

MORE THAN JUST A 'HOME'

# CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY  
RESEARCH, VOLUME 25

**MORE THAN JUST A 'HOME':  
UNDERSTANDING THE LIVING  
SPACES OF FAMILIES**

EDITED BY

**ROSALINA PISCO COSTA**

*University of Évora, Portugal*

and

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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**Silvia Di Giuseppe** holds a PhD in Sociology from the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-UL), where she is currently an alumni student, specifically in the Interuniversity Doctoral Programme in Sociology: Knowledge for Open and Inclusive Societies (OpenSoc). Previously, her studies in Sociology began in Italy, where she obtained a Master's degree in Sociology, Social Research and Evaluation from the University of Rome La Sapienza. During her PhD in Lisbon, she wrote a thesis entitled *Estar online e offline: práticas e representações de mulheres portuguesas e italianas na sociedade digital* (Being online and offline: practices and representations of Portuguese and Italian women in a digital society) focusing on digital information and communication technologies (ICT) in everyday life by a target group of women employees, who were living as part of a couple with children, in Portugal and Italy. Furthermore, she was also a Doctoral Scholar at the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). At the same time, she has participated in various scientific meetings in the field of Sociology, presenting several talks (e.g., APA, APS, CIEG, ESA, ESFR, ICCA, and ISA). Although not exhaustive, the areas of gender, everyday life, family and digital ICT cover her main research interests. She is currently conducting research that continues to focus on the use of ICT in the everyday life of Portuguese and

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**Wasana Handapangoda** is affiliated with University of Vienna, Austria. She is Head of the project, “*Ideal*” *Migrant Subjects: Domestic Service in Globalisation*, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Lise-Meitner Grant, M 2724-G. Wasana Handapangoda also has experience working as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. She earned her Doctoral degree in Global Society Studies from Doshisha University, Japan in 2011. Her current research interests lie in transnational migration and domestic work, intersectionality and identity politics, combining gender, work and home, brokerage and the global political economy of care, gender, and digital technology. This book chapter is an outcome of her FWF, Lise-Meitner project.

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**Tate Kautzky** graduated from Whitman College in 2020 with a Degree in Sociology. Kautzky then graduated with a Master of Public Health degree from Central Washington University in 2023. Utilizing qualitative research via systematic literature review, her master’s thesis project is titled, “A Conceptual Definition and Framework for Patient-Centered Contraceptive Counseling: A Review of the Literature.”

**Amanda Andrade Costa de Mendonça Lima** was born in Brazil, where she graduated in International Relations, she has worked in the social and humanitarian sector, especially with populations at risk. She emigrated to Portugal, where she continued her academic career, starting with a Postgraduate degree in Human Rights at the University of Coimbra, and later completing a Master’s degree in Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Minho. Her dissertation and field of study revolve around issues of multiple and subjective inequalities, gender studies, intersectionality, multidimensional poverty, and education. Amanda is currently doing her PhD in Sociology at the University of Porto, where she is continuing her thesis. During her academic career, she participated in research around intersectionality, the impact of COVID on the lives of children and young

people, especially girls, and the concept of Amefricanity as an Afrofeminist resistance movement. The research culminated in the publication of two collaborative articles by the University of Bonn, also providing the possibility to participate in conferences and present the works. Social work has always been parallel to her academic life, considering an empirical process of training and expansion of knowledge developed at the university and in research. Through collaboration in projects that have as their objective and method the outreach of the knowledge produced, Amanda seeks to contribute to a closer dialogue between the University and the communities and individuals studied. ORCID: 0000-0003-1896-9699

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**Naja Ferjan Ramírez** is an Assistant Professor in Linguistics at the University of Washington and holds the Distinguished Professorship in Language Acquisition and Multilingualism Endowment. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Neuroscience from Brown University and her PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science from the University of California, San Diego. She completed her post-doctoral training at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington. Naja's research focuses on understanding the extent and origins of variability in brain growth and linguistic development among young children of diverse backgrounds. She is particularly interested in examining how variation in children's early language environments contributes to language development, and in applying this knowledge to the development of interventions. She uses multiple methodologies, including naturalistic recordings in children's homes and early education centers, magnetoencephalography (MEG), and behavioral language measures in the laboratory.

**Ana Rita Nunes da Silva** holds a Master's degree in Artistic Practices in Visual Arts from the University of Évora, Portugal. She currently develops social projects that relate art, education and inclusion. As a freelancer, she paints artistic murals, creatively decorates spaces and teaches artistic activities to children and young people. Passionate about passing messages, she also works in areas related to marketing and communication. She has extensive experience in design, business development, marketing, communication and event organization, skills she acquired throughout her formal education and through various extracurricular activities she developed as a student and which she continues to develop as a professional. As a researcher, she has been interested in themes such as family, identity and memory, topics she explored through archival and participatory processes.

**Simona Strungaru** is a Doctoral candidate in Sociology at the Department of Social and Philosophical Inquiry at the University of New England, Australia. Her thesis critically explores the prevalence of sexual exploitation and abuse within United Nations peacekeeping through a power elite framework. Simona's research interests are in human rights and children's rights, international law, refugee studies, and Middle Eastern studies, however, she also shares a love of popular culture and animals which allows her the opportunity to engage in expansive and interesting research spaces.

