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To cite this article: Edith England (2025) 'Homelessness is a queer experience.': utopianism and mutual aid as survival strategies for homeless trans people, *Housing Studies*, 40:7, 1545-1562, DOI: [10.1080/02673037.2022.2108381](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2108381)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2108381>



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Published online: 10 Aug 2022.



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‘Homelessness is a queer experience.’: utopianism and mutual aid as survival strategies for homeless trans people

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ABSTRACT

Trans people are at considerably elevated risk of homelessness, yet services poorly meet their needs. I explore how community support, anchored in queer praxis and concrete utopian thinking enables trans people to survive homelessness. Drawing upon interviews with 35 trans people who have recently experienced homelessness in Wales, I explore how queer practices of mutual aid, contextualized by utopian possibility, engender community support for trans people experiencing homelessness. I argue that trans and queer communities provide extensive, often exhausting, practical, material and emotional support which counters well-established queer exclusion within statutory services. I show that community support is critical to the survival of homeless trans people within a complex and unwelcoming system, and that informal crisis alternatives are enabled by idealism, hope and pragmatism. These findings are important in visibilising how shared precarity produces practices of care, in offering strategies to address inequitable service failures, and in demonstrating the relevance of queer theoretical approaches to housing justice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 August 2021
Accepted 27 July 2022

KEYWORDS

Trans; queer;
queer theory

Introduction

Trans people- those whose gender identity does not match that assigned to them at birth- are at considerably elevated risk of homelessness. This reflects their marginalized legal, bureaucratic and socio-economic status (Wilson *et al.*, 2020) and consequent prevalence of common vectors into homelessness such as poverty, employment and housing discrimination, physical and mental ill-health, and compromised access to medical care (England, 2021; Bachman & Gooch, 2018; Ecker *et al.*, 2019; Kattari & Begun, 2017; Reck, 2009; Shelton, 2016; Spicer, 2010). There is a growing awareness that LGBTQ+ people as a group have specific needs in terms of avoiding, resolving and surviving homelessness (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2018; Ecker *et al.*, 2019; Matthews *et al.*, 2019). However, trans people remain especially poorly provided for within homelessness services internationally (Abramovich, 2012; ILGA

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Europe *et al.*, 2021; Pyne, 2011). There is a broader dearth of research on trans people as social individuals, and especially into their experiences of poverty, economic instability and homelessness. Further, the limited existing research tends to consider trans people only at very specific points in the lifecycle: primarily under the age of 25, or more recently, among older (primarily post-retirement) trans people (Abramovich, 2016; Willis *et al.*, 2021).

Mutual aid – community-level empowerment based within recognition of shared precarity (Spade, 2020) – has a long, radical history. By providing a framework for marginalized groups, including queer and trans people, to create meaningful social alternatives both to, and within, mainstream welfare and housing provision, mutual aid has become a significant movement internationally, gaining visibility in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Chevée, 2022). Mutual aid centres recognition of shared vulnerability and consequent importance of maintaining community resilience in the face of erasing, negating and harmful systems (Spade, 2015). Reflecting a wider failure to attend to the labour of marginalized groups (Pearce, 2020), the possibilities created by such active, resistive praxes of dwelling have received little attention, yet are critical to ensuring queer survival (Berlant *et al.*, 2012; Butler *et al.*, 2016; Scicluna, 2015). Through queer utopianism (Muñoz, 2019) mutual aid offers a practical enactment of a deeper theoretical approach to trans and queer precarity which has crystalized, within the academy, into ‘queer theory’ (Brim, 2020). Queer theory challenges heteronormative, binarised understandings of social organization. It has been successfully mobilized by activist movements to reframe resource (de)prioritization and scarcity as acts of symbolic violence (see Halberstam, 2005; Malatino, 2020; Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Queer utopianism extends queer theory into appreciation of the pragmatic necessity of shared precarity, tethering it to an idealized possibility of queer inclusion (Muñoz, 2019).

I explore how informal support structures provided by the wider trans community improve outcomes for trans people experiencing housing precarity, both by backfilling hard-to-access services and by providing suitable alternatives. Informed by analysis of interviews with 35 trans people experiencing homelessness, I argue that trans and queer communities provide extensive, often exhausting, practical, material and emotional support, countering documented queer exclusion within statutory services. Community support is critical to the survival of homeless trans people within a complex and unwelcoming system, but for those unable to stay in the system, informal crisis alternatives are enabled by idealism, hope and pragmatism. I show this to arise from belief in the urgent potential of community-driven change. I suggest that insights from these radical, imaginative and yet intensely practical approaches can facilitate development of strategies for meaningful improvement to services. I draw upon an unusually large qualitative data corpus of trans people’s experiences of homelessness to make a significant, urgent contribution to understanding queer homelessness as an internationally poorly understood, persistent, social injustice, providing a timely intervention into debates surrounding scope and form of provision for queer homeless people by demonstrating that both statutory protections and commissioned services for homeless trans people are functionally unworkable without substantial emotional and practical labour from marginalized communities.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, I explore existing approaches to LGBTQ+homelessness. I then discuss how mutual aid and queer utopianism both operate to reconceptualize queer homelessness. Next, I describe the methodological approach and methods, including a discussion of the complexity of representing queer and trans experience. I then present results, before arguing for the importance of these findings for service planning and provision.

