these others are construed as “neighbors,” in others, extended kin. Regardless, they are critical to the work that goes into sustaining a household. Yet these others, their demands, and their actions can also complicate that work in ways that become treacherous.

Kinship relations among transitioning Horner residents were nothing if not elastic. They expanded and contracted to accommodate the ever-shifting demands of securing basic well-being in a context characterized by diminished resources and ongoing want. For those that lived within given households and those who skirted their edges, these expansions and contractions foregrounded the fundamental ambiguity of social intimacy in Westhaven. Neighbors, friends, and extended kin could bring much in the way of material and emotional resources. Yet as the stability of leases grew more precarious, resources dwindled, and surveillance intensified, the presence of such figures could also ignite tensions, jealousies, and suspicions that threatened the capacity of leaseholders to coordinate resources. Below I turn finally to the work of assessing and managing intimate obligations in Westhaven, paying close attention to how leaseholders sorted, distanced, and even excised friends, neighbors, and kin whose presence had grown toxic.

“Heat-Sucking Kin”

While Chicago public housing still stood, its residents had access to an intense form of home heating. “Project heat,” as Horner residents called it, was once generated on-site at public housing complexes, included in the rent, and pumped into buildings at abundant levels largely beyond recipients’ control. As Horner became Westhaven, project heat’s former beneficiaries had to reckon with new leasing criteria that required them to control their own thermostats and pay for whatever cooking or heating gas they

consumed. If they had grown up in public housing, many were doing this for the first time in their lives. More was at stake though than an individual leaseholder's adjustment of expectations concerning winter comforts. She also had to monitor the consumption of dependents and visitors who stayed for long spells. Throughout the winters of 2005 and 2006, casual talk turned constantly to concerns surrounding heat. One aspect of this discourse revolved around the problems that emerged when, as an interlocutor put it, "heat-seeking kin" became "heat-sucking kin." The phrase "heat-sucking kin" referred not only to dependents and visitors who sought to replicate the warm comforts of public housing by cranking up the thermostat in Horner replacement units. It also referred to those who had at some point borrowed, purchased, or simply helped themselves to the personal information of publicly housed relatives. With that information, they opened up utility accounts on the private market. Many who did so ran those accounts into the ground, causing serious problems as Horner residents attempted to leave the complex behind.

Consider Martha, who exited Horner for a replacement unit in the late 1990s. Like other residents transitioning out of Horner, Martha struggled to maintain private utility accounts in the face of dependents and visitors who expected her to keep the house "comfortable." "They say everything less than eighty feels cold," she complained to a friend and me while we ate lunch out in late 2005. Such complaints were common enough, yet in Martha's case, they were complicated by the fact that her utility account was "in the red" the minute she opened it, courtesy of her favorite cousin.

People noticed the problem [around 1998], after they started moving around. They go to open up their light or gas and learn that they can't because they names was burnt up. My cousin took my name and opened up accounts in Milwaukee. She thought I would never find out, that I would never need it because I stayed in the projects. I was raised with her like my sister, but she took my name anyway and burned it up! At the time, I didn't know not to leave things around. She probably took that information right off my [ID] card.

Martha situated her cousin's actions in the context of the uncertainty that came with public housing's redevelopment. Abundant heat was such a certainty at Horner, so much so that in her cousin's eyes, Martha would never want for heat. Her name became a resource to mitigate the uncertainty of the private rental market. That certainty changed as Horner came down. What was once a collective resource became an individual liability. Martha's choice of words is instructive here. On the Near West Side, "burning" some-

thing “up” referred to the selfish or wanton exploitation of a shared resource, often in ways that made it unavailable to others.

By 2005, when Martha recounted her billing woes, she had finally resolved the debt. After an initial period of estrangement, she had also started seeing her cousin again. She still loved her, as she said, “like my sister.” Nevertheless the whole affair left a bad taste in her mouth. Martha found herself on guard with even her most trusted friends and relatives and wondered if they too might “turn” in ways that would prove destructive. She understood that in circumstances in which resources were either increasingly scarce or costly, the uncertainties of poverty had come to roost at the center of her household, including its loosest members. Martha took steps to hem in these uncertainties by making firm calls on whom she would admit to the space of her home. She rarely opened her doors for anyone beyond her adult children. Yet for other transitioning Horner residents, the threats posed by intimates were not so easily contained. They became a diffuse and ever-present dimension of social life.