**Jingxian Wang** holds a PhD in Sociology from the School of Sociology and Social policy of the University of Nottingham, England. As one of the "black children" who have lived with this label for almost three decades in modern China, as well as a researcher from sociological background who focuses on qualitative research skills, Jingxian wants to bring these children's voice back to our understandings of what really make sense of children in one's family, and what accounts humans as citizens in the society. With the support of Vice-Chancellor's scholarship for research excellence at the University of Nottingham, Jingxian has researched lived experiences of the "black children" to explain what the label of "black" really meant (and still mean) to this population, as well as to respond her own struggles of being "black". Her research interests include sociology of childhood, family relationship, gender violence, identity politics, China's modernization and globalization, recognition and belonging, shame and stigma, restored injustice, citizenship rights and human freedom.

**Michelle Zhang** graduated from Whitman College in 2021 with a Degree in Sociology and Computer Science. Upon graduating, Michelle went on to attend Santa Clara University School of Law and is now pursuing a career as an attorney in intellectual property litigation.

# FOREWORD

The year 2024 marks 60 years since the release of *A House Is Not a Home*, a 1964 drama, whose soundtrack includes the song with the same name written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David. Drama, from the Greek *drama* [action] means scenic action represented by characters. It is any piece intended for representation, with an action that unfolds from a conflict, at a determined time and space. Not by chance, we use the dramaturgical metaphor to begin the foreword of the volume *More than Just a 'Home': Understanding the Living Spaces of Families*. The image explored in the song's lyrics of a chair that remains (still) a chair, even if no one is sitting there, seems especially insightful to think beyond the physical boundaries of the space, the architecture, the people, and the artifacts we often and wrongly take for granted as necessarily part of the home and, consequently, of the family.

Understanding the living spaces of families implies seeing more than just a 'home,' just as one must see more than just a 'chair.' Again, we turn to drama. Not exclusively a tragedy or comics, a drama is a relatively hybrid genre, that addresses themes of everyday life. When aggregating the tragic and the comic elements, it allows us to incorporate a colorful and multilayered understanding of the common life ranging from the sublime and the grotesque aspects, pathetic and touching, or, as a sociologist would say, the result of an action-mediated in a variable way by structure and agency. This is the challenge of this volume.

Over time and space, sociology has given varying importance to the study of the house. The house is often a *locus* of special attention when a couple is formed, and the investments made in a neolocal residence constitute a complex social fact. In some contexts, related decisions are strongly family-oriented; in other contexts, individualization and personalization are the driving forces that surround the dreams of a future based on acquisitions, renovations, and decorations. The 'broken house' after a divorce or the death of parents, and the subsequent decisions to be made regarding the division of property have also received varying attention in the sociological literature. The house where one grew up is also somewhat analyzed from a sociological perspective, especially as a space for socialization. However, such descriptions are often blurred by nostalgia or trauma. There is, in short, much to be known about the importance and the relationships between home and family.

In inviting the reader to see more than just a 'Home' when understanding the living spaces of families, this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* sought to achieve contributions aiming a broad understanding of the house as a plural, diverse, and multi-meaningful space. The call for papers welcomed diverse theoretical approaches and multi-method research project submissions that explore both the ways in which the family socially constructs a home, and how the house, its architecture, spatial arrangement, internal and external

divisions, and micro technologies shape and reshape family relationships in the face of constant changes and challenges. Topics broadly explore the relationships between the family and the material and symbolic dimensions of the home. Such relationships encompass the trajectory and composition of the household, the gendered division of labor, work-family and education-family dynamics, migratory fluxes, and local and public policies, among others. Not surprisingly, the manuscripts consider specific occupational, gender, and age patterns of living in home space, as well as the use and implications of digital technologies, specifically a set of experiences brought about by the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent “turn to home.”

The call for papers allowed us to gather a total of nine chapters as diverse as they are interesting. As editors, we must recognize it was not easy to establish the order of the chapters as ultimately fixed in the table of contents. In the end, we opted for a sequence that allows one to zigzag through the public and private spaces of the house, from the nuclear to the single-mother family, focusing on the couple or the children, and shedding light on the stages of the interaction and behind the scenes. In neither of these chapters, the home is the fixed, immovable space of the architecture that shapes it. On the contrary, the home is an open space, to which the windows and doors metaphorically refer; and it is also a space of multiple social crossings, determined by the family structure, the composition of the household, gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic condition, among other.