Queer activism and practice: mutual aid, queer utopias and ‘everyday hope’

Queer theory is well-established academically as an approach which disturbs settled cisheteronormative assumptions through rendering them visible (Matthews *et al.*, 2019). This analytic has long been deployed within queer activist spaces to shape community action, offering insights into how a normative understanding of binarised, stable, gendered societal arrangements structurally marginalize LGBTQ+ people (Brim, 2020; Butler *et al.*, 2016; Cohen, 2019; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Muñoz, 2019). Queer utopianism is an imaginative approach connecting queer theory to the pragmatic help prevalent in queer, and other marginalized, identity-based communities. Through visioning how society *should* be, while connecting this explicitly back to the messy, imperfect present, queer utopianism rejects both the ‘banal optimism’ (Muñoz, 2019) and the simplistic negation of reality characterizing much abstract utopian thinking (Levitas, 1990). Rather, in queer utopianism, future possibilities matter because they shape the present, creating a realm of ‘educated hope’ (Muñoz, 2019, p. 3), in which the ideal future structures the present through an ‘anticipatory illumination’ (Muñoz, 2019, p. 104). The marginalization experienced by queer people renders utopian thinking an *inevitable* part of community responses: to improve the present it, it is necessary to look beyond the present and to an alternative in which queerness does not only survive, but is valued, celebrated and encouraged (Butler, 2002; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2019). Queer utopianism is a pragmatic, working approach. It values disappointment as essential to process of creating useful and workable alternatives to queer negation, and through which a queer present can be sustained (Levitas, 1990; Muñoz, 2019).

Mutual aid movements reject the idea that core human needs (such as food and shelter) should be met through competition. Rather, they understand precarity as a *consequence* of structural marginalization, tethering appreciation of shared vulnerability to valorization of community level solutions (Butler *et al.*, 2016). This recognizes a need for political, structural change which encompasses, but extends beyond, an emergency response to immediate injury. Mutual aid logics understand addressing social problems as a necessary, radical, collective act arising from practical assistance (Spade, 2020). Queer mutual aid movements are a concrete embodiment of queer utopianism, with a longstanding community history of offering practical, material help based on shared precarity rather than charity. Intra-community dependence becomes retooled as a *vital* response to shared need (Berlant *et al.*, 2012; Butler *et al.*, 2016; Hedva, 2016; Lynch *et al.*, 2021; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Willse, 2015). Mananzala & Spade (2008) argue that removing a bifurcation between service-users and service-providers, and so attending to both the *kinds* of help and

advice needed and the *way* in which this advice should be offered produces services which are appropriate to the needs of the community, efficient, and empowering. This approach is exemplified by the longstanding New York based Sylvia Rivera Law Project (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Recognizing that trans people are especially likely to face both poverty and legal precarity (due to well-documented high rates of discrimination and social and legal exclusion – see Spade, 2015), the Project offers ‘free, quality, respectful, affirming legal services’ (Mananzala & Spade, 2008, p. 64) targeted specially at low-income trans people, particularly trans people of colour. Inherent to their approach is commitment to non-hierarchical capacity building within the trans community: they aim to cultivate a useful service run by the community itself.

Homelessness through a queer lens

The queer theoretical lens discussed above invites consideration of how systemic marginalization *produces* poverty, economic precarity and lack of access to secure housing among trans and queer people (Currah & Mulqueen, 2011; Gleeson *et al.*, 2021; Mananzala & Spade, 2008). This centres the link between forms of systematic, structural and symbolic violence faced by trans people, (including bureaucratic erasure, legal exclusion and societal stigmatization and economic exclusion (impoverishment, economic precarity and difficulty accessing and maintaining accommodation, particularly within highly financialized private housing markets dominant in the UK, North America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) (Abramovich, 2016; Hulse & Morris, 2017; Mananzala & Spade, 2008).

At an international policy level, the substantial turn toward prevention within homelessness services has been motivated by awareness that homelessness is a traumatic, highly disruptive experience in its own right, and that early, appropriate interventions are critical to mitigating its impacts (Mackie *et al.*, 2017). Yet mainstream homelessness services are a space where trans people continue to face both direct and indirect discrimination, marginalization and exclusion (England, 2021, 2022; Mottet & Ohle, 2006; Pyne, 2011). This operates both directly, (as service refusal) and indirectly, (as maintenance of exclusionary access requirements, such as gendered dress codes for service users – see Pyne, 2011). In the last few decades, liberal rights legislation has introduced anti-discrimination protection within public services for trans people internationally. While the scope and enforceability of these is questionable (Gedalof, 2018; Spade, 2015), they nevertheless establish service inclusion as a default (Matthews & Poyner, 2020). Documented continued exclusion from public services has been associated with system design and implementation approaches which overlook trans people’s existence or needs, producing identify invalidation, obstructing access to specialist medical care and failing to offer protection from discrimination (England, 2021; Seelman, 2015; Spade, 2015).