“Streets of Hate”

On paper at least, Westhaven’s lower-income sections seemed to be a world comprised entirely of women and children. The handful of men who did hold leases for public housing units tended to be older, in their sixties or seventies. If they were younger than that, they generally suffered from physical disabilities that kept them from regular work. As my interlocutors explained, public housing, like other welfare benefits, over time was increasingly geared toward destitute mothers. Women without children and healthy men had difficulty obtaining leases. Yet Westhaven was not devoid of men. On the contrary, many stayed with female relatives, girlfriends, and wives. As they did, they attracted attention, attention that could grow destructive. An interlocutor named Linda drove this home for me in the summer of 2006 as her relationships with neighbors turned bitter.

When I met her in 2003, Linda was in her early forties. She grew up at Horner and left the complex in the late 1980s, drawn away by a debilitating illness. She had spent the past five years getting to a “good place.” For her, that meant getting well, being trained as an outreach worker for an agency that supported troubled women, and securing an apartment in Westhaven. It also meant falling in love. Her boyfriend turned many heads when he visited. Linda’s neighbors, a group of women she had been close to since childhood, all agreed that he was “fine”: he had no criminal record, held down a

regular job, and doted on her. Linda often sat out in the front of her home while the boyfriend worked on her car or fiddled with a home improvement project. Neighbors, including her old friends, would regularly drop by to chat with the couple. By all accounts, Linda seemed happy and on good terms with everyone. A very different picture emerged in the summer of 2006.

Linda came upon me one evening out walking and offered me a lift in her car. I slid into the front seat, and as we drove off I asked, as I had many times before, after her neighbor friends. We had all recently passed several evenings together in front of Linda's home, watching children and grilling food. Even though those particular evenings were special—we were watching local teens as they headed out in their prom finery—there was nothing remarkable about the gatherings. As she had told me many times before, she looked forward to being “out front.” She found these gatherings fun, but she also found them helpful in practical and emotional ways. This time, however, Linda responded to my polite queries by bursting into tears, blubbering that she lived on “streets of hate.” Out came a stream of suspicions: her neighbor friends made passes at her boyfriend. Someone (she couldn't say who, but it *must* have been one of the neighbors, right?) had spread rumors about him staying “off lease.” “Housing”—that is, staff from the private firm that managed her section of Westhaven—had come by several times, purportedly to check on her appliances. Really they must have been trying to corroborate rumors about her boyfriend. “This really hurts,” Linda choked up. “I've been knowing them all my life.”

Over the next few years, the boyfriend's visits continued, even as they became conspicuously less public. He would always arrive late and depart early. Linda, among the most social people I met in Westhaven, retreated indoors, her blinds permanently drawn. She grew increasingly wary and fretted constantly that this or that acquaintance, neighbor, or old friend was watching and, as she said, “lying on me.” Nobody was immune, not even me. Linda's romantic relationship had come to occupy an explosive interface between the most intimate recesses of her household and the long-standing but now utter uncertainty that orbited it. Linda turned inward to manage her misgivings. In the process, she severed ties with a support network that she had built over many years. Linda's response was among the most dramatic I encountered, but other transitioning Horner residents took even more surprising directions when dealing with the anxieties surrounding their intimate relations. They flung open the doors to the very institutions formally tasked with monitoring their households.

“Extra Eyes”

The regular presence of young men in and around Westhaven’s lower-income households could spark jealousy among neighbors, but it was more likely to incite worry. Like many other public housing sites undergoing redevelopment in Chicago, Westhaven was a space overdetermined by anxieties about crime. In this context, neighbors worried that even the most straightforward and careful young man could cause problems. Specifically, they reckoned that he would attract other young people (especially other young men) who either had criminal entanglements or who might act erratically. They also worried that the mere presence of young men in a world dominated by women and children would draw unwanted attention from police or management staff. So when a leaseholder welcomed any younger male relative into her home, she had to find a way to manage the concerns of neighbors alongside her own worries that he might associate or act in ways that jeopardized her lease.