The volume begins with “The Neoliberal Regime of Disappearance: Mothers Living with Their Children in Canadian Motels” by Melinda Vandenberg Giles. From the outset, vignettes from Melinda’s field notes reveal some of the inconsistencies and erasures between public policy narratives and representations of motels and lived realities. The chapter addresses a little-known facet of motels, namely their usage as a family shelter space, thus exploring the concepts of “privacy” and “domesticity” in juxtaposition to shelter, identified as a “public” space capable of offering reasonable conditions for creating a home place. The inconsistencies in the narratives provided by individuals working in the homelessness industry and case workers become immediately apparent as Melinda discloses some of the women’s narratives gathered during fieldwork. As the chapter focuses specifically on women living with their children in Canadian motels, it is especially heuristic for the focus of this volume due to the reflection it brings around the differences between “physical spaces,” “home,” and “home-like” arrangements when discussing poverty and homelessness. From the Canadian national housing program to the global social sector economy, this chapter is also particularly insightful for reflecting on how the marketization of the social domain is contributing to the disappearance of “the poor, the homeless and the hungry” from the political agenda.

The Sands Motel gives way to the vacation home during pandemics in the chapter titled “The Pandemic Vacation Home: Media Framing of COVID-19 and Second Home Real Estate Morality Projects,” co-authored by Michelle Janning, Tate Kautzky, and Michelle Zhang. Methodologically, the chapter draws on the broader collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents the results of a content analysis of 62 local news stories from 7 US locations

published in 2020, revealing how the migration of seasonal residents and short-term renters to nature-focused, amenity-rich, and leisure environments during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the social meaning of home for year-round and seasonal or part-time residents. Using Viviana Zelizer's (2005) "connected lives" approach, the chapter contributes to expanding understanding of lifestyle for a deeper analysis of how everyday economic interactions between and within families and neighborhoods are imbued with social and cultural meaning even in times of crisis. Topics related to local economies, health and safety, local government, insiders, and outsiders give rise to dilemmas, deliberations, and conflicting considerations made by individual and group stakeholders in evaluating the acquisition, use, meaning, and dispossession of properties meant for residential use beyond the primary residence. Furthermore, the results suggest that moral considerations of deservedness and citizenship among usual residents and second homeowners are framed as deep and incompatible concerns surrounding economic stability and public health. As COVID-19 yielded a visible shift in second home use from tourism-focused to shelter- and safety-focused (often including teleworking), it also raises important questions about the hidden relationships between second homeowners and host communities, which expands understanding of the changing social meaning of home and the designation of housing decisions as moral or immoral in relation to shifting and opposing public opinion on health, economy, and politics.

The emphasis is once again focused on family households and pandemic times in Chapter 3. *Women's Narratives: ICTs in the Family Household During the (Post-) Pandemic* by Silvia Di Giuseppe, has as its backdrop the fact that the pandemic occurred in the broader context of a digital society, where digital technologies of information and communication (ICT) were already widely used, to explore the lasting and diverse impact of ICT use on households in the (post-) pandemic. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the multiple changes, challenges, and tensions resulting from the increased use of ICT at home, due to lockdown, mainly for professional and educational purposes. The empirical work is based on the daily lives of Portuguese and Italian women, who live in nuclear families, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thick descriptions of Mafalda and Anastasia's cases are presented to illustrate how changes during the pandemic forced families to become more technologically dependent. Although it had a visible and immediate impact on the spatial organization and technological equipment of houses (for example, on the arrangement and decoration of spaces), transforming them into a workspace, it revealed profound changes and permanence, particularly those related to gender roles, education, and class imbalances, which seem to penalize couples with young children and women more than men.

The next chapter adds knowledge about lesser-known spaces in the home and the underlying social dynamics. Strongly permeated by class issues, the "Maid's Room: The Blurred Identity of Live-in Maids," by Amanda Andrade Costa de Mendonça Lima, explores understanding surrounding the definition of family, "as-if" and "family-like" relations by questioning the physical and symbolic place of the live-in housekeeper, both in socioeconomic and historical terms, departing from the analysis of the architectural and social dynamics

of the home. Specifically, Amanda undertakes an intersectional and teleological analysis of the intrinsic devaluation of paid work for social reproduction, based mainly on gender, race, and class inequalities. Ultimately, the chapter proposes a hermeneutic dive into the experience of this working class, revealing both the hierarchical socioeconomic system and its subjectivities. Combining a sociological, philosophical, and anthropological analysis, the ambiguous place of domestic workers becomes clearer, thus promoting a reflection on the multiple layers of understanding surrounding the family and household. Among these, the emotional bonds created with family members are particularly significant, especially with the children for whom they are responsible. As these women reside in their employers' residence and participate in the practical and emotional life of the house and the lines that outline the "architecture of inequality" become more defined, the contour separating this family from their own becomes blurred.

Wasana Handapangoda is the author of the chapter titled "(Re)Making Home(s) on the Move: Sri Lankan Live-In Migrant Domestic Workers in Kuwait." The text departs from the scenario of transnational migration to explore how migrants conceptualize and experience home. Recent theorizing on transnational migration has produced a state of flux in the naturalized conception of home as a fixed, bound, discrete, and trouble-free place of origin, (re)defining home as a project tightly entangled in the functioning of the global capitalist economy. Qualitatively based on the lived experiences of Sri Lankan women who migrated to Kuwait as live-in migrant domestic workers (MDWs), independently of their families, the chapter explores these stories to show the changing meanings of home in the intersection of power and control. The results suggest that MDWs negotiate and construct belonging and not-belonging dialectically in multiple homes, thus being simultaneously "here," "there," and "nowhere." In the analyzed context, home isn't something that is "there" or "behind"; instead, it is taken on a journey with women to a distant, foreign land. In the end, stories of mobility and transformation of Sri Lankan women working in Kuwaiti private homes as live-in MDWs make it possible to understand home, identity and belonging beyond traditional views and in different ways, constructing, and contesting boundaries between "us" and "them," private and public, and global and local. This chapter also adds insightful knowledge to the volume by considering home constructs as a space of (un)making, which is (re)produced through MDWs' own feelings of being at home (or not at home) and those produced by others that make them feel at home (not at home).