Separate services reduce minority stress, reduce the risk of targeted identity-based violence, and provide a space of normalcy (Mottet & Ohle, 2006; Pyne, 2011; Willse, 2015). British homelessness departments increasingly commission separate, specialist LGBTQ+ services to meet the specific needs of LGBTQ+ people (Pyne, 2011; Willse,

2015). The Welsh Ty Pride project offers temporary accommodation for homeless LGBTQ+ youth, while the English Albert Kennedy Trust is a long-established youth LGBTQ+ homelessness provider (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2018). In London, UK, the Outside Project is especially significant in offering a range of targeted services to homeless LGBTQ+ adults.

However, specialist service provision has practical limitations. It is often geographically specific, centred in large urban areas and so is less helpful to rural homeless queer people (England, 2021; Matthews *et al.*, 2019). Services also tend to be age-specific, mostly targeted at those under 25. Not only does this produce a dearth of services for those who remain or become homeless when older, but it reinscribes an individualized understanding of LGBTQ+ homelessness as the result of family ignorance and prejudice (Spade, 2015; Willse, 2015), masking a wider context in which gender and/or sexual identity operate to amplify established risk factors for homelessness – notably poverty, certain early experiences, institutionalization and mental and physical ill-health (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; McNeil *et al.*, 2012; Willse, 2015). Specific homelessness provision for trans people is especially limited. Despite having a well-established statutory homelessness service, the UK has no dedicated hostels or services for trans people experiencing homelessness.

Queer communities have long provided informal, pragmatic responses alongside or instead of statutory and third sector/not-for-profit homelessness services, relying on community activism, fundraising and informal labour to offer both relief from homelessness and protection from the psychological, emotional, social and physical impacts of housing precarity. Active creation of physical as well as ontological home for young queer people lacking either or both is evident within, for instance, North American ball culture (Bailey, 2014), and mutual aid practices evident within the House of Tulip – a co-operative established, managed and staffed by trans people with personal experience of homelessness (House of Tulip, 2021). Although small-scale, hyper-local and temporally transient responses to community specific needs predominate, grassroots queer responses to homelessness have become mainstream, funded and long-term. The British Albert Kennedy Trust developed from community-based direct-provision of accommodation and psychological support for queer homeless youth, to a multi-city operation with a £2.1 million turnover, which collaborates with statutory services (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2018; Carr & Hunter, 2012; Charity Commission, 2020). The relationship between queer community responses and mainstream services provision is, therefore, porous, with in-community responses of considerable historical importance in instigating and shaping LGBTQ+ specific homeless provision.

This demonstrable in-community expertise in addressing homelessness has been largely unconsidered within scholarly housing literature. Understanding how theoretical orientations such as queer utopianism translate to mutual aid practices offers insight into how services might be adapted to better meet the needs of this highly precaritized and often functionally excluded population. I now look to the practices deployed by homeless trans people and their communities to engender survival amid, and beyond statutory responses.

Methods

This study draws upon two complimentary datasets (Dataset 1 and Dataset 2, below) to understand the experiences of trans people who have experienced homelessness in Wales since 2015. *Dataset 1* draws on interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019 which aimed to develop understanding of the experiences of trans people under the new Housing (Wales) Act 2014. Interview questions included experiences of homelessness, experiences of interactions with services, and outcomes, with content and length participant led. *Dataset 2* drew on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2017 from a qualitative study exploring trans people's experiences of child-rearing. Participants in *Dataset 2* had experienced very high rates of homelessness, with 7 of the study's 16 participants giving detailed accounts of homelessness experiences. As for *Dataset 1*, their homelessness occurred when their children were not resident with them, making them 'single homeless' applicants under UK law. Given the ethical benefits of re-using data gathered from over-researched populations (Lombardi, 2018), and the relevance of these interviews to the research question, inclusion of these additional interviews was felt to strengthen the study. The 7 interviews were re-analyzed alongside those from *Dataset 1* as a single data corpus. Dataset 2 participants were not explicitly asked about experiences of homelessness, nor the homelessness system. However, as with *Dataset 1*, because a semi-structured, participant-led approach was used, where participants began to discuss experiences of homelessness, appropriate questions were asked, and these were very similar to those in *Dataset 1*. Ethical approval for *Dataset 1* was obtained from Cardiff University School of Geography and Planning ethics board, Ethical approval for *Dataset 2* was obtained from Swansea University School of Social Sciences ethics board.