Curiously enough, leaseholders would sometimes urge their young visitors to behave by issuing vague threats: if visitors got out of line, the leaseholder would “call” the police, management, or even child and protective services “on” them. Most often, these threats were jests or gentle or idle warnings. Every so often, though, they materialized into something more. Consider a middle-aged leaseholder, a woman I’ll call Susan. When I met her in 2003, Susan was in the process of moving into a Horner replacement unit with her ailing husband. She had several grown children who had found housing on the private market. Yet the couple was never alone. They took a great interest in their young nieces and nephews and often opened their home to them. In turn, the youngsters often helped with household chores, especially with child and sick care. Over the years, though, I noted one glaring exception: Susan’s nephew, by all accounts an easygoing young man in his midtwenties whom she adored, never set foot in her home. During family gatherings, he would sit in a lawn chair on the sidewalk in front. From there he would carry on loud conversations with the guests inside. They would pass him plates of food out the windows and over the fence. When I finally asked Susan about this strange arrangement in 2006, she relayed the following.

Several years earlier, while visiting with friends, her nephew had gotten into an argument with his girlfriend. Susan was at a meeting nearby. Upset neighbors burst in with the news: the girlfriend had “stabbed” the nephew. It was a very light wound, Susan stressed, but a stab wound just the same. Susan never knew exactly what had happened. What she did know is

that the incident spelled trouble for her lease. She promptly did what she “needed to do.” She called a local police officer whom she had met through activist networks. As the entire group tended to the nephew and waited for the ambulance to arrive, they also tended to the official report. The incident became “young people’s stuff,” a “game” that got out of hand. Susan kept her lease, but she also sensed that her nephew warranted “extra eyes.” He continued to visit, but they relegated those visits to the outside, where a range of people, including neighbors and the police who passed by often on this main thoroughfare, could keep an eye on him. Her household, her friends, and her neighbors approved of this course of action. By turning her household inside out, by inviting attention from the very actors and institutions that could destabilize her intimate obligations, Susan managed to hold on to both her lease and her commitments.⁸

Susan’s situation and its resolution fell on the extreme end of such cases. Nevertheless, the casualness with which I heard so many leaseholders threaten to invite in the very institutions and actors tasked with monitoring them, and the conviction with which some followed through, underscores just how much gestures of intimate care had melded with those of state-sanctioned surveillance. More than simply internalize the self-responsibility and surveillance mechanisms of a post-welfare state, many living in redeveloping public housing on Chicago’s West Side made an unexpected virtue of them. Loving one’s cousin, brother, child, child’s father, or neighbor did not preclude exposing them to the very institutions that could excise them—sometimes permanently—from household, from neighborhood, and from community.

Conclusion

Horner’s demolition and redevelopment got under way in the thick of national conversations about the “end” of welfare and public housing. On Chicago’s West Side, neither public housing nor welfare has “ended.” Yet the provision of care has shifted in ways that have rendered the interpersonal obligations that unfold within and around subsidized housing tenuous, difficult, and even explosive.

Martha, Linda, and Susan managed the delicate task of triaging their obligations. They sorted them in ways that contained or diffused their destructive potentials. Yet these women were exceptional. Many transitioning Horner residents I met worried constantly about intimate obligations growing irrevocably toxic. Some spoke of tacit threats from neighbors to

“clean house” of relatives and friends (lest their neighbors make reports) or, conversely, to remain quiet about off-lease presences among neighboring households. The formerly incarcerated men I came to know seemed forever preoccupied with what their incapacity to contribute to their households “like men” portended for their long-term membership *in* the household. They traded worrying stories about women who controlled men like them with threats that they would be put out. They spoke of men forced to stand by as their women took on other lovers, made all decisions about household life, and denied them regular access to their children. More than a few young adults fretted that leaseholders would force them out if they failed to obey and, especially, neglected to hand over all resources to which they had access. In one especially difficult situation, my teenage neighbor spoke constantly to me of her eighteenth birthday, which she dreaded. She worried that her grandmother would remove her from the lease when she no longer “came with a check”—that is, when she no longer brought in monthly payments from the state to defray the cost of her care.