The chapter "Zooming Home and Family Gatherings in Pandemic Times: Ritual, Memory, and Identity," co-authored by Ana Rita Nunes da Silva and Rosalina Pisco Costa, brings back the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the relationships between home and family. Specifically, it focuses on art, culture, and society by shedding light on the enduring role of family rituals in creating and maintaining family identity whilst affirming the role of ICT, in both the construction and reproduction of the family dynamics amid pandemic times. The reflection is made on a live-by-Zoom art exhibition opened in March 2021, during the second confinement in Portugal, where family photo albums

and various artifacts are used to show the family's history, and, at the same time, to invite others to imagine the artist's family as well as the family of each viewer. Inspired by an arts-based approach and storytelling sociology, methodologically the paper is based on data collected through direct observation and autoethnography. In the end, it is argued that just as families "live" on Zoom, so do family rituals. The Zoom platform reproduces the family environment, its opportunities, and constraints. Looking at the opening of the art exhibition as a family ritual allows one to think about how individuals have experienced family gatherings during the pandemic, but also how art can generate such family intimacies in such exceptional times.

Still with the pandemic context as a background, "The National Lockout: Impacts of Australia's International Border Closure on Family Relationships and Notions of Citizenship," written by Simona Strungaru and Jo Coghlan, broadens the understanding of the home through the analysis of the impact the restrictions imposed on the entry of travelers into Australia, closing its international borders in March 2020, as an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). The border closures have had a huge impact on the lives of Australian citizens living abroad and the lives of their families. The chapter explores the multiple and diverse effects of the Australian government's decision to close the national border, presenting the lived experiences of Australian citizens negatively affected by the government's decision. Based on an online survey carried out in late 2021 and early 2022, Simona and Jo explore notions of the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship in the context of the pandemic, and the profound impacts that the national lockdown has had on Australians as individuals, family members and in its sense of national identity. The conclusion that the separation of citizens from family during lockdown has placed considerable pressure on the family as a social institution and has had significant impacts on the physical and mental health of Australians is an important and somewhat novel contribution to the current CPFR volume.

The remaining two chapters explore notions of home in strong relation to the parental dyad and the dynamics of parenting, the former in Latinx families and the latter in the Chinese context. "Contextual Factors of Electronic Media Exposure and their Effects on Parent-Infant Interactions in Latinx Families," authored by Katie Lindekugel and Naja Ferjan Ramírez, looks at the broader picture of infants' increased exposure to electronic media in North American families to examine contextual aspects of electronic media exposure, and the effects of electronic media on two types of parent-infant social interactions associated with child language development: parentese (a style of infant-directed speech distinguished by its higher pitch, slower tempo, and exaggerated intonation) and parent-infant turn-taking. The research uses naturalistic daylong recordings collected in the homes of bilingual Spanish-English infants of Latinx descent. Specifically, using Language ENvironment Analysis (LENA), two daylong audio recordings were collected from each family. The results interestingly demonstrate that although all infants were exposed to multiple electronic media sources in English and Spanish, they experienced more adult-directed than child-directed programming.

Furthermore, various devices were found to differentially affect parental language input. As these results contribute to the growing body of research on electronic media and parent–infant interactions, they are particularly important for designing culturally sensitive language interventions and messages using the home as a *locus* for child language development through media exposure.

The volume ends with a chapter titled “Children Belong Nowhere: Discontinued Family Identity of the “Black Children” (*Heihaizi*) of China’s One-Child Policy,” authored by Jingxian Wang. This research aims at explaining the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of the “black children” (*heihai zi*), a very little-known generation that lived in hiding under China’s one-child policy. The term “black children” has mainly been used to describe their absence from their family registration and education. However, this research aims to expand the meaning of being “black” to explain children who were concealed more than at the level of family formal registration, but also physical freedom and emotional bonding. Details of their day-to-day experiences, namely where they lived, how were they raised, who was involved, who benefited from it, and who didn’t. Moving beyond the scholarly considerations that inform the one-child policy, the chapter repositions the “black children” as primary victims and reveals the family as a key figure in the co-production of their diminished status with the support of state power. In closing the volume, this chapter contributes to improve understanding of how these children’s lack of access to ongoing, stabilized, and reciprocally recognized family interactions shaped their own idea of self-worth and identity.

Undoubtedly, these nine chapters result in an extraordinarily rich collection of the *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* series. On the one side, its international scope is fully fulfilled here, with research coming from America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and China. On the other, the diversity of disciplines, theoretical approaches, and research designs attests not only to the multidimensionality of family studies, but also to the importance of a more than disciplinary reading of the topics under study, namely the uses and meanings of the home across space, time, and culture. Finally, despite an (un)expected predominance of female authors, the volume gives voice to single and multiple authorship, by researchers with different backgrounds, with different professional affiliations and experiencing distinct stages of their careers.

