MAKING RENTING RIGHT: ETHICS OF ECONOMY IN THE EDINBURGH PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

Benjamin Bridgman

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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Making Renting Right: Ethics of Economy in the Edinburgh Private Rented Sector

Benjamin Bridgman

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of St Andrews

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen a shift in Scotland in terms of the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private sector. In statistical terms, the proportion of Scottish households in the private rented sector has doubled during the past ten years.

This thesis unpacks anthropologically the private rented sector as a locally-found concept in Edinburgh, largely through the medium of ‘property management’, another locally-found concept. Key questions concern how the private rented sector in Edinburgh is ‘managed’ at the vernacular level, how the ethics of property management take shape in Edinburgh in the context of this ongoing shift from the public to the private sectors, and how the property relations within the sector relate to existing debates in economic anthropology. The primary ethnographic material, based upon fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, is of an Edinburgh letting agency as archetypal property managers, though other material either was produced in conjunction with Shelter Scotland or stemmed from the tracing of further connections within the field. Engaging with the broader anthropology of ethics, a core conclusion is that processes of property management rest ultimately upon practices of ethics that take place at the ‘ordinary’ level.

A parallel aim is to consider how anthropologists might produce ethnography of an economic ‘sector’, such as the private rented sector. Borrowing from Actor-Network Theory, I propose occupying a range of different vantage points in a given economic sector within a socially defined locale, such as the city, by following the connections encountered in the field, and then by allowing actors to perform both the social and the economic by tracing their associations through the production of the ethnographic text.
Candidate's declaration

I, Benjamin John Bridgman, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of PhD, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

I was admitted as a research student at the University of St Andrews in September 2013.

I received funding from an organisation or institution and have acknowledged the funder(s) in the full text of my thesis.

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Acknowledgements

It would be impossible acknowledge everybody who has contributed in some way to the production of a thesis. From an ontogenetic perspective, we are all partial products of our history, and the chains of influence and memory extend even to before our own time. Many of our influences remain subconscious or underappreciated. Nonetheless, I would like to take the opportunity to thank a select number of people and organisations here.

First and foremost, thanks should be given to those with whom I worked in the field, as without their co-operation, no ethnography could have been written. The need for anonymity prevents me from naming people and, in certain cases, whole organisations. Particular mention should be given both to the letting agency that became my primary field site and to Shelter Scotland for granting me access, though they are far from the only organisations that have had a role. Needless to say, all people who find themselves represented in this thesis are thanked, though it should also be acknowledged that many others from the field who are not personally represented here have also contributed indirectly to the ethnography.

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Introduction

I first became interested in tenancy as a subject of anthropological study in the autumn of 2012. I had recently completed my undergraduate degree in anthropology at the University of St Andrews and, that summer, had moved into a tenement flat near the centre of Edinburgh. In so doing, I joined two other tenants, neither of whom had I known before. This process was uneventful. A few months later, both the other tenants served their notice to quit to the landlord, and I became responsible for facilitating the process of finding replacements. The landlord put up advertisements on a range of appropriate websites, including Gumtree, and the responses, of which there were several hundred, were forwarded to me by email. It was my job to arrange viewings with prospective tenants, show them around the flat, assess them for suitability, and then pass on suitable candidates to the landlord for approval. Most candidates were rejected by the landlord, usually either for not being in permanent employment, or for not having a guarantor who was both a UK citizen and a UK resident. Some prospective tenants found this process opaque and frustrating, and one got upset with me for failing to explain all the landlord’s criteria fully at the start. I had, in effect, become part of the process of property management. As tenants, I mused, we were paying participants in a ‘market’, paying for a product and a service, but we were not exactly ‘customers’. We were applicants submitting a character of ourselves to a landlord for judgment. It was at this time, and with these reflections, that I came up with the earliest proposal of the project that has become this thesis.

These reflections were not, and are not, disconnected from their broader social and political context, either. The past few decades have witnessed a substantial shift in Scotland in terms of the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private sector. In particular, there has been a substantial expansion of the private rented sector during the past ten years. According to the 2016 Scottish Household Survey, and illustrated in Figure 1, the percentage of households in Scotland in the private rented sector increased steadily from 5% in 1999 to 10% in 2009 and then further to 15%
in 2016. Meanwhile, the percentage of households in owner occupancy had increased from 61% in 1999 to 66% in 2005, but has since fallen back to 61%. More significantly, the percentage of households in social rented housing – covering council (i.e. state-owned) housing as well as independent non-profit housing associations, including co-operatives – fell from 32% in 1999 to 22% in 2009, but has remained stable since then. However, if ‘social housing’ is broken down into council housing and housing associations, then the shift away from state-owned property is even more dramatic; just 13% of households were renting from local councils in 2016, compared with 27% in 1999 (Scottish Government 2017: 48).

The figures on dwelling stock by tenure in Scotland, available in full since 1969 from the Department for Communications and Local Government (2017a), demonstrate the extent of this shift over a longer period. The focus upon ‘dwelling stock’ as opposed to ‘households’ means that empty properties are included in the figures, though the impact in percentage terms is minor. As Figure 2 illustrates, the percentage of council-owned dwellings peaked at 54% from 1974 to 1980, but then fell by typically one or two percentage points each year before stabilising at 13% in 2008, though was mitigated to a

![Housing Tenure in Scotland, 1999-2016](source: Scottish Government 2017: 48)
small extent by the rise of housing associations since the 1980s. 30% of dwellings were owner occupied in 1969, but this has since doubled. Meanwhile, the proportion of dwellings in the private rented sector declined in the 1970s and 1980s, but is now moving back up towards 1969 levels.

By comparison, the 2015-2016 figures for England are 63% owner occupancy, 20% private rented and 17% social rented (Department for Local Government and Communities 2017b: 1-2). Similar shifts have taken place in England too, though the proportion of households in social rented housing there peaked at 32% in 1981 (Department for Local Government and Communities 2017b: 6). At least on paper, the shift in Scotland has been more dramatic, and has impacted upon a greater proportion of people.

Observing the external built landscape of Edinburgh, one cannot fail to notice the streets of distinctive Victorian sandstone tenements around the inner city, the estates of grey-pebbledash council-built tenements, cottage flats and houses towards the periphery, as well as the newer apartment blocks that have sprung up in many areas, especially

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**Figure 2: Dwelling Stock by Tenure in Scotland, 1969-2015 (Source: Department for Communications and Local Government 2017a)**

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around the shore in the Port of Leith and along the Union Canal. Beyond this exterior is an internal landscape of semi-public stairwells, communal back gardens, and the more private spaces of the flats themselves. This built landscape not only contributes to the physical construction of the city and the enframing of urban space (cf. Mitchell 1988); it is also the primary physical site of these shifts towards the expansion of private rented housing in Edinburgh. Consequently, it is also intimately bound with the relations between landlords, letting agents, current tenants and prospective tenants, and the proliferation of these relations concomitant with the increased presence of private rented housing has thrown up new challenges both for relations between neighbours and for building maintenance.

These changes have not passed without broader political comment. Most significantly, in October 2014, the Scottish Government launched a consultation paper entitled A New Tenancy for the Private Rented Sector. The paper sought to develop a ‘new, modernised and simplified tenancy system for the private sector’ that resulted in ‘better property management by providing clarity for tenants and landlords’ and aimed to ‘give investors reassurance in the modern private sector’. Tenants, the consultation document argued, ‘may feel they have more power and greater sense of community’ with increased security of tenure, and may thus be more inclined to assert their existing rights without fear of eviction, whilst the ‘simplifying and streamlining processes’ aimed to give landlords ‘more confidence and reassurance’ in their ability to recover both possession of their property and rent arrears (Scottish Government 2014: 13). A range of interest groups participated in the consultation, including the Scottish Association of Landlords, housing charity Shelter Scotland, and the grassroots Living Rent Campaign. Numerous conferences and other events were organised by those and other organisations during the consultation period and its aftermath. Following the consultation, the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2016, and came into force in December 2017. I will discuss the policy implications of this later on, though this immediate political context should be kept in mind. It must also be said that it was fortuitous that these political processes coincided with my fieldwork period – this was not initially by design.

What, then, is this ‘Private Rented Sector’ for which the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 sought to develop a new tenancy? I have of course also been using
the term myself. In one sense, the core aim of this project is to unpack anthropologically the private rented sector as a locally-found concept in Edinburgh primarily through the medium of 'property management’ – itself another locally-found concept that will be explored further below. The primary ethnographic material focuses on an Edinburgh letting agency as archetypal property managers. However, this is not solely an ethnography of a letting agency; to a certain extent, it endeavours to be an ethnography of the Edinburgh private rented sector more broadly and, consequently, also engages with property management from other vantage points. These include not only tenants’ perspectives, but also the consideration of the actors and activities that allow for the continuity and management of the broader private rented sector, up to and including the role of government, which, as we have seen, imposes regulations. Against the background of a wider shift from the public to the private sectors in terms of the provision of housing in Scotland, I investigate how the Edinburgh private rented sector is ‘managed’ at a vernacular level. Of particular interest is the role of the moral and the ethical in the practice of management. These questions are then considered in terms of existing theory in economic anthropology. Parallel to this, I consider how, as anthropologists, we might do ethnography of an economic ‘sector’. Given that I approach the sector as a locally-found concept in Edinburgh, I also consider how this might contribute to our anthropological knowledge and understanding of the city.

**Managing the Private Rented Sector**

During my fieldwork in Edinburgh from the summer of 2014 to the summer of the following year, I repeatedly encountered ‘the private rented sector’ as a reified concept. It is, as we have already seen, a concept used in government documents, but it has also entered the vernacular language of many involved, especially amongst those involved in a professional capacity. Indeed, I used it myself without extrapolation early on in this introductory chapter. Precisely what it entails, however, can be hard to pin down. In one sense, it is something that can be measured statistically – we have already heard, for instance, that the proportion of housing in the private rented sector in Scotland has doubled over the past decade. In practice, however, it refers not only to the physical
houses and flats that are privately rented, but also to the landlords who let them out, the tenants who rent them, and the letting agencies who manage both the physical properties and the landlord-tenant relations. The latter include not only the owners of letting agencies, but all their employees and contractors, their office spaces, their meetings, their documentary records, and so forth. It includes the tenancy agreements – the legal texts through which specific property rights are conferred. It connects to various arms of local and national government who not only design ways of regulating and utilising the private rented sector, but also implement and enforce their policies, and, in so doing, find themselves drawn into the peripheries of the sector itself. At the same time, it involves voluntary associations and non-governmental organisations that seek to represent the various groups within the sector, who seek collectively to protect their interests and influence the direction of government policy, and who on occasion come together through conferences and other events aimed at assessing how the sector is going and considering its potential future. The boundary therefore is porous, though as a concept, it does have a core.