For both studies, all participants were aged over 18 at the time of the interview, and all consented to participation, including interview recording and data re-use. Both studies comprised semi-structured interviews with trans people who had experienced homelessness in Wales since 2015. Recruitment for both studies was primarily through social media, in conjunction with various homelessness and LGBTQ+ specific organizations. Social media recruitment enabled participation from those unknown to, or disengaged from, homelessness services. Participants were interviewed either face-to-face or via teleconferencing, according to preference and convenience. Interview length varied from around 30 minutes to up to 5 hours: participants were encouraged to take regular breaks and to split the interview over several days if they became extended. Allowing participants to determine the length and direction of interviews was regarded as important in affording participants control over their own narratives (see England, 2021, 2022 for fuller discussion).

The total data corpus produced by combining the interviews from participants who met inclusion criteria in the two studies comprises around 85 hours of interview data. To ensure a cohesive and representative set of themes, the data corpus was reanalysed and coded as a single dataset. Themes arose iteratively, through a process of repeated reading and coding (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

Demographic observations

All participants who had experienced homelessness self-defined as trans. Homelessness followed the expansive UK legal definition of homelessness as where an individual or household has nowhere to reside which is safe, secure and adequate (England, 2021; FEANSTA & the Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2019). None of those whose interviews formed part of this study's dataset had children with them when they became homeless. For those included in both *Dataset 1* and *Dataset 2*, routes into homelessness were often complex, including a combination of familial and relationship breakdown, domestic violence, economic precarity and loss of employment, and an inability to secure affordable private rented sector housing. Experiences while homeless were varied, and included rough sleeping, sleeping in vehicles, sofa surfing, and staying with friends as a 'hidden household' (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2019) over a prolonged period. Most had contacted statutory homelessness services at least once, with just over half either entering hostel accommodation or engaging with services over an extended period in an attempt to find accommodation. Very few, however, had remained engaged with the system beyond a few months, or had their situation resolved through the actions of the Local Authority.² At the time of interview, around half of all participants remained legally homeless. No participant was able to access specialist LGBTQ+ services: none existed in Wales at the time of the studies.

A note on pronouns and identities

Participants were often reluctant to identify themselves by gender identity. Several spontaneously resisted *anticipated* questions about gender identity, linking them to societal judgements which failed to capture the complexity of lived gender (Currah & Mulqueen, 2011). Maeve (she) described feeling, in similar encounters, that she was expected to 'offer up my gender for a pass/fail' Participants who did spontaneously identify or describe their genders offered varied categories, including trans man, trans woman, non-binary, agender, woman with a trans past, 'bear' and 'just me', meaning that inter-gender comparison was of limited utility. Where participants did define or describe their gender(s), this has been noted after their pseudonym.

'Just keep going' mutual aid structures and queer survival

This section explores how community-level caring practices operate in the interstices of statutory services to make them fit for purpose for trans people. Alienation and disengagement were high among participants, reflecting wider trends (McNeil *et al.*, 2012). Ongoing service engagement relied upon significant psychological, emotional, and practical support and community scaffolding. This pragmatic response to shared vulnerability operated as mutual aid. Initial engagement with services frequently depended on the advice and encouragement of others in the community. Trans and queer friends were often critical in helping participants recognise that their situation constituted homelessness, and that they were deserving of assistance. Maeve's friends

(she) – ‘*yeah just a trans woman*’ helped her realize that she could get help through homelessness services by validating her right to help ‘*In my head, well there’s people who need it more ... my friends were – you’re kipping on our sofa love ...*’

This support became apparent during the difficult application process. For trans applicants, the prevalence of bio-securitization, wherein the identity of applicants becomes closely scrutinized, questioned and categorized and repeatedly categorized in line with bureaucratic-legal requirements, was an emotionally difficult experience (England, 2021, 2022; Currah & Mulqueen, 2011). Support from friends was especially important here. Paul (he) ‘*trans man*’ explained how the physical presence of two trans friends visibilized and normalized queer, trans identity. Curating a space where practical change could occur reduced ongoing traumatic and invalidating misgendering (Kapusta, 2016).

Cos they [friends] were talking about me, so they [friends] were saying him, he this, you know, and correcting him [the caseworker] and he was like oh yeah it’s him? And I was like ‘oh yeah it’s Paul.’ So that meant everything got everything changed over. Yeah they [friends] were brilliant, supporting me.

Community support scaffolded applicants in managing system interactions. For Tomos (he), – ‘*I’m a boy!*’ – his then-partner and friends offered critical support which helped him to comprehend and navigate humiliating and disempowering interactions with homelessness services. Although young and estranged from his family, and despite a commitment within the Welsh system to offer targeted, ongoing support for all applicants, especially those considered vulnerable (England, 2021) he was largely left to advocate for himself. Violence from other residents led to repeated changes of hostel. He was routinely misgendered by staff, and not offered help to access either mental health or gender affirming specialist services. He survived the experience through practical, psychological support offered by his (trans) friends and (trans) partner. An important component of this was idealism. His support network helped him to contextualize his struggle within the wider marginalization of queer people. This psychological validation then enabled him to access his legal rights. On at least one occasion his partner’s time-critical, crisis support over the phone prevented him from simply abandoning his placement in the middle of the night. With her support and advocacy, he then secured an alternative placement quickly, and so remained engaged with homelessness services.