An immense and grateful thanks goes to the authors who provided important contributions to the volume, the editorial board, the external reviewers, and the excellent and highly professional staff at Emerald Publishing, for their outstanding assistance in bringing this book to print. Their trust and constant support across the project development were key in successfully reaching this wonderful output.

As we finish writing and reviewing this foreword, sitting calmly and comfortably in our chairs in Évora and New York, we remember and reflect on the way in which our homes were, in themselves, the physical, relational, and symbolic spaces of co-production of this volume. And, at the same time, we wonder how the contributors to this volume experienced the process of writing their manuscripts in specific places, certainly crossed by experiences, imagination, and contestation

around the home, its different architectures, underlying relationships, constitutive artifacts, and assigned meanings. As we wrote at the beginning, the 1964 drama *A House Is Not a Home* remains a timeless and inspiring title for anyone interested in studies of family and home. This volume does nothing but strengthen personal conviction and scientific evidence for those who doubt.

Rosalina Pisco Costa  
Sampson Lee Blair  
Évora/New York

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE NEOLIBERAL REGIME OF DISAPPEARANCE: MOTHERS LIVING WITH THEIR CHILDREN IN CANADIAN MOTELS\*

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*University of Toronto, Canada*

### **FIELD NOTES: SEPTEMBER 24, 2014, SANDS MOTEL**

*Ada opened the door hesitantly and peeked out. She had beautiful brown eyes and long dark hair. She was wearing a simple but elegant black and white dress with bare feet. She smiled and immediately welcomed me into her motel room. I introduced myself as a U of T student doing some research on the motels and she seemed very pleased to see me. I came inside, closed the door and sat down on the only chair in the room.*

*I was immediately accosted by the stale air and smell of old cigarette smoke. Her baby slept on the bed. The room was small. A playpen stood in one corner and two beds pushed together took up most of the floor space in the room. There was an open tiny closet in the corner but there were few clothes and it looked mostly packed with things. One door led to the bathroom. The only thing between the room and the outside was a locked door without even a deadbolt. The brown floral carpet was stained along with the mattresses. The bed sheets were dark and stained, and Ada told me the motel owner gave them a cup to put underneath the dirty bedposts to prevent the bed bugs. When she lifted up the sheets I could see the filthy dark stains on the mattress and the way the mattress itself was sunken in. There was no space to cook, no kitchen.*

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\* Some quotes from interviewees have previously appeared in Vandenberg Giles, M. (2020). Not a home: Shelter families living in Canadian motels. *Current Sociology*, 68(5), 701–718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120927739>.

*The Sands doesn't even have a communal kitchen so there is simply no place to make dinner. The one table stood beside the bed and was covered with KFC, pita bread and diapers. There was a fridge on the left-hand side but not even a hot plate. I could see that in the tiny space between the playpen and the table Ada had some cooking items, a large bowl and some cutlery on the floor.*

*Ada's nine-month-old baby was asleep when I first arrived but then she woke up and there really wasn't anywhere for her to play. She sat in the tiny space on the dirty brown carpet under the table and in front of her playpen. I couldn't imagine what would happen if she tried to learn to walk. There was nothing outside the motel room door but a concrete parking lot. Ada and I sat and talked for a while. Her baby seemed happy most of the time we spoke and smiled when I played peek-a-boo. Ada picked up her baby and we started laughing together as little Azra rolled on the bed making faces. Suddenly, instead of being in a pay-by-the-hour motel room, we were two women enjoying an afternoon conversation about our children.*

### **FIELD NOTES: NOVEMBER 5, 2014, MOTEL NORTH OF TORONTO**

*One chilly November day, I went to visit one of the motels that used to be the main overflow space for a shelter north of Toronto and spoke with the motel owner to understand why they terminated their agreement with the shelter even when they were making a huge profit. I drove up to the isolated motel, hearing the sound of my car tires crunching on gravel amplified in the eerie silence. The dull roar of traffic from the distant highway seemed to evaporate in the cold air. I walked across the littered parking lot and opened the door to the motel, the rusty hinges making a loud creaking noise. There was no one there at first until I called out several times, and finally, an older woman appeared, her hair dishevelled. She waved at me with a smile and said she had the absolute best suites available for a really good price – with a Jacuzzi and everything. She peered behind me to see if I was alone or not and then shrugged. When I indicated that I was a U of T student and would she mind if I asked a few questions about the motel being a shelter for so many years, at first she didn't want to say anything at all.*

*“You know, I really just want to hear your story, too. I think the story of the motel owners is important.” My words seemed to make a difference because she told me to come back to the counter, leaning in close to me.*