In order to approach the private rented sector anthropologically, it is useful to turn to Bourdieu (1977) and consider the applicability of his notion of ‘habitus’, understood as a ‘system of dispositions’ or bodily inclinations and ways of being that collectively produce practices, organise action and construct social structures. Of particular interest therefore is the habitus of those involved in the private rented sector – how they have developed practices and ethics that enable them to negotiate and reproduce a particular property regime in which a range of distinct actors are implicated, namely tenants, landlords, letting agency staff, and buildings. These dispositions do not take place at a single observable ‘site’, though focusing on the private rented sector in Edinburgh does endeavour to render the ethnographic enquiry ‘strategically situated’ in the vein of Marcus (1995: 110), as many of the key actors do indeed know each other – or at least know of each other – in locally specific ways as will become clear.

Attempting to conduct ethnographic research of the private rented sector, even in a specific city, does, however, present certain challenges, not least as much of the activity takes place behind closed doors. Indeed, it is not even always clear that relevant activity is taking place at all. Tenants pay rent to inhabit a property subject to certain conditions, but aside from a small proportion of those who are activists or active members of residents
associations and tenants forums, it does not inherently entail community-formation, nor does it necessarily involve more than a superficial and transactional relationship with a landlord or letting agency. Landlords are potentially even more elusive. Whilst some maintain regular contact with their tenants, others are described as ‘absentee landlords’, receiving a monthly rental payment but otherwise apparently doing little else directly. Some landlords join together in interest groups such as the Scottish Association of Landlords, whilst others, especially so-called ‘accidental landlords’, would struggle to identify themselves with the category ‘landlord’ on a personal level. Where, therefore, is the action to be found? I find myself drawn to the notion of ‘property management’, a concept repeatedly encountered in the private rented sector. Broadly speaking, it refers first and foremost to the activities undertaken by letting agencies with regards to property: finding, negotiating with, and mediating between landlords and tenants, facilitating financial transactions, keeping and updating documentary records, inspecting buildings for maintenance purposes, arranging repairs, and more. That said, although it is a locally-found concept, I am also interested to consider the ways in which the metaphor of ‘property management’ may be extended more broadly to consider additional ways in which the private rented sector is ‘managed’ and reproduced from the micro level to the body politic. Who else, therefore, is implicated in the management of the private rented sector, and in what ways?

Further to this, it should also be noted that concepts such as ‘the private rented sector’ and ‘property management’ appear to be of greater salience for some involved than for others. It is chiefly actors within organisations such as the Scottish Government, the City of Edinburgh Council, Shelter Scotland and the Scottish Association of Landlords who are most inclined to speak of it regularly. This is not to say that it is an irrelevant or unknown concept amongst letting agents and their employees – far from it – but those whom I encountered were far more inclined to speak of ‘property management’ when describing their day-to-day work. In this sense, the concept-metaphor of the ‘sector’ is apparently more salient for those engaged with it on a political or otherwise sector-wide level – those for whom discussion of the policies that regulate the sector is prominent. Consequently, when considering the ways in which the notion of the private rented sector itself is constructed, key questions to keep in mind are by whom, for whom and to what end it is constructed.
In July 2014, I moved to Leith, the historic port area of Edinburgh. Leith, as with Edinburgh more generally, was a strategic choice, being an area not only with a large and recently expanded private rented sector, but also with a history of mass tenement construction, rent strikes, post-war council housing developments and, more recently, gentrification, as well a substantial ongoing presence of housing associations and community activist groups (cf. Doucet 2002; Marshall 1986). It appeared, in a sense, a location of relevant action. Although Leith had originally been a separate town, only merging administratively into Edinburgh in 1920, it was not able to offer a bounded field site, but did, nonetheless, provide a geographic starting point. Given the limited availability of reasonably low-cost housing in Edinburgh, it was perhaps overly optimistic to imagine that this could be staged perfectly; rather than renting via a letting agency, I ended up renting a room as a lodger in an otherwise owner-occupied tenement flat.

Following the theme of property management, my core planned ‘activity’, at least from the beginning of fieldwork, was a period of participant observation with a private letting agency with an office in Leith. I refer to the company as ‘Almond and Thompson’, and their main brand as ‘RightLet Edinburgh’, though these are pseudonyms. For various
reasons, mostly connected to their rapid staff turnover – indeed, virtually the entire body of staff were replaced over the summer of 2014 – the start of this was postponed until October. Consequently, I busied myself by becoming a volunteer researcher with housing and homelessness charity Shelter Scotland and by joining the Living Rent Campaign. The work with Almond and Thompson however, still proved to be predominant, and it is from this starting point that the rest of this project flows.

Thus, my first core ethnographic subject became the Property Manager, an employee of Almond and Thompson. As an ethnographic subject, the Property Manager provides an entrance point to a particular urban landscape and its ethnographic description and analysis, as will be revealed in Chapter 1. Methodologically, I was inspired though not wholly guided for the purposes of fieldwork by Actor-Network Theory, in particular that advanced by Latour (2005). Starting with the Property Manager enables us to follow the connections that proceed from him or her with the view to reassembling the resulting social associations – potentially including, but in no way limited to, conceptions of property, notions of ownership, the construction of households, the making of home, documentation, management bureaucracy, governmentality and so forth. A wide range of overlapping potential groups emerge in conjunction with these processes, including tenement block, tenement flat, tenant, landlord, other letting agency staff, street, area, Edinburgh, the Council, property law and others.

The ethnography the follows should, moreover, be seen as partly experimental, whereby the aim is to trace associations and thereby reconstruct the social through the production of an ethnographic text. Via the text, the aim is to allow my informants – and indeed myself – to perform the social by presenting, reflexively, our relevant encounters in the field. This, I hope, will enable the tracing of these associations by the reader. That said, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, if the aim is for the textual performance of the private rented sector, the private rented sector is nonetheless a concept that emerges from the field. With a nod to Moore (2004), the private rented sector may be understood as a ‘concept-metaphor’ in the sense that, despite lacking an adequate referent, it does nonetheless retain ties to the real world. In the spirit of Wittgenstein ([1953] 1974), I have therefore opted to use the linguistic term for the concept that its usage defines. Latour’s methodology, in this context, is useful primarily for the tracing of social networks through which the habitus à la Bourdieu (1977) of the metaphorical ‘sector’ are
produced – and, after Strathern (1996), for ‘cutting the network’ in order to set limits, both practically and textually.

Latour further proposes a number of techniques for the production of textual-ethnographic connectedness that will be of use here. Firstly, we are invited to localise the global. Rather than focus solely on either the micro or an alleged overarching macro, we should instead ascertain the local actors through which the macro is produced. In this case, we have started with the Property Manager with the intention of following the connections to buildings, tenants, landlords, neighbours, bureaucracy, property law and, perhaps ultimately, the body politic. Secondly, we are to redistribute the local by recognising direct interactions between actors as the endpoints of a potential infinite number of agencies. In other words, each action carried out by a letting agent, tenant, landlord, flat, tenement block etc. is ultimately framed and mediated by other actions carried out upon the actors themselves. And finally, we are to connect sites according to what appears to us in the foreground without resorting to hidden social explanations. In this sense, follow the associations made by informants. By following the connections, textual connectedness may be created without imposing background, overarching or all-encompassing models of the social world onto what is an inherently disparate and partial landscape.

In practical terms, tracing these connections has provided opportunities not only for engagement with a range of interested parties, but also for my own movement within the field. People can and often do move from one vantage point to another within the private rented sector in Edinburgh. Almond and Thompson’s Edinburgh office director, for instance, left her job to work at Shelter Scotland’s Edinburgh office during my time there, where I encountered her again. During fieldwork, I too have moved between different vantage points and between different organisations in a similar way, partly to experience this movement as an end in its own right, but also in order to access a wider range of positions from which the broader social may be reassembled.

By adopting a methodology that emphasises the tracing of associations, and that is deliberately wide-reaching yet strategically situated, I sought to avoid artificially limiting the opportunities encountered in the field, whilst nonetheless creating and retaining connectedness. Through participant observation, my aim was, in the words of Wagner (1981: 9), to participate as myself, to build what I learnt upon what I already knew, and,
hopefully, to “‘take it on’ so as to experience a transformation of [my] own world’. This at least sought to provide not only direct forms of data, but also the necessary context for the analysis of data gathered by other means. Participation alone does not, however, as Davies (1999) points out, suffice as the sole technique for data collection. This was particularly important in a spatial context that differentiates both physically and symbolically the private and the public, and where much action and interaction takes place behind closed doors (cf. Hockey 2002). The holding of informal and unstructured interviews also proved key.

The Making and Remaking of the Scottish Private Rented Sector

Before proceeding, it is worth charting the historical development of the private rented sector in Scotland since the nineteenth century. It would be difficult to provide such a trajectory without acknowledging the place of the tenement as the predominant housing form, at least in the popular mind-set. Indeed, its iconicity is well documented via its prominent presence in literary and other cultural representations of Scottish urban life, including Ian Rankin’s Inspector Rebus novels, Ralph Glasser’s autobiographic novel Growing up in the Gorbals, Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting, Dexter Fletcher’s film adaptation of Stephen Greenhorn’s musical Sunshine on Leith, and the weekly comic strip The Broons from the Sunday Post newspaper, to name but a few. Despite this, in-depth academic studies specifically of the Scottish tenement have been more limited; Frank Worsdall’s earnest 1979 monograph The Tenement: A Way of Life: A Social, Historical and Architectural Study of Housing in Glasgow being one such exception. Indeed, it was partly because of this apparent clash between the preponderance of popular representations and the paucity of academic representations that I had, at one stage during the formation of this project, sought to conduct an anthropological study of ‘the tenement’ as a (naively reified) social and architectural object through which property relations either took place or were made manifest. In the end, one engages with the Scottish tenement, but finds the built form usurped variously by the politics of heritage – note the Tenement House museum in Glasgow – or, as in my own case, by the politics of housing and property. Life within the tenement itself takes place predominantly behind closed
doors with limited opportunity for participant observation, whilst some of the more observable spaces of interaction – letting agencies, for instance – are linked to the tenure of the individual flat, and tenement blocks typically house a range of different tenures. At least, that was my own experience. There was and has been more than enough housing politics, during both the fieldwork and the writing-up ‘stages’ of this project to overwhelm any other potential narratives within the research story.