She was ‘right, yeah, you’re right, yeah, but get through the night, make it to the morning, not long, just keep going.’ In the morning, [I was] messaging her, packing my stuff, and she just talked me through it all, what to say, my rights, I sounded like ‘yeah, don’t mess with me!’

Practical support from the wider trans community was also offered in the form of reprieves from temporary homelessness accommodation. Although supported accommodation can, for some individuals, provide a space where gender and sexual identity can be expressed (Tunåker, 2015), temporary accommodation in the UK and internationally is often a hostile, exclusive place where trans people are in psychological and physical danger (England, 2021; Pyne, 2011). Short respites from emergency accommodation placements enabled applicants to remain engaged with

homelessness services. Marguerite (she) – ‘*I’m just me! I’m going to say transsexual*’ – stayed intermittently with trans friends while technically in Local Authority temporary accommodation. This offered her both access to community and functional crisis support extending beyond what the Local Authority could provide her. On one occasion, she was attacked in the bed and breakfast accommodation – ‘*I was robbed, robbed and beaten up ...*’ The Local Authority response was to move her to a more secure, but geographically isolated, hostel. Rejecting this due to concern for her physical and psychological wellbeing, Marguerite decided to stay with her friends. Their rapid, sensitive help both addressed her physical safety and offered meaningful ontological security (McNaughton Nicholls & Nicholls, 2010). After this respite, she felt able to re-engage with homelessness services.

I had friends who were very kind and very willing to let me stay for a few nights, they looked after me a bit which helped no end...It felt like [inhales, exhales]. I could feel my fingers and toes again ... I’d just been surviving for so long.

Community support enabled people to tolerate intensely heteronormative hostel spaces (England, 2021). For Will (he) – ‘*just a trans man*’, his friends’ identity validation support enabled his psychological survival within an intensely heterosexualised hostel space. Most other residents were young mothers, targeted by ongoing pedagogical interventions to improve their performance of gendered home-making, and ability to re-produce heteronormative ‘family time’ (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2014; Halberstam, 2005; Heath & Scicluna, 2020). Will did not experience explicit transphobia in the hostel. However, the lack of clear inclusion or planned provision made him feel like an afterthought, reinforcing his sense that the space was simply not one in which he belonged (England, 2021) – ‘*they’d got something in common and that’s not me, so I just kept myself to myself*’. He recalled his surprise at once seeing rainbow flags in the reception area one Pride weekend. These were without context and occurred absent of affirmation from staff, and so offered Will no reassurance that, as a trans man, *he* was welcomed and that his needs would be listened to sympathetically. Reflecting Massey’s observation that space is dialectically constructed and gains meaning *through* human interactions (Massey, 2013), Will’s sense of isolation was intensified, rather than diminished, by the appearance of commercialized, disembodied trappings of LGBTQ+ culture. They highlighted to him that the organization was not interested in understanding *his* needs, rather simply in performative equality.

The hostel, they put a couple of little flags just in a jar...with pens and...yeah the rainbow flags. You know it was probably one of the staff...I don’t know if that was for me, no one said anything.

Will’s close group of trans friends were critical in enabling him to reframe and de-normalize the suffocating, invisibilizing heteronormativity of hostel space. In contrast to the generic, non-interactive staging of inclusivity by the hostel, his friends deployed care which intricately reflecting *his* specific needs as a homeless queer person (Cooper, 2009). On one occasion, a friend brought him a trans pride flag and suggested he display it proudly in his window. For Will, this gesture was

significant. It linked him to his community, demonstrating how a queer, methodology of hope (Muñoz, 2019) might operate in to a limited, harsh, *here and now*.

He wanted to put a, you know, the flag over the window. Yeah. 'So you're bathed in our light.' Which was, uh...sweet [laughs]. And I imagine he'd had to go all the way to ebay for the flag [laughs].

However, this also highlighted, for Will, the risks of his minoritized gender within the hostel. He did not display the flag: he worried that openly identifying as trans might be dangerous physically and psychologically (England, 2021; Doan, 2010; Matthews *et al.*, 2019; Pyne, 2011). It therefore reinforced his isolation, emphasizing to him that neither his domiciled friends, nor the hostel staff, really understood how queer identity and housing precarity translated to material limits upon his ability to use his room as a location of safe self-expression (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2014). Both his homeless experience *and* his trans identity meant his perspective was unique. However, because his friends were willing to explore, adapt to and accommodate his needs, he nevertheless saw these relationships as validating, a space where *his* complexities were recognized and valued.