Such cases are difficult to write about, because scholarly and lay accounts of impoverished households and communities cannot break from the two prevailing analyses that have been used to illuminate them. Either the affections or exchanges that bind impoverished families and communities together are exemplary of the very behaviors and adaptations that inhibit individual mobility or they are exemplary of practices of cooperation that other citizens, particularly those lacking any robust collective commitments, should emulate. If the former, then any effort to flesh out the difficult cases alluded to above risks providing even more grist for arguments about the deep-seated pathologies of the poor. If the latter, such material must be swept under the rug, countered by hopeful accounts of poor people’s resourceful and resilient ways. Both analytical framings have supported the course of public housing and, more broadly, welfare state retrenchment in the United States over the past twenty years. The poor will continue to be poor, regardless of what interventions and policies are thrown at them. Why bother with more interventions? Why not prod them to the harsher disciplines of diminished benefits and market rental housing? Or the poor will band together and stubbornly survive. Why not mobilize and incentivize that ethos in policy arenas? Why not empower poor people to take better care of themselves, their families, and their communities? Certainly, such empowerment will come in handy in a welfare context no longer able to float expansive programs and benefits.

The anxieties gathering that welfare retrenchment have ignited within impoverished households surely warrant a different approach, one invested

neither in dissecting and remediating individual behaviors nor in unearthing and celebrating collaborative endeavors. To entertain such approaches, welfare scholars might follow the lead of those who linger on the “darker” dimensions of kinship, on moments in which amputations and excisions ensue (see Biehl 2005; Das, Ellen, and Leonard 2008). We might uncouple expectations that trust and mutuality are necessary corollaries of social intimacy, even as we remind ourselves that analytical valorizations of both dovetail quite well with a policy climate that would advance social capital and small-scale, localized affectations and exchanges as a solution for ongoing disinvestment in social welfare programs. And if uncertainty and ambiguity become thinkable as *general* features of social intimacy and its spatialization within households, we must also ask for whom and how each becomes manageable. For whom and then how must the figures that embody the unhomey dimensions of intimate social worlds be excised, lest they lay waste to leases, households, and the very conditions of life in common?

Notes

- 1 Throughout my research, I lived and worked in Westhaven, volunteering with two social service organizations. Both styled themselves as “grassroots” initiatives, although what that meant in each setting was different. The first organization was the social service arm of a local community development corporation; the second was an aspiring mutual aid society for ex-offenders who lived in Westhaven but whose names were not on leases. These positions also drew me into individual households and the dense, but often fraught, obligations that encircled their members. Through them, I gained a sense both of the tensions brewing within and around their households and of how leaseholders, their dependents, and their neighbors sought to manage them.
- 2 These philosophies are associated with an urban planning movement known as new urbanism.
- 3 For a discussion of these networks at the height of public housing, see Venkatesh 2000.
- 4 For a discussion of this history, see Hunt 2009.
- 5 By 1995, the year that Horner’s demolition got under way, a much-circulated figure indicated that eleven of the nation’s fifteen most impoverished census tracts fell within the walls of CHA projects, where 70 percent of households received some form of public assistance besides subsidized rental housing (US House of Representatives 1997: 12–32).
- 6 Transitioning Horner residents could lose their leases if members of or visitors to a household engaged in criminal activity, especially the consumption or distribution of drugs. This policy emerged in 1996 as HUD moved forward with public housing reform on a national scale. It granted a public housing authority the capacity to evict at its discretion residents who violated this policy. Within a few years of its implementation it was challenged in federal court, but the Supreme Court upheld it in 2002.

- 7 At the time of my research, in Illinois, most men returning from prison or jail had committed nonviolent or parole-related offenses. Yet half of them would return to a correctional facility within three years (Peck and Theodore 2008).
- 8 Alice Goffman (2014) has observed a comparable dynamic in an ethnographic study that examines how some young, lower-income black men and their families cope with the ubiquity of police surveillance in their everyday lives. In Goffman's Philadelphia study, however, intimates of such men hand them over to authorities under explicit duress from the police.

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