Tenements are, however, ubiquitous in Edinburgh, including and especially within the Edinburgh private rented sector. To borrow from Worsdall (1979: ix), the tenement is ‘a domestic building of more than one storey, all the houses of which are reached by a common entrance and stair’. Traditional tenement blocks are typically conjoined in rows along streets, each block having its own communal garden with washing line, known as the backgreen. Popular conceptions of what is or is not a tenement vary to some extent, with some residents of such buildings described above seeking to distance themselves from a term that they associate with poverty and deprivation – or, in one case that I encountered, with Glasgow. That said, the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004 employs a broader definition of the tenement as a building comprised of two or more related but separate flats divided horizontally from each other – a definition that potentially extends to other housing forms, such as colonies, cottage flats, high-rise blocks and even larger buildings that have been subdivided. Nonetheless, the classic Scottish tenement is chiefly a purpose-built form and is a prominent leitmotif across the course of the development of housing and housing politics in Scotland. Also significant is that the traditional tenement (as opposed to the 2004 Act definition) is an almost uniquely Scottish form within Britain, in contrast to England, where terraced housing of separate family units per building is predominant.

Although tenements have existed in Scotland since at least the fifteenth century, the great majority of those still standing today have been built since the 1870s. Most of those constructed in the late nineteenth century were built and rented out privately by tradesmen who regarded build-to-let house construction as a worthwhile investment (Worsdall 1979: 53-4). Proprietors in this period were required by the General and Police Improvement Act (1862) to provide a range of sanitary facilities, including communal internal toilets and washhouses. Higher status tenements built during this period were differentiated by internal and external decoration, including large windows with entablature and consoles.
(Devine 2006; Worsdall 1979: 28-9), though even many of the more modest tenements included large rooms with high ceilings and elegant plasterwork (Begg 1996: 10).

The proliferation of the tenement as an architectural form in urban Scotland should be understood concomitantly with the distinct Scottish system of land tenure. O’Carroll (1996: 18-20) contrasts the historical development of tenure in Scotland with that in England, arguing that differences in this regard led to the development of different forms of urban housing north and south of the border. The classic Scottish system of land tenure was essentially feudal. The landowner, or feu superior, divided land into lots that were leased or feued in perpetuity for a fixed annual payment known as the feu duty. Although landowners could not retake possession of the land, they were able to determine how the land was to be used. This contrasted with England, where land was either sold outright or leased for a specified period. The building of tenements proved to be a lucrative option for both landowners and developers. Rapid population growth during the nineteenth century meant that landowners could charge high duties on land feued for tenements. Equally, developers sought to maximise returns and minimise fees by fitting as much housing on as little land as possible. Moreover, the common practice of sub-feuing, which in some cases could be done several times over, further augmented the price of land.

There were also other factors. Until 1956, domestic rates for comparably sized property were higher in Scotland than in England as they were collected from owners as well as from occupiers. This provided an incentive for Scottish developers to keep the size of accommodation to a minimum relative to the number of occupants. Stricter building regulations, owing in part to harsher climatic conditions, also increased building costs; stone was more common than brick. Lower wages and higher unemployment in Scotland furthermore created a need for more low-rent housing. The combination of the above factors doubtless contributed to the situation where, until the First World War, the most common domestic dwelling in urban Scotland was a tenement rented from a private landlord.

The economic relationship between tenant and landlord apparently engendered particular social relationships. McCrone & Elliot (1989a: 219) outline many of the characteristics of classic nineteenth century landlordism in urban Scotland. A common factor amongst working-class families was chronic indebtedness. Landlords apparently ‘became arbiters of the moral worth of the family’, as to be allowed to get into debt, a
tenant had to be able to access credit. Though often resented by the tenant, the credit-debt cycle was apparently a useful means of social control on the part of the landlord. Few would contemplate absconding, as a prospective new tenant would invariably require a character reference – a document that the landlord could grant or withhold. Moreover, the tenants’ material possessions were immediately liable to sequestration by the landlord upon entry to the property, regardless of whether or not they were in debt. Far from being merely a commercial arrangement, tenancy was, according to McCrone & Elliot, a ‘tacit recognition that the tenant was subordinated to a class which policed his life and that of his family at home and at work’. Landlords were thus able to assert not only material power, but also moral authority.

The predominance of tenements, rented privately from large-scale landlords who owned whole blocks if not whole streets, began to wane from the early twentieth century to the extent that construction had virtually ended by 1910. Housing shortages had led to rent increases, especially in Glasgow, but also in other urban centres in Scotland. Pressure from the recently formed Scottish Housing Council and from trade unions led to the Housing Letting and Rating Act 1911, which replaced yearly with monthly lets. Rents, however, continued to increase up to and during the First World War. A number of further organisations were formed in response, such as the Scottish Federation of Tenants’ Associations in 1913, and the Glasgow Women’s Housing Association in 1914, to campaign against rent increases. Perhaps the most famous figure from this period was Mary Barbour, who, in 1915, led a rent strike in the Govan area of Glasgow, predominantly amongst women, and often resulting in violent confrontations with police officers during attempted evictions. The rent strikes spread across Glasgow, and also to Edinburgh, Dundee and other areas, and were supported by trade unions and mass demonstrations. Ultimately, these activities led to the Rent Restrictions Act 1915, which introduced rent controls in Scotland for the first time (Castells 1983). Though intended as a temporary measure during the war, the regulation of rents was not actually abolished until 1989.

After the First World War, local authorities started to undertake greater responsibility for working-class housing, initially with the construction of garden suburbs and cheaper three-storey tenement blocks in the 1920s (Worsdall 1979: 11). It was after the Second World War, however, that housing in urban Scotland was transformed on a grand scale
through state intervention, with the construction of nearly one million new homes. The primary instigator of this process was the Labour Party. Between 1945 and 1957, councils undertook large-scale development on suburban greenfield sites, mainly of family tenements, to relieve overcrowding in inner-city slums. From 1957 to 1969, central government sought to exert more direct control over the location and form of state housing with the view to integrating housing development with industrial incentives. Thousands of families were transferred from inner-city slum tenements to newly built peripheral schemes, new towns, and overspill estates adjacent to existing smaller towns. Slum buildings were demolished (Gibb 1989: 157-9).

This process was and, especially with hindsight, has been controversial. Gibb (1989: 168-70) argues that it was socially destructive, as the emphasis upon ‘family’ homes in new estates left a residual population in deprived inner-city areas that consisted disproportionately of the single, the elderly, the unskilled and the disabled. Moreover, the architectural designs of the new buildings were typically monotonous and unsuited to the Scottish climate. The need to construct housing on a massive scale quickly and at low cost, combined with the planning and implementation of the process, certainly had a profound impact upon both the former slum areas and the new schemes – an impact that has not always been unambiguously positive, despite the ostensibly improved facilities in the new buildings. These processes also contributed to the emergence of spatially segregated socioeconomic and political constituencies, as politicians sought to maintain electoral support through the provision of public services, including housing. Public housing schemes were dominated by working-class voters, whereas private housing in both urban and suburban areas contained more managers and professionals. According to Gibb (1989: 166), Labour’s dominance within urban Scotland during this period could be attributed in part to the public sector housing programme that it created and administered, as it entrenched a base of electoral support and enabled the party to take full control of the environment in areas of state housing.

From the 1970s, however, there was a shift towards the rehabilitation of existing older tenements as a result of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1969. Rehabilitation could be implemented in three main ways. The first involved the public funding of private property owners to carry out the necessary public improvements to buildings, though in practice this process was complicated and often slowed down by the fragmented nature of
tenement ownership. The second allowed local authorities to undertake improvements in designated ‘Housing Action Areas’, though this was often impractical due to the need to re-house residents elsewhere during the process. The third was the establishment of local housing associations. These were state-funded voluntary not-for-profit associations that acted as agents for, but were independent of, local authorities, to provide housing for people in need. Houses in particular geographical areas were transferred to the control of these housing associations, which became responsible for their rehabilitation, maintenance, letting and management (Gibb 1989: 170-4). Alongside local authorities themselves, housing associations remain one of the major providers of social housing in Scotland today.

The privately rented tenement has, nonetheless, continued as common form of urban housing up to the present, though substantial changes have taken place. Widespread private ownership of individual tenement flats, for instance, is a more recent phenomenon. By the 1970s, it was often more financially viable for landlords to sell property rather than continue letting it out. This frequently involved the sale of individual tenement flats after a tenant either moved out or died. In other cases, older landlords would sell off whole tenement blocks to new landlords, who would then refurbish the property with the view to either selling or letting the flats individually. Moreover, the policies of the British Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, in addition to the more famous ‘Right to Buy’ scheme that gave council tenants the right to purchase their council-owned properties at discounted rates, also provided incentives for the expansion of the private rented sector. The introduction of the Short-Assured Tenancy in 1989 allowed landlords to set leases as short as six months. At the same time, rent controls were abolished, theoretically as a stimulating measure (McCrone & Elliot 1989a: 229-33; see also 1989b).

Changes to the demographics of housing tenure in Scotland, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century, have engendered changes to the expectations of the state, especially local authorities. Currie (1996: 48-9) argues that this has coincided with a shift in the role of local authorities in the provision of housing from that of providers to that of enablers. Although they continue to play a significant part in ensuring that their residents are adequately housed, it is now less likely to be the local authorities themselves who provide the housing. Instead, local authorities have increasingly sought to secure housing
via housing associations, housing co-operatives, urban renewal companies and other private house-builders. All in all, this has made for a much less monolithic mode of housing provision in which the state is much less directly implicated in the administration of the household environment.