No, it was nice, nice thought. Bit too much to be on show though, cos of how the place is laid out, cos you can see my room, my window, from the grass, so you know, I had to say, mate...he was actually apologizing, don't apologize mate...I put it in my wardrobe in the end, cos it was a nice thought, having it.

In this section I have shown that even apparently inclusive systems are supported by the work of trans communities. They create care practices anchored in a understanding of need and precarity derived from marginalization. This work is seldom acknowledged by those providing services yet offers an essential psychological and emotional support which enables trans people to tolerate a hard-to-navigate, invisibilizing system. The next section considers the operation of these care practices: the 'concrete utopian' (Muñoz, 2019, p. 3) pragmatic hope governing this queer response.

'There but for the grace of god go I': Envisioning queer futures

Queer utopianism offers hope from which to draw energy and inspiration to address inequalities in the present. It both links current inequalities to wider structural injustice and offers a framework through which to develop different approaches (Muñoz, 2019). This was evident in the response of queer communities to the ontological insult engendered by rooflessness. Queer communities tried to provide more substantial, medium-term assistance to address physical, psychological and emotional needs. Rapid provision of short-term accommodation, alongside emotional support and validation, was often critical in mitigating the impact of homelessness where applicants had disengaged from services. For Kay (they) 'non-binary', staying with slightly older friends informally enabled them to avoid the potentially dangerous shelter accommodation offered to them by the local authority – 'I ain't good at fighting, I'm gangly, I know myself. I'm a little bit too much of a femme to go up against people'. Kay lacked legal security in the house: they did not have a tenancy

agreement or a right to occupy, and so remained homeless under UK law. When the landlady visited – Kay had to ‘*scramble to hide [their] stuff*’. However, because the ethos of the house centred queer egalitarian visioning, Kay nevertheless experienced ontological security. Their flat mates own experience of housing and economic precarity gave Kay confidence that they were capable of providing them with the attentive, empowering, and ongoing reciprocal care which they *specifically* needed as a homeless trans young person: it ensured that Kay was not othered or objectified as a result of their homelessness. It also operated as a form of insurance, because it meant that their flat mates were operating from a position not only of empathy but recognition of their own precarity.

I'd see it as different to sofa surfing....The people I'm living with, they're also queer, that's why they did it, it's security then, there's that added safety. They've all been through a lot of the same things and so there's just an understanding between everybody and so...I think you need that kind of communal thing going on if you're homeless, it's lonely being homeless even when you've got friends.

A community approach which anticipated homelessness, and which understood it as a routine and logical, albeit unjust, consequence of systemic queer exclusion also enabled trans people experiencing homelessness to exercise autonomy. For instance, some participants were able to rely upon community support to the extent that they could exercise a more deliberate approach to temporary housing solutions, managing multiple offers of housing support. This evidenced an understanding wherein need arising from homelessness did not suggest incompetence and did not justify the imposition of institutional solutions. Rather, it enabled produced pragmatic, community-based solutions anchored in a broader commitment to create support structures to ballast queer people against marginalizing structures (Butler *et al.*, 2016; Spade, 2020). JJ (they) – ‘*non-binary, veering, just veering, on the trans-masculine*’ – found that their queer community had a ready, welcoming, and validating response to their homelessness – ‘*As soon as people knew that I needed somewhere to stay, they were...I've got a spare room*. Their homelessness was validated as a social injustice rather than as evidence of their own failure. As JJ explained, ‘*it made sense in a queer context, it was accepted*’. This community responsibility had an important temporal element. Those who had experienced homelessness articulated their own sense of future community responsibility to assist other trans and queer people experiencing homelessness, underlining the importance of shared precarity as a driver of queer approaches (Cohen, 2019).

Why were people so willing to help? The heart of it, I think, people did say, you know, there but for the grace of god go I ... I was there once, people helped me. Thinking forward to the future, I've always had that thought there might be a point at which I would be in a position to do that [help others]... I think homelessness is a queer experience, yes.

Engaging with alternative, potential radical, approaches to homelessness resolution was necessitated by lack of choice. Yet a wider queer utopianistic framing enabled them to understand their homelessness as the result of structural oppression, rather than individual failure. This afforded them dignity and imbued their struggles with

wider meaning (Brim, 2020; Cohen, 2019; Gleeson *et al.*, 2021; Mananzala & Spade, 2008).

Muñoz (2019) argues that building queer-inclusive alternatives requires both illuminatory hope, and difficult work. The reality of developing *workable* alternatives to the housing precarity faced by trans people was often exhausting. In the application of the ideal to messy, unyielding reality, these ‘concrete utopia’ were learning spaces and works-in-progress (Levitas, 1990; Muñoz, 2019). Hera (she) also moved in with friends, initially without the landlord’s knowledge (although she later secured a legal tenancy). She saw this approach to resolving her homelessness as a form of queer utopianism, enabling her to *live through* utopian thinking. Her own willingness to perform ongoing, difficult, and yet essential community-building work, and especially to engage in undoing/redoing of the normative values of existing society, was structured by her belief in how society could, and should, be reconfigured in line with idealistic inclusivity (Muñoz, 2019). The disappointments and frustrations arising from attempting to put these collective beliefs into practice gave her hope that she, and her flat mates, were creating a useful and meaningful alternative (Muñoz, 2019).