*“We used to have people here but you know it was too bad. Those people, they be bringing in bed bugs and you know we still have to deal with this problem. And they leave stuff from the food bank all over the place because they just get fresh stuff. They send the worst to us, the shelter, so no more. We had lots and lots of families here because it's a good place. Swimming pool, laundry... See how big it is? Sometimes the families stayed four or five months looking for housing. But then we had all those problems with drugs and prostitution yeah. Last week, we had a family, two adorable children, 6 and 7 and the mom and dad came in for breakfast and I know. Hey, I can control it because I know those people they are drug dealers. They didn't eat any breakfast and I have a good breakfast, all kinds of things. All jittery.*

*And I called the police and they searched the room but they didn't find the drugs. They wanted to live here but I said no."*

*When I asked if this represented all the families who were directed to the motel from the shelter, the owner grudgingly admitted, "Well, 90% were fine, but the 10% were so bad we just didn't want to deal with it anymore. Most of the families were okay, sure, but then you just can't imagine... this other family... what they did to that room. And the room is all paid for so they just don't care." As I left the motel, I couldn't help noticing the nearly empty parking lot filled with leaves, the chipped paint on the motel walls, and the feeling of desolation that permeated the space.*

In response to increasing familial homelessness in Toronto, the City of Toronto established an agreement between two shelters operated by the city and local motels to serve as "emergency shelters." This was in September 1986 (City of Toronto, 2001, p. 5). Unfortunately, what began as an "emergency solution" continues to be the only "solution" to the increasing number of families experiencing homelessness in Ontario, Canada. At the time of my fieldwork (2010–2017), there remained three primary motels along Kingston Road contracted by the City of Toronto.

The above vignettes from my field notes reveal the inconsistencies and erasures between public policy narratives and representations of the motels and lived realities. While the shelter managers and social workers acknowledge the motels were initially intended as an emergency measure, they continue to reiterate the positives for city usage of motels as family shelter space. Since the arrangement is financially beneficial for motel owners, they also reiterate how the families are "lucky" to be given "free" space in their motels, quick to point out all the advantages of what their motels have to offer and dismissive of any questioning of the living conditions. As indicated above, rather than acknowledging the severe issue of bed bugs in their motels, they prefer to place blame on families from the shelters "bringing" the bed bugs.

Caseworkers will point out the benefits of increased privacy for families and less surveillance. They will point out how with 13 motels available in the city, family shelter space will never reach capacity, and therefore, there will always be space available for needy families. Concepts of "privacy" and the ability for families, particularly mothers, to be able to create their own "domestic" places in the motels are given as good reasons to continue placing families in motels. These concepts associating privacy and domesticity to the motel are placed in juxtaposition to the shelter, identified as a "public" space. The shelter is where families must follow specific strict guidelines, often share rooms and bathrooms, and do not have the ability to create private domestic places for their families.

And yet the inconsistencies in this narrative become immediately apparent. Despite the insistence from individuals working in the homelessness industry that home places can be created in motel rooms, the women I spoke to living in the Sands motel all felt the motel space was not a home place. Given that many of these women had been living for months, and sometimes even years, in these motel rooms did not diminish their assertion that it was *not* a home. A physical space in which to live and length of time did not determine the place of home. A "home" had to be felt, it had to be experienced, and it had to be recognized and acknowledged as a "home." Having a caseworker tell them to keep things tidy

or work harder to make their motel rooms more “home-like,” or a motel owner suggest how “lucky” they were to be there, did not alter the situation for these mothers. If anything, it created an even greater disconnect between the mothers, motel owners and caseworkers.

### WHOSE “HOME” IS IT?

Social workers, motel owners, and faith group volunteers had a particular conceptualization of “home” that they felt should be instilled within the motel residents. As part of my fieldwork, I attended several monthly Faith Group meetings. The Faith Group (pseudonym) is a conglomeration of different faith groups, city organizations such as a local shelter, and community organizations from the local area. It was first established in 1997 by the Scarborough Health Department (now Toronto Public Health) when they arranged to meet with local faith groups to address the influx of Roma refugee families arriving in Toronto and being placed in the local motel rooms.

On one cold March evening, we all sat around the meeting room table in the church basement, the hot air blowing as the discussion became even more heated. With an influx of new members into the community, the Faith Group had expanded and diversified, but with this also came diverse interests. The discussion that evening was centered on the future of the Faith Group and where funding should be primarily directed. The conversation began by asking the question, “Are we going to be the political voice for particular issues such as affordable housing, or do we want to become more directive and membership-driven?” As was indicated, “We’ve never had this much money so now the challenge is how to best utilize it. We don’t want to keep it in the pot.” The response quickly revealed a distinctive divide between the members from the United, Anglican and Catholic Church who had initiated the Faith Group and felt strongly that the motels were the central reason for the Faith Group to exist, and the new evangelical faith-group members who strongly felt future funding should be primarily directed to expanding and renovating their own churches, doing fundraising and marketing drives to increase membership, and exclusively providing support to their own faith community members. In both cases, ideas of “home” were utilized to indicate the most “deserving” groups worthy of church support.

There have been very few Roma refugees since the 2000s and the majority of motel residents are now Canadian-born. Despite this, one faith group volunteer said,

The Roma, it’s just how they live you know. They punch holes in the wall just to see each other. They don’t like to be alone. They live in tents in Hungary. No attachment to anything. They just keep moving. They make a mess of places there so they do the same here. No sense of home at all.