The state has, however, continued to impose regulations over the housing market and to confer property rights. Referring to tenements in particular, MacEwen (1996: 34-6) notes that property rights are both individual, in the sense of the private ownership of an individual flat, and communal, in the sense that the common passageways, stairs and backgreens of the tenement block are shared between all residents. Legislative measures have been introduced to ensure minimum standards for the upkeep of property in both the public and private sectors. Buildings must be structurally stable, watertight, substantially free from damp, and must have a toilet for exclusive use of occupants and adequate provision of both hot and cold water. In the case of rented accommodation, it is the legal responsibility of the landlord to maintain the aforementioned standards. If these requirements are not met, the local authority can serve a Closing Order on the owner, to be followed either by an Improvement Order, in which the owner is required to improve the building within 180 days, or a Demolition Order, whereby the whole building is demolished if it cannot be sufficiently improved at a reasonable cost. The diversity of tenure even within individual tenement blocks, combined with the communal aspect of certain parts of the property, have particular implications for these legal requirements, not least their potential to engender collective responsibility for what is technically the individual private property of others.

Further legislative measures concerning property rights have been introduced by the Scottish Parliament since its establishment in 1999. One such initiative was the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, which ended the feudal system of land tenure described earlier in this section. The rights of the feu superior were removed, transferring sole ownership to the former vassal of an estate. A further endeavour was the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004, which sought to clarify the particularities of ownership within tenement buildings. Specifically, the 2004 Act states that the owner of the top-floor flat owns the roof and loft space above said flat, that the owner of the ground-floor flat owns the ground beneath, before and behind said flat, and that the ‘close’, i.e. entrance and stairwell, including the ground beneath and the roof above it, is in communal ownership.
Owners moreover are required to maintain any part of their property that provides shelter or support to any other part of the building. If a tenement building is demolished or destroyed, owners of individual flats will continue to own the airspace that their flat once occupied.

In early twenty-first century urban Scotland, one thus finds a diversity of property relations that include owner-occupancy, council tenancy, housing association tenancy, and private tenancy, often within a single tenement block. The Short-Assured Tenancy has, perhaps unintentionally, become the norm rather than the exception, and has contributed to a transience of residence within areas characterised by a high proportion of private rented housing. In presenting the preceding historical material, my aim has been to provide not only a sense of how the present situation within the Scottish private rented sector has emerged, but also to introduce some recurrent themes. I hope that this material will help readers to make sense of what follows and will provide for further reflection upon the continuities or discontinuities with the past.

Recent Developments

I conducted my fieldwork in Edinburgh from the summer of 2014 to the summer of 2015. This, and its aftermath, has been an eventful time for Scotland politically. Living in Leith, the early months of my fieldwork were characterised by a preponderance of badges and posters around the area, and rather high volume of political discussion. The Independence Referendum on 18th September 2014 produced a result of 45% in favour to 55% against across Scotland. Despite, or perhaps rather because of, this margin of ten percentage points, the issue does not appear to have been ‘settled’ at the time of writing, and the political and constitutional future of Scotland remains uncertain, even if the day-to-day prominence of the issue has faded somewhat. Indeed, whatever political outcome that may emerge over the coming few years may still not appear much like a lasting resolution.

Against this backdrop of Scottish constitutional politics, however, I have observed an increased interest in housing politics in Scotland over much the same timeframe. I have already mentioned the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016, which was under public consultation during the period of my fieldwork. I discuss the specifics of the
new legislation in Chapter 5, but for now, I will simply say that the changing landscape of Scotland’s housing must be understood in the context of the ongoing evolving political landscape of Scotland itself. Indeed, given the present political discourse, it would be hard to avoid at least some consideration of the implications of Scottishness and current Scottish nationalism for housing, the private rented sector, and recent changes to tenancy legislation. ‘Scotland’, and indeed ‘Edinburgh’, are for our purposes here not only both polities and locations of housing, but are also imagined states of being (cf. Gupta & Fergusson 1992) that are inevitably contested (cf. Ashworth & Graham 2005). It is now twenty-five years since McCrone (1992) argued that Scotland was problematic as a meaningful sociological category due, at least in part, to its apparent status as a stateless nation, and to some readers today, it may seem amusing or even absurd that such a point was ever made. Nonetheless, McCrone did then argue that Scotland could be regarded as a ‘society’ in the sense that it provided a meaningful set of frameworks to which symbolic meanings were attached. In this sense, Scotland is a symbolic construct, an ideological power and a transcendent idea. Scottish nationalism in particular has posed a notable challenge to the central authority of the British state since the 1970s, and whilst the 2014 referendum did not result in independence, considerable changes to political structures and governance in Scotland have taken place since the formation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 – a process which has arguably enabled the development of a new and more distinctly Scottish civic society.

Much of the specifically ethnographic literature pertaining to Scotland, however, has concentrated on rural communities, with particular focus upon the formation and experience of ‘community’ itself in rural and island locales. The ‘community’, in this context, is not a bounded or integrated whole; it is created by diverse interests and is sustained in part via its external relations. Local consciousness, according to Mewett (1982a, 1982b), writing about the Isle of Lewis, is grounded through kinship, neighbouring and other forms of social interaction, which, according to Ennew (1980), further serve to produce myths of continuity with and within a diaspora. Writing about Whalsay in Shetland, Cohen (1987) argues that boundaries are understood as symbolic and variable, existing in the mind of the members of the community. Deploying the symbols of the community serves to sustain the efficacy of the boundary. Relations between ‘locals’ and ‘incomers’ in conjunction with other forms of socioeconomic
change and their impacts upon notions of community have been recurrent themes within
the ethnography of rural Scotland (Byron c1981; Byron & McFarlane c1980; Forsythe
c1982; Macdonald 1997; Nadel 1984; Nadel-Klein 1991, 2003) and elsewhere in Britain
(Emmett 1982; Pahl 1965; Strathern 1981, 1982a, 1982b). Edinburgh is ostensibly a very
different environment, though it is worth considering the ways in which comparable
distinctions may play out, especially in the context of urban gentrification. Do different
forms of housing and tenure embody distinctions between different types of residents?
How do these relations impact upon notions of ‘community’ or, as we may come to see,
lack thereof?

Two more recent ethnographies conducted in Scotland may be of more direct
application. One is *Of Orderlies and Men: Hospital Porters Achieving Wellness at Work*
by Nigel Rapport (2009), based in a large hospital in a major Scottish city. Most
significant is that the hospital was not regarded as a formally ‘Scottish’ institution, though
certain aspects of both medical practice and demand were deemed to have a distinctly
Scottish character. Given that the regulations that govern the private rented sector in
Scotland are formulated and administered by the Scottish Government and are, by
definition, specific to Scotland, it is worth considering whether a similar analysis may be
applied to the private rented sector, or at least to specific institutions within it or connected
to it, such as letting agents, non-governmental organisations and campaign groups.

The other ethnography is *Devolution and the Scottish Conservatives: Banal activism,
electioneering and the politics of irrelevance* by Alexander Smith (2011). Focused on a
branch of the Conservative Party in southwest Scotland during the run-up to the 2003
Scottish Parliament election, a party then still struggling to come to terms with their
electoral defeat in 1997, Smith argues that Conservative activists turned towards ‘banal’
bureaucratic activities, such as the production of spreadsheets containing details of known
supporters. A degree of mundanity, both bodily and bureaucratic, is present in my own
ethnography; indeed, part of my aim here is to render a seemingly mundane set of
activities interesting, not least with the view to reveal the ‘everyday’ of the social and
economic relations that create and constitute the private rented sector.

Can, however, a meaningful definition of Scottishness even be reached, not least given
the diversity of Scotland? McCrone (2005) argues that Scottishness is chiefly an
institutional frame of reference. People, according to McCrone, see themselves as
Scottish because they have been governed and educated in a Scottish way. Everyday interactions are thus scotticised via a parliament that ‘both embodies as well as transforms and determines [...] social will’ (McCrone 2005: 74). Hearn (2000) argues that notions of Scottishness tend to be grounded in myths of egalitarianism, specifically in contrast to England. Such ideas may be located both in the history of trade unionism and the Labour Party as well as in the historical struggles between the state and the Church of Scotland – at least notionally a more democratic body than the Church of England. This, according to Hearn, leads to a tendency to combine Scottish egalitarianism with Calvinism and, moreover, to combine this with struggles against the British government at Westminster. In the vein of Foster (1989), this process contributes to the formation of class-based dialectics between Scottishness and Britishness, whereby Scotland comes to embody ‘working-class’ values.

Perhaps of more direct concern for an anthropological approach to Scottishness is its potential for interpretation and manipulation by actors through social interaction. Cohen (1996) argues that notions of Scottishness, specifically Scottish nationalism, are associations made by individuals between themselves and Scotland. It is, Cohen argues, its capacity for personalisation that renders Scottish nationalism persuasive, as political representations of Scotland inevitably stem from unique vantage points based upon individual, local or sectarian interest. Rapport (2009: 249) argues that affirmations of identity should be understood as plural, temporary, situational and often contradictory. Scottishness may be conceived in essentialist terms, though is linked to personal biographies. It can be both an administrative identity stemming from an association with ‘Scottish’ political institutions, and a competitive identity located in comparisons with the achievements of ‘other’ groups. Significantly, however, it is not all-pervasive. More immediate identities, such as the local or the occupational, frequently carry greater significance.

Nonetheless, the rhetoric that sought to equate Scotland with ‘equality’ and generic opposition to the Conservative Party intensified during the independence referendum campaign and its aftermath. I recall receiving a postcard shortly before the referendum urging me to vote Yes in order to ‘END TORY RULE FOREVER’. This was followed in the subsequent Westminster election campaign in 2015 by similar ‘RED TORIES OUT’ postcards calling for the replacement of MPs from the Labour Party with those from the
Scottish National Party. I remain cynical as to the more thoroughgoing validity of such rhetoric, and it should be noted that such material would have been locally targeted – Leith, where I lived, is a predominantly working-class urban area with a long history of left-wing and Labour politics. Nonetheless, this rhetoric provides a context within and against which the policies and praxis of the Scottish private rented sector may be examined and perhaps even, at least where the Scottish Government is concerned, held to account.