...you know you can't just get away...if you fall out, it's going to be just awful, awful. But you can't be oh happy clappy, we're all friends...It's about, I would say, creating that way of living where we can all feel safe but that does mean that we have to learn, like actually really learn to keep each other safe. It's...well, exhausting, quite often actually, I love it but it's intense, I just want to pull a duvet over my head and go, I'm having a day off...but you can't, you can't.

A ‘concrete utopia’ is both pragmatic and idealistic (Muñoz, 2019). It is anchored in a shared awareness of precarity – a need to help others in the community in the face of system-level negation. Creating workable alternatives was rewarding, but also difficult and messy, performed by stressed, under-resourced individuals because, in the face of homelessness and financial instability, they had little choice. O (they) articulated this sense of an urgency of community. They described themselves as a ‘*queer messy dyke*’ whose gender was usually unintelligible in wider society. This excluded them from access to mainstream housing aspirations, despite many years experience of both community housing activism and paid housing support work. O saw building alternatives to validate both queer need *and* queer identity as urgent and necessary work (Muñoz, 2019). A queer lens enabled O both to understand their experiences as structural, and to recognise the importance of working with others to develop pragmatic, realistic, community-based alternatives.

I think among...not even just trans people to be honest with you, people generally who are...under that umbrella if you know what I mean...you know, the vision...a home and the picket fence. Well it's just not that way for us, is it? So then it's like what's the alternative? We have to look out for each other cos the alternative, we're gone.

This approach to queerness is expansive, understanding it as operating according to alternative logics of location, movement and identification. It creates a distinct approach to time and space which de-privileges the capitalist, heteronormative family, rather centring devalued, relational, approaches to kinship (Halberstam, 2005). It

tethers a hostile present – where to be non-straight and non-cis, particularly for those who are impoverished, racialized, gendered and disabled – produces marginalization and disempowerment – to a rich alternate past and hopeful future (Muñoz, 1999, 2019). The inadequacy of the present to meet queer need is reframed as a gift – as an affective check, existing at an intuitive level as *‘that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough’*. (Muñoz, 2019, p. 1). It is an attentive care: offered not simply in response to the urgent needs of any one individual, but through the sum of myriad small acts, producing a cohesive community response to structural negation. It arises from a fundamental inequality – the failure to adequately consider trans people and their needs when developing and providing services – and yet the resulting efforts by the trans community to infill these gaps are highly instructive in illuminating the kinds of services which are meaningful and effective for this group.

Conclusion

Trans communities have significant expertise in providing support to trans people experiencing homelessness. With systems poorly set up to meet their needs, community-based alternatives both enable them to remain in services, and provide a validating, emotionally sustaining safety net when these systems fail them. Although this study was conducted in the UK, a country with a statutory right to assistance while homeless, these findings have broader international applicability to the non-statutory modes of homelessness provision prevalent across many other parts of the world where a top-down approach to resolving LGBTQ+ homelessness also predominates (Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Willse, 2015). Given an international context where homelessness organisations are dealing with increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ applicants, recognition of the broader social context in which experiences of homelessness exist for trans applicants exist is critical (ILGA Europe *et al.*, 2021).

This article draws upon an unique data corpus to make a significant, urgent contribution to understanding of the needs of trans people experiencing homelessness. This research is timely, in exploring the impact of new attempts, such as the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 to address the specific disadvantages faced by minority groups experiencing homelessness. I have shown that *despite* a national context of both a wide-ranging, statutory right to assistance when facing homelessness, and integration of equality legislation which requires that local authorities both avoid discrimination and actively address inequality, adequate assistance for trans people experiencing homelessness can only be achieved through substantial support from already-overstretched communities. I now conclude by highlighting the three main contributions of this article, and end with a final question over broader applicability.

The first contribution lies in providing a challenge to an assumption that trans people and their communities are passive and disempowered. Individual trans people manage their homelessness and assert their ability to make choices which reflect their psychosocial needs, while communities accept a pragmatic responsibility to offer support to their members. This is necessitated by a failure of statutory service to offer the same standard of care to trans people as other individuals becoming

homeless. It relies upon the exhausting, unpaid labour of marginalized communities. While acknowledging that the requirement to provide this help constitutes a social inequity, it is also important to recognise that queer communities are active, resistive, and experienced. This contributes to growing recognition that external, imposed, approaches to assistance are not only ineffective, inappropriate and disempowering for trans and queer communities, but unnecessary given the existing knowledge within them over how to respond to their community's needs (Pearce, 2020).