There was a distinctive concept of who was most “deserving” of aid. As was mentioned, the motel residents would accept the welcome packages and anything else that was offered but then refused to ever attend any of the church services.

And if they did come to the church, it was only to pick up food items or clothing. Despite handing out brochures and encouraging them to become part of the church community, the motel residents appeared to show a complete lack of interest. The consensus was that they were eager to accept free items but dismissive of the faith-group members who worked so hard to provide them with those free things. As one faith group member said, “There’s always people that rush to the troff if you know what I mean.”

However, in response to this, other members argued passionately for the need to maintain affordable housing as a central priority and not become exclusively membership-driven. As one member stated emphatically in response to the above statement, “Can’t stop a good thing because of some that abuse it.” Another member pointed out how the cost of TTC fare to attend a church service was simply more than a mother with several children could afford, not to mention the difficulty of taking her children on transit with a stroller. This member further stated that she felt the very reason the motel program was so effective is that it brought the church directly into the community. The point was not to increase their membership but to provide a necessary social service. Rather than being inwardly focused, these members believed, “The faith community has an active role in social change.” They also utilized images of “home” to augment their arguments:

We need to be the conscience for our politicians. Housing is the core of what we’re about in the Faith Group. Trying to find housing for people in motels. We can’t give up the fight for affordable housing. It is an alliance of working together. We care for people and we advocate for people. Poverty and homelessness are the most important things. It can’t just be housing. We have to look at the whole family and offer things so they can feel like they have a home.

As can be seen, for all social actors within the homelessness sector, “home” provides a powerful construct that is utilized to push for various agendas.

## **FIELD NOTES: SEPTEMBER 24, 2014, SANDS MOTEL**

### *Ada’s Story*

If we now juxtapose the above words from the faith group volunteers and the motel owner with Ada’s story, the incongruence is obvious. When Ada and I were talking that cold September afternoon, after a moment, I left my perch on the chair and went to pick up her baby girl. I was hesitant at first since I didn’t want to overstep my boundary as a researcher; however, it quickly became obvious that Ada was eager for human connection since she mentioned that in an average week she often scarcely spoke to anyone except her case worker and her husband. As I played with Azra, Ada proceeded to tell me about the circumstances that brought her to the motel and how she felt living there.

“So how long have you been living in the motel?” I asked, discreetly placing the recorder between us on the bed when Ada said she didn’t mind.

“Everything here six months. Pregnancy 6 months, 6 months here.”

“Oh! I didn’t even realize you were pregnant!” We both laughed and Ada nodded. Her slim figure belied any indication that she was already six months along.

“So you’ve been living in this motel room for six months and you’re six months pregnant?” I asked to clarify. Ada said she was struggling with her English and I didn’t want to misunderstand anything. Ada nodded again.

“And how old is your daughter?”

“9 months.”

“Wow.” Ada laughed again, indicating that yes, it wasn’t easy having a baby and being pregnant so quickly again.

“Hi there! Oh, peek-a-boo!” I played with Azra while she cooed and gurgled. Ada and I talked a bit about what it’s like to be a mom and how hard it can be looking after a baby, especially when Ada’s husband was always away either working or looking for work.

“So what do you think of this motel?” I asked casually.

“Big problem here. This motel, everything no good. Here have nothing. One bed. One toilet. Here cooking. We have nothing here in Canada. No refugee claim. We’re going home. My home, Croatia. We have no house, no nothing.”

“Your refugee claim was not accepted?”

“No. Every day you wait for document. Waiting for passport go home now. But we have no house, no nothing in Croatia. No home.”

“What has it been like for you living in this motel for six months waiting for documents?”

Ada shook her head and pointed to Azra. “Ah, this child cannot eat. My social worker, she tell me, go home, Croatia. She give me 150 dollars for food, for everything. She no help me.”

“How often does your social worker come by?”

“She bring me check. 11, 12, 5 o clock at night. I going to shopping, food. Milk for baby. Pampers. Everything’s more money. Everything is my problem. My social worker tells me go home, go home. You’re waiting for document. Go home. You no like giving you money. There is no program. There is nothing now.”

“How old are you?”

“19.”

“Did your social worker tell you about any programs for young moms?”

“I don’t know. She no give me tokens. No bring me nothing. We have nothing. Every week someone tell me go here, go there, but they give me nothing. She tell go this, come there. I say I have no tokens. You give me 150 dollars for food, pampers for baby, for milk, everything. But is 50 dollars for pampers, 30 dollars for this, 4 dollars for milk. Money is gone.”

“So you feel like your social worker keeps asking you to go to programs and do things but doesn’t give you any transit money to get there?”

“No. And we have nothing. We have no home. This is no home, this motel. We have nothing. We have no money.”

Our conversation was interrupted as the baby made gurgling noises and started to cry a bit. She could feel her mother’s distress. I realized that my questions were making Ada unhappy and I was starting to feel emotional myself so I switched the topic and talked about my 7-year-old daughter and what it was like when she was a baby. Ada smiled again and nodded, wanting to share her own stories of mothering.