To borrow the concept of ‘periodisation’ from Kroeber (1963), the precise quality of Scotland’s post-referendum ‘period’ remains to be seen, pre-independence or otherwise. But as far as housing is concerned, Scotland is clearly going through a period of upheaval and transition. Broad analysis may be made of wider Scottish political discourse in light of the rapid expansion of the private rented sector and the response of the Scottish Government to this expansion, but equally interesting, and perhaps more relevant for our purposes here, are the contested and competing narratives present within the Scottish private rented sector itself. How are we to balance both rhetoric and policy at the formal levels of both governmental and non-governmental institutions with property relations as they take place at sites of social interaction between implicated actors? Anthropology, and ethnographic methods in particular, offer a unique angle into these questions.

Towards an Economic Anthropology of Housing

In the popular Western perspective, the terms ‘economics’ and ‘the economy’ may conjure up images of money, markets and trade. Etymologically, the English ‘economy’ is derived from the French économie, which is derived via Latin from the Greek oikonomia, meaning ‘household management’, itself a compound of oikos – ‘house’, and nemein – ‘manage’. Indeed, Aristotle, or perhaps more likely Theophrastus or another student, in Oeconomia developed the idea of the household, including household finance and household management, as a model for the broader economy from the personal to the political. Adam Smith (1776) famously developed this further to argue that the economic system consists principally of households and firms interacting rationally in markets as if guided by an ‘invisible hand’. Even if the use of such theistic imagery has declined, the
distinction between markets and households as core components of the economy has endured as central to neoclassical economic analysis.

The private rented sector might appear to problematise some of these assumptions, and in some respects with a mild irony. Drawing on popular notions of the economy, there are certainly plenty of exchanges of money for (the use of) property and services within the sector. And, drawing on classical theories of economics, households are ostensibly central. What is less certain in this instance, however, is the extent to which households are or can be units of engagement in a private renting ‘market’. Instead, there are apparently markets of houses presented to prospective tenants, and of prospective tenants presented to landlords. Whilst this does not amount of a market of households, it does amount to concurrent markets of core components of potential households – the house and the tenant – within the private rented sector. Further to this, and continuing the theme of oikonomia or ‘eco-nomy’, is the role of ‘property management’ in the form of letting agencies that mediate the relations, both economic and social, between houses, landlords and tenants, whilst at the same time both engaging in markets and creating markets of their own. Whilst ‘the household’ may be neither an appropriate unit of analysis here nor a viable means of entry to the wider economy of the private rented sector, the essential metaphors inherited from classical economics nonetheless provide a convenient point of access to broader economic-anthropological debates, as well as an opportunity to re-engage with the original sense of eco-nomy as ‘house management’ – or property management.

Economic anthropology in particular provides a useful and appropriate discursive framework for the analysis of economic and ‘eco-nomic’ – or house-management – relations as encountered within the housing ‘market’, and indeed has the distinct epistemological advantage in this instance in its refusal to take ‘markets’ for granted as the primary sphere of study. Economic theories, according to Wilk (1996), are fundamentally theories of human nature and, by extension, theories of ethics. Consequently, they can be interpreted as sets of ethnographic claims to be explored in the field. Wilk (1996: 36-8) posits three broad models that social scientists have used to explain human behaviour: the self-interested model, the social model, and the moral model. Most theories of economics, Wilk contends, are forms of one of these three models. In engaging with economic anthropology, a core if basic question to ask is how far any
of these models – again, keeping in mind that I treat them as ethnographic claims – can be applied to the Edinburgh private rented sector.

The self-interested economy, as a mode of analysis, has its origins in Adam Smith (1776). Smith argues that people ultimately participate in markets and trade because of their own self-interest – to get the best return for their labour by selling it at the highest possible price, and to accumulate riches. The core of Smith’s argument, however, is that individual self-interest and free competition via ‘the market’ leads to the greatest utilitarian outcomes for society as a whole, provided that individuals are empowered to act rationally, as competition keeps costs of production and prices low. These basic assumptions have filtered through to much of neoclassical economic thought today, but, as Wilk (1996: 68) points out, they do rather rest upon the ‘utilitarian assumption that human beings are rational maximizers of their own utility’. My own contention is that this is far from the case, at least as far as the present-day private rented sector in Smith’s hometown is concerned, but its widespread persistence in Western journalistic and economic commentary – the ongoing output of the Adam Smith Institute is but one case in point – does render it a convenient discourse for deconstruction in light of ethnography.

Beyond the self-interested economy is, in Wilk’s terms, the social economy. Durkheim ([1893] 1964) rejects utilitarianism, argues that human consciousness is social rather than individual, and then subsumes economics into society, understood as a functioning totality. Mutual interdependence leads to economic integration, and laws are developed to regulate co-operation. Economic activity thus becomes an expression of social structures, not the other way round. A distinct sub-branch of the social economy, Wilk (1996) argues, is the political economy. Marx ([1867] 1976) would have shared Durkheim’s view that economic behaviour is embedded in society and social groups, but, instead argued that society is composed of different classes defined by the property that they own or do not own. As these classes by definition have competing interests, they struggle against each other for dominance, thereby rendering all economic activity inherently political. Engels ([1884] 1972) argued that these inequalities stem ultimately from the institution of private property, and by extension the social system of property rights, which, in historical terms, has its origins in the household, whereby men extracted and appropriated the surplus value produced by women. There are certainly roles within the private rented sector – tenant, landlord, letting agent – that are grounded in one’s
particular rights to property, but the extent to which these constitute classes would appear more uncertain, not least given the rise of ‘petty landlordism’ in Scotland since the 1970s, and the range of people working in letting agencies and other mediating organisations who do not have coherent or clearly defined ‘interests’ to pursue. Nonetheless, the notion of contested or competing interests does, in my view, constitute a more viable mode of analysis in this instance than either the complementary self-interest of Smith on the one hand, or the unified social interest of Durkheim on the other.

How might these contested interests be analysed? Wilk’s notion of the moral economy, underlying the tradition of cultural economics, is relevant. In this model, ‘behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right, and these moral values flow ultimately from a cosmology—a culturally patterned view of the universe and the human place within it’ (Wilk 1996: 38). This is not, however, intended to imply a culturally-determined moral economy, or that rational or reasoned choices play no part. Indeed, Boas ([1911] 1938) argues, perhaps with some contradiction, that cultures are integrated wholes, but that all humans have the same rationality, whilst Malinowski (1922), via his famous analysis of the Kula Ring, considered that humans are ultimately rational and needs-driven, but that the needs and their solutions are culturally variable. Of more direct theoretical application for the moral economy here is Weber ([1905] 1930), who regards economic acts as products of social, personal and ethical conditions. Most famously, he argues that economic rationality emerges only with capitalism because of its distinct ‘spirit’ that is linked to the ethics of Protestant Christianity. Economic rationality, thus understood, is itself a social product and, in a sense, a moral and ethical ideal.

Through the preceding discussion, I have attempted to indicate that economic anthropology is fundamentally concerned with property relations, and that questions of appropriate rights to property are by definition ethical or moral questions. Indeed, as Macpherson (1978: 4) argues, property is both a ‘political relation between persons’ and an ‘enforceable claim’. Although this ‘enforceability is what makes it a legal right, the enforceability itself depends on society’s belief that it is a moral right’. Property as an institution, he claims, depends upon a ‘justifying theory’ (Macpherson 1978: 11) or legitimising narrative through which the professed owners convince others that they should accept their claims of ownership (cf. Rose 2006). Such ideas are ultimately
connected to notions of sovereignty, however, as it is those with the means of enforceability whose narrative is most likely to gain acceptance.

Theories of property rights may therefore be understood as ethical ideologies based upon moral claims. Liberal and proto-liberal thinkers, for instance, have regarded private property both as an inherent individual right and as the best means of ensuring socioeconomic security. Locke ([1689] 1821) considered unlimited private property to be a natural right insofar as one has access either to one’s own labour or to the means of the labour through which it is produced. Bentham ([1830] 1931: 112), conversely, regarded property as an ‘expectation’ or ‘persuasion’, guaranteed only by law, which in turn should seek to provide for security and subsistence rather than equality per se. Mill ([1871] 1965: 215) argued for ‘the recognition, in each person, of a right to the exclusive disposal of what he or she [has] produced by their own exertions, or received either by gift or by fair agreement, without force or fraud, from those who produced it’. Green ([1885] 1986: 164-5, 178) moreover defended private property as a necessary expression of human consciousness, the denial of which would be to lessen moral and economic development on both individual and social levels. What these positions have in common is that they ascribe primacy to the individual whilst couching property rights in terms of ideals based upon negative liberties.

Such ideals have been criticised by those who have agitated for a less individualist conception of property. Rousseau ([1755] 2006) argued that the accumulation of unlimited private property is fundamentally unjust on the grounds that its management necessitates the co-operation of multiple persons who are mostly not proprietors. Marx ([1867] 1976: 929) regarded the accumulation of capitalist private property – in contrast to individual private property, which is the exclusive product of its owner’s labour – as possible only through the expropriation of the labour of others. Proudhon ([1840] 1970: 52) moreover argued that the right of property is fundamentally irreconcilable with society because the proprietor’s right to dispose of social property undermines the rights of liberty, equality and security. Central to these arguments is that the excess accumulation of private property by individual persons denies others the property that may rightfully be theirs.