The second contribution lies in demonstrating that service providers should be aware of the considerable expertise within local trans communities around homelessness. Trans and queer communities are not compromised by lack of knowledge, but by resource shortage. Who provides services, to whom, and how are critical questions with which services seeking to provide help to trans people experiencing homelessness must engage (Casey & Allen, 2004; Deck & Platt, 2015). Service providers should be aware of the existence, and importance, of non-statutory, informal routes to support for trans applicants. Service planning should consider the importance to queer and trans people of being understood as social individuals with a specific set of experiences, community, and culture. In the UK this might include modifying tests of Local Connection (used to determine whether a local authority owes a duty to help a particular applicant) to recognise the importance of non-biological family networks. Homelessness services might also proactively work with LGBTQ+ service organisations to increase mutual awareness and facilitate beneficial, respectful, supportive relationships. An awareness of the importance of the *nature* of the support relationship to trans people is also relevant to assessing different housing solutions. For instance, Housing First is a recent, popular, approach to intense, holistic housing provision. Yet it is questionable whether a Housing First approach would meet the needs of those in this study, unless it also recognized their need for non-statutory forms of help. By extension, this highlights the importance of considering how apparently empowering approaches such as Housing First would need to be carefully considered in the light of the actual needs of specific communities, and especially whether they allow individuals to remain in control and maximize their agency.

The third contribution is in demonstrating the utility of queer theory in general and queer utopianism in particular to exploring issues of housing justice. By recognizing homeless trans people as active and resistive, I have shown that queer theory can be activated to create a psychological, as well as practical, buffer between an often hopeless present and future freedom. This can enable resistance to reductive, objectifying notions of both homelessness and trans identity through offering a structural analysis of queer marginalization. As Matthews & Poyner (2020) argue, in centring the challenging of established dichotomies, queer approaches are helpful beyond understanding LGBTQ+ experience, offering tools to disrupt other reductive binaries prevalent in homelessness provision: between homeless and housed, vulnerable and empowered, and service user and service provider (Cohen, 2019; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Muñoz, 2019). Through demonstrating how an appreciation of the relationship between cisnormative societal configurations and queer marginalisation can be used to imagine and develop practices of change I develop queer theory as a tool for pragmatic resistance to marginalization (Cohen, 2019).

I end with a question as to the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other groups. First I note the importance of recognising trans people's experiences as valid and important in their own right (Namaste, 2000). This is especially necessary within housing studies, as a discipline which has so far paid little attention to the experiences of trans people. However, the finding that precaritized communities may offer critical support to members who become homeless to supplement inadequate statutory systems may also be of relevance to other marginalized communities, and to individuals experiencing homelessness as a group. The presence of strong community organization and particularly a history of theoretically rich strategies to frame responses to precarity, notably mutual aid and queer utopianism, make the responses by queer people to homelessness in their communities especially visible. Yet I have shown that, to some extent, the needs of trans people while homeless are not substantially different to other homeless people: they require timely responsive care, which validates identity and centres dignity, and which avoids disempowerment, enabling people to be involved in their own solutions (Casey *et al.*, 2008; Deck & Platt, 2015).

A paternalistic approach which understands homeless applicants in terms of deserving/undeserving victimhood is deeply embedded within British homelessness service provision (Bretherton *et al.*, 2013; Davis, 2001). Homelessness itself operates as a category which engenders disempowerment, with individuals experiencing homelessness too often assumed to be incapable of competent long-term decision-making (Jolley, 2020; McNaughton Nicholls & Nicholls, 2010). This disempowerment process involves objectification, in which individuals become viewed in isolation from their social context and rather understood as a problem to be solved. As Muñoz (2019) argues, a queer utopian lens accessible through a wider community response reframes, and so validates, homelessness and housing precarity within a wider, hopeful, context. Following the logics of a mutual aid approach suggests that communities which are at especially high risk of homelessness are also likely to have well developed, pragmatic approaches to addressing the *specific* forms of homelessness experienced by those within them. In this way, I extend homelessness scholarship by providing a necessary and timely challenge to a dominant approach to homelessness as an individual, rather than a social, experience (Neale, 1997). However, I propose that more work is needed to better understand the role of informal social networks in buffering failing statutory systems, even within apparently progressive landscapes.

Note

1. There is debate about the inclusivity of the term 'trans', with specific concern over exclusion of those whose gender does not align with a temporally stable binary gender identity. Recruitment literature specified that the study was open to these individuals, but it is recognized that the use of the word 'trans' as an umbrella term may have excluded those who specifically rejected the term 'trans'. For a more detailed discussion see Barker & Iantaffi, 2019; Hines, 2020.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their comments and feedback during the development of this work: Dr Josie Henley, Dr Julyan Elbro, Hannah Browne-Gott, Jennie Bibbings, Dr

Andrew Williams and Dr Peter Mackie. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful contributions. Finally I would like to thank the participants for their generosity in sharing their experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was funded by Welsh Government LGBTQ+ Aware; UK Centre for Collaborative Housing Evidence.

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