“Happy for my child. She is my child. Happy mom. She like going to shopping. Everything is this, my child. She get everything. This first my child. She’s everything. My child happy. She no like sleep in bed. She like to going outside, every minute, every day. She sleeping in stroller. She no like everything in one room. She like go out.”

“Does it make it hard sometimes living here?”

“Can no stress for baby. You can’t stress. You go outside. Put stress outside. This child, she’s everything you understand.”

“This is a difficult situation.”

“Ah, yes. They put in this motel. Look.” Azra pointed to the small, cramped room. “Yeah, cockroaches, bedbugs in bed. She eat me. In bedroom. No helping, this motel. I tell my social worker, change this motel. She tell me, big problem to change. Fight here. No camera. Nothing here. Come outside. You can look at everybody here. Come the police. Look here. One door.”

“There isn’t even a latch.”

“No. There is nothing here. This motel, I don’t know. Think Canada help me. No help. In Croatia everything broken. People broken. Not happy here. Not happy go home. Don’t know what we’re doing.”

“So you’re in limbo?”

“Yeah. This motel, no good for child. Family here, but no home. Everybody tell me, why you come here in Canada? You lost everything.” The baby started to cry and I realized that I was creating a stressful situation. I nodded and stood up.

“Would it be okay if I come back and visit sometimes?”

“Yes, yes. Thank you very much!” Ada nodded and smiled, taking my hand in hers. I smiled back.

## FIELD NOTES: FEBRUARY 25, 2014, STARS MOTEL

*I met Sarah today to visit the Stars Motel. She showed me the store room where they keep all the donated items they give to new motel residents as part of the welcome package. She’s been visiting the Stars Motel for nearly six years every two weeks as part of the motel visit program organized through the local church and coordinated by the Faith Group. The store room was filled with an assortment of items. As Sarah said, “Some people bring nice things, but for others it seems it’s just easier for them to bring it here than throw it in the garbage.”*

*I could see a pile of multicoloured mittens with few matching pairs, snow pants, boxes of old chipped dishes, donated toiletry items and half-filled bottles, and worn clothes. “We don’t take it to the families anymore. The way I see it, they need to show some initiative too. They can take a short bus ride and come pick up what they need.” The small store room was in the church basement at the end of a long hallway.*

Discarded things – things that become irrelevant, things that could just as easily have been thrown in the garbage. Things that people no longer want cluttering their homes. And yet, these *things*, this garbage becomes treasure when it is given away for free. The motel residents need to show they are worthy of such things, even though many of the mothers living in the motels were struggling themselves with

an overabundance of things and nowhere to put them. For many of the women, they had to leave behind their entire lives when they came to the motel. That meant either paying monthly to put their things in a storage unit or cramming whatever they could into the corners and closets of the tiny motel room. The disjuncture between expectations in the homelessness sector of what motel residents need versus lived realities for the women in the motels is stark, but never more so than witnessing that dark storeroom piled high with broken and leftover items.

## THE NEOLIBERAL REGIME OF DISAPPEARANCE

In our current era of neoliberal globalization, how are we witnessing the creation of poverty in the midst of corporate wealth in North America?

Thirty years of neoliberal economic and political governance has created increasing poverty and income polarization. The “free” market economic discourse bolstered by the social discourse of “productivity” have unified to create a hegemonic alliance that rhetorically silences the presence and needs of those most impoverished by the neoliberal ascendancy. Due to the increasing financialization of society leading to a “marketization” of nearly every aspect of social/cultural life, the neoliberal ethos has penetrated our very consciousness, effectively taking “poverty” and “homelessness” off the agenda in terms of both public policy and public awareness. (Vandenbeld Giles, 2011, pp. 198–199)

This rhetoric of silence is defined by Judith [Goode](#) and [Jeff Maskovsky](#) (2001) as

a regime of disappearance: a mode of governance, economy, and politics in which the poor are not so much vilified as they are marginalized or erased by the institutional and ideological aspects of work, social welfare, and politics that are dominant under neoliberalism. (p. 10)

As the globalized neoliberal world becomes increasingly precarious with political/climate change refugees and job migration, the constant flux has produced greater focus on what the concept of “home” actually means. As individuals and families increasingly migrate, issues of housing become paramount. My narrative ethnographic research is an attempt to situate this globalized space of mobility within the localized space of Ontario, and primarily Toronto. How do globalized discourses of homelessness become localized specifically in Toronto’s increasing housing crisis? How can personal stories of mothers living with their children in Ontario motel rooms help us understand the globalized terrain of housing and homelessness?

A historical analysis of families experiencing homelessness (particularly mothers) post-1995 in Ontario enables situating the housing crisis (especially in Toronto) within the shifting neoliberal policies of merit/risk assessment that have infiltrated welfare states globally – transitioning the accessing of welfare services and resources from a *use-value* to *exchange-value* paradigm. Instead of focusing attention on the immediate material needs of mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario, the focus becomes one of bureaucratic risk assessment consistent with the neoliberal economic ethos of futurity. Mothers are categorized and assessed for various levels of potential *future* risk leading to a negation and disappearance