Others have argued against liberal notions of private property in less explicitly ideological terms. Tawney (1920) decried ‘functionless property’ as existing solely as a
right to an income for the proprietor regardless of any services provided, and, far from acting as an extension of an individual’s moral personality (cf. Macpherson 1978: 100), in fact undermines both legitimate property and creative energy. In a similar vein, Veblen ([1923] 1997) argued against both the natural-right and the utilitarian justifications for private property on the grounds that the ability of corporate owners to impose their will, potentially to the detriment of the community, undermines both the efforts of labour and the guarantee of security. This in particular has implications for notions of personhood, both anthropological and legal. Cohen ([1933] 1978: 155) argues against the legal separation of property from sovereignty, contending instead that property in fact is sovereignty as it confers not only rights between persons, but also power between persons, as it is property that enables the proprietor to exercise power over others. The precise denotation of ‘persons’, at least since the mid twentieth century, is potentially blurred, however, in a legal context that recognises the notion of corporate personhood. Reich (1964: 772) argues that ‘multiple ownership of corporations helped to separate personality from property, and property from power’. Corporate private property, he argues, ‘lost its individuality and in effect became socialized’ as corporations ‘sought the aid and partnership of the state, and thus by their own volition became part of public government’. If nothing else, this analysis would suggest that ‘property’ could not simply be taken for granted as a distinct notion even in the Euro-American socio-legal context.

The anthropology of property, approached from within the broader subfield of economic anthropology, offers a distinct angle for investigation into the moral – and, perhaps, immoral and amoral – reasoning through which property regimes are reproduced. As a starting point, we might wish to heed the advice of Hann (1998: 3), who urges anthropologists to consider both the micro and macro levels of property relations. The former consist of ‘the myriad ways in which people build up their social identities through holding and using a variety of “things” in their environment’, whilst the latter concerns ‘issues of political power and control over the distribution of “things” in society’. This dichotomy may be contested, malleable or disputable in creating notions of ownership. Whilst hierarchies of legal claims to property do not necessarily produce uncertainty, persons nonetheless negotiate the politico-legal structures in which they are implicated.

To return to economy and eco-nomy, the prospect of an anthropology of private rented housing perhaps inevitably invites comparisons within the broader anthropology of the
Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga (1999: 3) posit that ‘[i]t is most often the house that permits us to define households; it is the indispensable reproductive and social reproductive role of family that makes such a definition worthwhile’. We might in this argument hear echoes of Lévi-Strauss (1983) and the société à maison, whereby the house constitutes a corporate person that structures and maintains kinship by uniting and transcending certain incompatible binary oppositions, or of Bourdieu (1979), whose classic analysis of the Kabyle house posits that the house serves to structure symbolically the hierarchical relationship between males and females. Carsten & Hugh-Jones (1995: 45) further argue that the house and its inhabitants are ‘mutually implicated in the process of living’ – that is, that the household is founded upon the day-to-day affairs that arise from sharing within a domestic dwelling. Through social interaction, houses become spaces of memory and, perhaps, of intergenerational transmission; the household itself is metaphorically constituted as the locus of interaction between these interrelated strands. The core unit of analysis here, however, is neither the household nor the individual house (or flat, or tenement). Rather, the focus is inverted to consider how the economic and economic relations manifested within the private rented sector coalesce (or not) within and around the house, as will become apparent.

The house building itself, however, may impose, or appear to impose, certain contingencies on the kinds of relations that take place therein. Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga (1999: 8) argue that the personal agency of the inhabitants of houses ‘may at times be compromised but never concealed’ due to ‘the power of houses to structure and constrain [their] lives’. Miller (2001b: 112) likewise argues that ‘the prior presence of material culture may have a constraining impact upon what one feels one can do with possessions in such a manner that they may appear to possess their own agency’. The contrast between the relative transiency of occupancy and the longevity of the buildings themselves has the potential to evoke ideas about past and future occupants. Notions of ownership, moreover, may imbue material culture with particular agency. Miller (2001b: 118) argues that council tenants on an estate in London feel ‘haunted’ by their state housing due to the lack of control felt over their living environment, whilst owner-occupiers feel similarly in relation to prior owners of their property. How, therefore, might the private ownership of a building or part of a building by someone other than its inhabitants impact upon the ways in which the house, tenement or flat is
perceived and experienced by the tenant? In what senses does the building mediate the landlord’s or letting agent’s agency?

Much of the anthropological literature on the house is concerned with the modification of material space, especially involving the use of furnishings, décor and arrays of objects as a means of delineating space, producing households or ‘making home’ (Bank 2001; Clarke 2001; Daniels 2001; Drazin 2001; Garvey 2001; Hecht 2001; St. George 2006; Tan 2001). A recurrent theme is the use of internal modifications to counter the sameness engendered by the uniform exteriors of buildings. Indeed, these uniform and homogenising exteriors frequently embody housing regimes, both past and present. As discussed earlier, Scotland is no stranger to this. Ethnographic explorations of modernist housing projects may be of more relevance here. In the case of Brasília, as analysed by Holston (1989, 1999), not only did architectural standardisation of apartments seek to structure the daily lives of inhabitants in a way that would prevent social discrimination; the fact that such architecture formed part of an ideologically-driven modernist planned city provokes the entrance of Brasilia into the apartment as part of citiescape’s wider social and spatial relations. A range of further ethnographic accounts that concern the ways in which inhabitants deal with the ideological intentions behind state-planned housing schemes exist, such as Buchli (2002) in the Soviet Union, Rasson et al (1999) in socialist Serbia, Drazin (2001) in Romania, Booth (1999) in Sicily, and Bank (2001) in apartheid South Africa. Are there parallels with the private rented sector in Edinburgh? In some respects, no – the sector is not the outcome of modernist planning and is not embodied (at least not intentionally) by a homogenising architectural form. Nonetheless, as a component of both the housing sector and the private sector, it does, however, constitute a form of housing regime. It is a state of affairs that has been brought about by deliberate government policies, and it continues to be managed in part through state intervention, even if not by the state itself. Comparisons are thus invited.

**Ethics of Property Management**

Let us return both to Wilk’s notion of the moral economy and to the notion of property as a moral right, and consider how the study of economic relations within Edinburgh’s
private rented sector might contribute to the broader anthropology of ethics and morality. I choose not to dwell on the semantic distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ in this instance, as I find any apparent distinction inadequately consistent, though certain authors from particular vantage points have tended to favour one over the other.

Concerning the anthropology of morality and ethics, Csordas (2013: 524) outlines four distinct approaches. The first he describes as ‘moral anthropology’, whereby morality is treated as a social domain like religion or politics, and ‘includes a reflexive stance toward morality accepted as a problematic responsibility to engage, as well as to analyze, moral dilemmas and realities’. The second he characterises as the ‘anthropology of morality’ (or moralities), which variously concerns either ‘the contrast between the routine reproduction of moral regimes in stable societies and the enforced freedom of moral choice in situations of value conflict produced by social change’ or ‘the interpersonal level in which taken-for-granted moral life breaks down and must be restored by self-conscious ethical work’. The third concerns the ‘[a]nalysis of local moral worlds’, in which morality is understood as a form of consciousness, ‘the seat of which is the self embedded in the context of a collective moral sensibility’, and accessed via ‘person-centred ethnography’. Finally is the anthropology of ethics, developed primarily by Faubion, Laidlaw and Lambek, which is concerned chiefly with ‘human agency as it appears when ethics is considered [...] from the standpoint of practice theory with respect to actor, act and virtue’ or ‘from the standpoint of systems theory that emphasizes ethical subject positions defined by ethical discourse within politico-semiotic fields and entered/exit by processes of autopoiesis’. I borrow from all these strands, though it is this final approach that I find most directly applicable to my work.

Laidlaw (2002: 315) cautions against an equation between agency and freedom, and argues that an anthropology of ethics risks ‘constantly collapsing into general questions of social regularity and social control’ unless we take the possibilities of human freedom seriously. Agency, for Laidlaw (2002: 327), focuses on the effectiveness of action, whereas free and thus ethical conduct is shaped by people’s ‘attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live’. Equally, Faubion (2001) argues that ethics is constituted in the self in its relation to others. Consequently, ‘[t]here is no thinking of ethics without thinking of power, or rather of powers, whether they are those that suppress autopoiesis
or allow it to flourish’ (Faubion 2001: 97). Thus understood, powers have strategies and
tactics that frame the pedagogical acquisition of ethics itself. Ethical formulation and
reformulation may, therefore, be conceptualised as fundamental to human ontology and
ontogeny. Regarding these ‘powers [...] that suppress autopoiesis or allow it to flourish’,
one may wish to consider how these processes take shape with regards to property and
property regimes. How, therefore, does the ethical come into play for tenants, landlords,
letting agents and others within the private rented sector given their distinct economic
relations and their not-always-so-distinct, as we shall see later, social relations? Further
to this, how does the ethical produce and reproduce the ‘sector’? We may also wish to
take the argument of Cassaniti & Hickman (2014: 258) seriously here, which is to say
that ‘a stance that separates freedom from reproduction [...] does not allow for the
possibility that social actors may be engaged in agentive moral reproduction’. How,
therefore, do actors in the private rented sector produce their own ethical life-worlds via
interaction within the property regime?

In the vein of Csordas (2013: 536), I posit that morality is not a cultural system, but
rather, that ‘the moral can enter into – spontaneously or by conscious evocation – virtually
any corner of human concern’. Methodologically, at least, it is useful to turn to the
‘ordinary ethics’ of Lambek (2010: 2), which is to say, an ethics that is ‘relatively tacit,
grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and
happening without calling undue attention to itself’. In saying that ethics is intrinsic to
action, Lambek (2015: 129) argues that ‘practice is always understood in relation to
[ethical] criteria and based on judgment about the relevance of specific [ethical] criteria’,
and ‘new [ethical] criteria are instantiated by means of illocutionary force or acts’. In
other words, the criteria by which actors exercise their judgement about what they do or
say are ‘made relevant, brought into play, by means of performative acts, such acts
themselves being conducted in consequence of practical judgment’. Let us, therefore, take
this notion of the ‘ordinary’ and focus on the acts and practices within the private rented
sector through which the ethical is manifested.

So, how might the ethical come to the fore? Using the metaphor of the ‘moral
laboratory’, Mattingly (2013: 318) endeavours to ‘foreground those events that serve as
experiments, small inaugurations into something that might constitute a fleeting
experience or might portend a future different than one had envisioned’, and to recognise
‘moral transformation and the moral striving surrounding it that is at once experimental, even perilous, and also deeply embedded in the routines of everyday life’. Mattingly uses the example of a physiotherapy session for an African-American boy at which his custodial grandmother and non-custodial mother were both in attendance; but to what extent might, for instance, a letting agency, or other spaces within the Edinburgh private rented sector, be conceived as sites of moral experimentation?

I stated earlier that it was my intention to develop economic anthropology in light of the anthropology of ethics as they pertain to the private rented sector in Edinburgh, and I hope that the idea is at least beginning to emerge that ‘ethics’ are, by definition, central to property relations. One potential point of departure concerns theories of value. Lambek (2008: 134) contrasts ethical values with economic value, arguing that the former are ‘generally posited according to some absolute standard, whilst the latter are ‘intrinsically negotiable and relative’. Economics, he argues, is concerned with choice, whereas ethics is concerned with judgment. Any absolute ethical values must, however be ‘qualified in and through lived practice’ (Lambek 2008: 137) and are thus inevitably relativised. ‘[E]thical and market value are incommensurable to one another,’ Lambek concludes, ‘precisely because economics chooses between commensurable values operative under a single meta-value while ethics judges among incommensurable values or meta-values’ (Lambek 2008: 145). Is this incommensurability between ethical and economic values applicable to the private rented sector and to property management in Edinburgh? Where might tensions arise?

Of particular interest is how these negotiations between the ethical and the economic take shape in the context of socioeconomic change – in this instance, the rapid expansion of the private rented sector. Robbins (2007: 311) suggests that ‘situations of cultural change are particularly good ones in which to study the way morality shapes culture and experience’ on the grounds that they ‘often upend previously stable value hierarchies [and] generate the kinds of conflicts that push the morality of choice and freedom to the foreground’. Has this shift in the provision of housing from the public to the private sectors produced particular kinds of moral and ethical reasoning, grounded in the practice of the new economic relations that have ensued?
Towards an Ethnography of the Private Rented Sector

The term ‘Private Rented Sector’ was ubiquitous throughout my fieldwork experience, is prominent within parts of Scottish political discourse, and has been reproduced numerous times in this introductory chapter so far. As a term, it would appear to pose its own question: *sector* of what? ‘Sectors’ are of course a common concept within political-economic discourses; one speaks, at least in Britain, of the private sector, the public sector, the voluntary sector, the higher education sector, the agricultural sector, the financial services sector, the hospitality sector, and so forth. And yet, one may still ask, *sector of what?* Broad notions of ‘the economy’ do not appear to quite suffice here as it does not adequately situate sectors within their concrete social relations. I contend that the private rented sector *in Edinburgh* entails both interior and exterior landscapes brought into being through buildings, intersects public and private space, and is constituted via a network of property relations, and that, methodologically, it is useful to conceive of it as a constituent of the city. Thus, rather than of either a specific locale or reified social group *within* the city, this is a reframed economic anthropology *of* the city, accessed via a particular vantage point.

The intersections between the built urban environment and social behaviour invite reflections upon the ideas raised by some of the key figures associated with the Chicago School of urban sociology. Park (1915) characterises the city as a diverse mosaic of contiguous yet separated worlds, each with its own moral character, between which individuals may pass quickly. Wirth (1938) argues that the transitory and segregated nature of the city engenders the formation of artificial and segmented interest-based kinship groups through which individuals develop and express their personalities, created in lieu of actual kinship ties, superimposed upon a territorial base. Redfield (1947), after Simmel ([1903] 1950), holds that the industrialised city is conducive to heterogenisation, individualism and disorganisation – a less optimistic take than that of Weber ([1921] 1958), who argues that the individualisation of the city gives rise to the civic ‘community’ in which the legal position of individual inhabitants is guaranteed by citizenship. Is the Edinburgh private rented sector a ‘community’? There are certainly overlapping networks defined by personal contacts, and through which actors may move about and shift roles, something to which we shall return.
Indeed, Hannerz (1980) conceives of the city as a network of networks that consist of the diverse role repertoires of individuals. Social relations in the city are fluid and multiplex because role repertoires, such as neighbour, friend, kin and colleague – or property manager, tenant, landlord and so forth – may shift over time. Such roles are not merely ready-made; they may be adapted or even created by city dwellers in the context of their wider repertoires of networks. In formulating a methodology for an anthropological analysis of the city, Hannerz proposes that the focus be upon the ways in which such networks develop and maintain common perspectives and shared meanings, paying particular attention to the social, institutional and spatial contexts in which the production of such ideas take place. The city in toto could thus be understood as a social form that intersects with its constituent social relations.

A potentially useful tool for the analysis of these intersections therefore is the urban landscape. Hirsch (1995: 22-3) argues that landscape is not merely a physical backdrop; it is a relationship between ‘everyday social life’ and ‘potential social existence’ – a cultural process through which people ‘attempt to realize in the foreground what can only be a potentiality and for the most part in the background’. To connect this analysis to the urban process, one might, in the vein of Gell (1998), consider the ways in which the secondary agency embodied in the outcomes of urban planning – in this case, houses, tenements, flats, gardens, streets and so forth – symbolically structure and act upon the everyday social lives of participants in the urban landscape. Mitchell (1988: 60) argues that the techniques of ‘enframing’ codify a visible hierarchy through the construction of streets, façades and public buildings that position the subject as an observer looking on. The layout of the city itself may seek to embody notions of distinction between social groups (Rabinow 1995), or to facilitate the movement of individuals through conceptions of veins and arteries (Sennett 1996). Following this, it is useful – essential, even – to situate the private rented sector within its physical landscape, and I hope to have achieved this via thick description.

The city does, however, present a methodological challenge for the ethnographer. Whilst segments may be delineated for the purposes of ethnographic description, the scope of this project potentially reaches out to the city as a totality, or at least to an ill-defined entity that does not constitute a face-to-face community in any meaningful sense. The analytical modes used to produce connectedness within a diverse and potentially
disparate environment are not immediately straightforward. In the vein of Amin & Thrift (2002), it may be useful to conceptualise the city not as a diverse yet ultimately total entity, but as a site of potentiality in which a plethora of overlapping and malleable networks interact subject to contingencies, though also have the capacity to transcend the dichotomy between the local and the global, thereby rendering generalisations as to common perspectives somewhat suspect. Our analysis concerns the discourses of the city as gleaned through the moment of encounter (Amin & Thrift 2002: 30), though such discourses are invariably diverse. We thus may not only wish to consider the urban discourses in which the private rented sector is situated à la Low (1999), but also consider how discursive models and images of the city may be followed by the ethnographer in drawing the connections required for the production of the ethnographic text (cf. Marcus 1995). Our moments of encounter provide an interactive window on the city that recognises urbanism as more than a series of face-to-face relations, but that nonetheless accepts the limitations of a holistic analysis.

How, then, can we do ethnography of an economic sector within a city, and how can this contribute to our anthropological knowledge of the city? The broad questions that I seek to address are not only theoretical and ethnographic, but also methodological. I provide a cursory answer here. However, I hope that this project in its entirety will contribute in some way to addressing these issues, both theoretically and by example.

The production of the ethnographic text itself, and the need for textual connectedness, has thus been a major methodological plank, both during and beyond fieldwork. Indeed, ultimately, I regard the practice of ethnography, including fieldwork and writing stages, as a single continuous process. If, to return to Latour (2005), the text is to be successful in performing the social, it must stage its actors so as to stabilise and compose the collected associations. In so doing, I have sought to prioritise the efficacy of the ethnographic text. After Tyler (1986), I have endeavoured to produce a text that is, I hope, evocative rather than merely descriptive or representative, and that tells a larger story through a series of smaller stories.

In seeking to achieve ethnographic evocation, I cannot deny that I have been inspired by one of my favourite novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell, not least because I read both Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life (1848) and North and South (1855) for pleasure during the writing period. Semi-autobiographical, both novels seek to tell tales of the relations
between employers and workers in an industrialising city. *North and South* in particular offers much potential inspiration for the ethnographer of an economic sector in an urban environment. With an extraordinary realism, not to mention the comedy of manners, Gaskell deploys the main protagonist Margaret Hale as an audience surrogate, i.e. a character with whom the reader can identify, who expresses their imagined questions and confusions, and who engages with both mill owners and mill workers to present their diverse perspectives and comment upon their complex social and economic relations. In the novel, Miss Hale wanders between vantage points within the textile sector of her new city and tries to empathise with the viewpoints of different actors whilst retaining a clear if at times naïve ethical stance of her own. Narrative connectedness is ultimately created through her wanderings – the entire story is seen through her. As an ethnographer, I of course write in the first person, but I feel that the parallels are clear. Gaskell has often been drawn upon by social historians for her realism and attention to detail. Perhaps, then, as ethnographers, we could draw upon her literary methodology and ask whether we might regard her, after a fashion, as a proto economic anthropologist?

More broadly, in drawing upon Gaskell, I am, by implication, drawing upon a British literary genre that has dealt with urban socioeconomic relations. Indeed, given the relatively recent shift back from the public sector towards the private sector for the provision of housing and related services, this connection may appear particularly appropriate – in Gaskell’s time, before the creation of the welfare state, social services were provided primarily by the private and voluntary sectors, and indeed much of *North and South* deals with the ethics of what and how much care and support should be provided by factory owners to their workers. But equally, my intention is to consider how ethnography may draw upon linked literary genres generally, and how British urban economic anthropology may draw upon urban realism specifically. If nothing else, I hope that my own text, as an experiment in ethnographic production, will go some way to answering this.

Two ethnographies stand out as particularly inspirational for me. One is *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* by Ho (2009). Ho successfully constructs an ethnography of Wall Street investment banking through a combination of participant observation in an investment bank and the interviewing of investment bankers, drawing together a range of voices who, for the most part, cannot be described as part of a face-to-face community,
but do nonetheless inhabit a common working milieu in a particular city. Though not particularly written from the theoretical vantage points of either economic anthropology or the anthropology of ethics – Lo primarily deploys the tools of habitus and performativity in her analysis – much of her ethnography is driven by the desire to unpack the apparent contradiction encountered in the field whereby employees are ideologically in favour of downsizing even though it jeopardises their own jobs, and thus does cover some of the broader themes of management ethics. The second ethnography is *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* by Bourgois (1995). Set explicitly within the context of the structural economic factors, including institutionalised racism, that have contributed to urban poverty, Bourgois tells a story about the microeconomics of crack dealers in Spanish Harlem in New York through detailed ethnographic evocation. Textually, I hope to have produced something in the literary tradition of Bourgois here.

As with Lo, Bourgois and indeed Gaskell, this project cannot be divorced from my own (political) background and motivations, both of which intersect with its broader theme. I mentioned at the start that I first became interested in an anthropological study of the private rented sector in the autumn of 2012. This was, however, far from my first experience of the politics of rented housing. Not only had I lived in private rented housing in Scotland for some years prior to this, experiencing a variety of landlords and letting agents, I was also, as an undergraduate in St Andrews in the late 2000s, an active participant in what was known as the ‘Lower Rents Now! Coalition’ – a small campaign group founded largely to oppose the University’s proposals to demolish much of its cheaper accommodation and replace it with higher-end accommodation with higher rents. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that I grew up in Bournville, a predominantly socially-rented ‘model village’ in Birmingham. Inspired by the Quaker ideals of its founder George Cadbury, Bournville was built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to provide decent-quality homes and gardens both for their chocolate factory workers and for the wider community in the area. Much of my extended family have lived in, and to an extent have politically dominated, a small housing co-operative along four streets in Bournville since about the 1920s. Many of those same people have also worked at Birmingham City Council’s Housing Department for the duration of their careers. It is hard to say precisely how influential that background has been on my later political and
academic interests, but I nonetheless hope that it provides at least some indication of where I am coming from as far as this project is concerned.

Outline of Chapters

The following chapter begins with the character of the Property Manager – the person responsible for a portfolio of rented properties within Almond and Thompson. Although he (and it usually is a he) retains a desk in the letting agency office, and has to attend some meetings in the office, most of his work takes place in ‘the field’. The chapter is structured around a day in the life of the Property Manager, tracing his activities from office to field. This is partly intended to serve as a way into both property management and the broader private rented sector, but I hope that the role of this character will also present something of a surprise to readers. The Property Manager comes, in a sense, to be the actor through which the other connections flow. Not only do they come into regular contact with tenants, landlords, other letting agent staff, contractors and so forth; they also spend a lot of time driving around the city, walking up and down semi-private and semi-public stairwells, and viewing the insides of flats and houses. Thus, this initial ethnographic chapter also serves as a tool that links together the range of actors deployed throughout the thesis: the Property Manager links many of the aspects of the private rented sector landscape together, but their unique vantage point is that they see it principally from the inside. Drawing upon the anthropology of landscape more broadly, and of urban landscapes in particular, the chapter develops the notion of the property manager as an actor who reads visible signs and constructs narratives based upon them.

In the second chapter, we encounter three other Property Managers and consider the ways in which they ‘facilitate’ the relations between tenants, landlords, and contractors and local government. All three Property Managers face physical barriers of access to property that stem from breakdowns in the relationships between themselves and one or more of the aforementioned other actors, leading to time-wasting – a frequent complaint. The anthropology of ethics is reintroduced here, and the particular ethics of time-wasting also provides a way into a broader discussion of the temporality of rent and tenancy vis-à-vis a number of popular and analytical equations between time and money.
The third chapter is based entirely in the Almond and Thompson office and aims to position the determining of both eligibility and liability as functions of property management, to introduce the notion of knowledge of persons and properties through documents, to argue that such documents are management tools, and to develop further the theme of extra-legal actors within the private rented sector. After attending a training session in the use of their computerised database, we meet the Customer Support Team. Much like Property Managers, Customer Support Advisors turn out to be persons ‘between’ the office, buildings, tenants, landlords and contractors, albeit from a different vantage point within the letting agency. After this, we meet the Property Management Co-ordinators, who are responsible for carrying out background checks on prospective tenants. The theme of extra-legalism is introduced through their investigative knowledge practices based upon the reading of documents and the construction of characters.

The fourth chapter develops the focus on ethics and the ‘moral economy’ to explore the rhetoric and practice of care as a function of private sector property management. The chapter begins by following a Property Manager who describes himself as an ‘untrained social worker’, and who, by all accounts, displays a high level of personal care towards his tenants. Further to this, we meet the Tenancy Sustainment Advisor, who helps tenants with ‘income maximisation’ and holds drop-in surgeries in public libraries promoted by the city council to people on the homeless register – all while effectively acting as a sales agent for a private letting agency. Through this, we consider how ‘untrained social workers’ may be a consequence of the shift from the public sector to the private sector in housing provision. Private sector ‘tenancy sustainment’ is a relatively novel phenomenon. Does successful management require this level of ‘care’? Is it largely rhetorical? If so, who is the rhetoric for? These questions are considered in light of wider anthropological literatures on both care and ethics.

The fifth chapter shifts away from the letting agency to the broader ‘private rented sector’ as understood by housing charity Shelter Scotland, and participates in an ‘engagement with stakeholders’, in their words, by interviewing members of the Edinburgh Private Tenants Forum, which they founded. Themes are drawn from a series of interviews with forum members, including one who later became involved in the Living Rent Campaign. Although this chapter in part tries to approach the private rented sector from the vantage point of the tenant, the chief focus turns out to be exploration of
engagement with stakeholders’ as enacted by Shelter Scotland. Who joins a forum such as this?

The sixth chapter begins with a depiction of Shelter Scotland’s joint conference with the Scottish Association of Private Landlords. This is partly a tool for the reassembling of the sector: tenants, landlords, letting agents, Shelter Scotland and I are all there, but also because the conference is centred on the Private Housing (Tenancies) Bill, of which the consultation period has just come to an end. Going back to rhetoric, this chapter explores the rhetoric of ‘consensus’ displayed at the conference, i.e. the stated claim that we all agree with each other ultimately – in contrast with the actual speeches made at the conference, many of which passionately disagreed with each other. This provides an opportunity not only to unpack the rhetoric of ‘consensus’, but also to consider the extent to which the broader ‘management’ of the private rented sector is dependent on rhetoric. Developing the theme of consensus, the chapter then engages with some of the literature on ‘the commons’ and the practice of ‘commoning’ to consider the extent to which the private rented sector, though defined by the ownership of private property, may be understood to entail elements of common property. Ethnographically, this is achieved in two ways. Firstly, we experience a stint at a Living Rent Campaign stall, and meet activists who are seeking to shift the balance of property rights in the private rented sector further towards tenants from landlords. Secondly, we encounter Sue, whom I met at that stall. Sue is the lone owner-occupier in a tenement block surrounded by private rented flats, describes herself as the ‘unpaid factor’ of the building, and tells of how she has repeatedly had to co-ordinate multiple tenants, letting agents and landlords to ensure that basic maintenance is carried out. The aim is partly to introduce another somewhat unexpected actor in ‘property management’ – the unintentional manager who, blaming ‘the letting agents’ for most of the problems, ends up managing the managers – albeit one that was not part of the performed ‘consensus’ earlier on. There is an element of communal living in the tenement block, but is it part of ‘the commons’, or has the fragmentation of tenures and the increased responsibilities it places upon Sue produced an increased sense of alienation?

The bulk of the rest of this thesis, then, is intentionally highly ethnographic in order to achieve, I hope, a considerable level of literary evocation throughout. It may, therefore, appear to contrast with this largely theoretical introduction, though I do return to the
literatures discussed in this introductory chapter, as well as introduce new ones, during all ethnographic subsequent chapters. The final conclusion, however, will provide an opportunity to draw the theoretical strands explored in this introduction back together in order to provide explicit answers to the questions hitherto posed, whilst also tentatively suggesting some potentialities for the future.
Chapter 1: Property Manager

Reading Signs

I am woken by the sound of a neighbour’s pully. It is 7.45 in the morning in November, so it is not properly light yet, though the ‘terrace’ is dimly visible through the sash window behind the plain brown curtains. The terrace amounts to a communal concrete area two floors below, behind our building and above the shop on the ground floor. There is nothing but puddles immediately in front of my window, but one of our neighbours has a couple of chairs and plant pots, and can often be found sitting there reading during the summer months. Connected to a hook just below the window is a broken pully, or washing line, which stretches out to a rusty pole opposite. There are a number of other pullies above, below and further along, and those that work make a screeching sound as the line is pulled along either to hang more washing out or to take more washing in.

There are piles of cigarette butts on the terrace, mostly from the mosque behind our building. The mosque shares our terrace, and its worshippers can often be found chatting and smoking out there in the evening. The mosque itself is an unmarked and unremarkable building, but the view beyond towards the Port of Leith itself includes a number of landmarks. Visible to the left is the grey sandstone clock tower of the former St Thomas’ Church, built in 1840, which is now the Edinburgh Sikh Gurdwara. To the right is Cables Wynd House, better known as the ‘Banana Flats’. This is a ten-storey grey concrete block of over two hundred council and ex-council flats, stretched out lengthways and shaped like a banana, first opened in 1962 in response to overcrowding and slum clearances elsewhere in Leith. Visible between these is a curious French-style Mansard roof with a terrace on top. At warmer times, I have seen people having dinner parties up there, complete with champagne flutes.

I leave my bedroom and wonder through the hallway, past the icons of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and into the kitchen. My flatmate-landlady is still asleep in the living room, though her Ave in æternum on loop will drown out any noise I make. This music, and other Catholic choral music like it, continues through the night, every night. The kitchen has no windows and would not have been part of the original plan of our flat.
Originally, both what are now the living room and my bedroom would have had bed-cupboards, perhaps behind curtains or folding doors, each just big enough for a double bed. The current kitchen has been formed by knocking down the wall between the two bed-cupboards, filling in the entrances to them in both the living room and my bedroom, and creating a door into the space from the hallway. It is dingy, with 1970s green-flowered lino fake tiling on the walls, and wooden panels on the ceiling. After breakfast, I have a shower in the bathroom – another cupboard-like room, this time with pale pink walls, though, unlike the kitchen, with an eerily high ceiling, much higher than the room’s length or width. High up on a shelf are two large tubs of holy water from Lourdes.

I get dressed and slip out of the flat, careful not to let the front door slam. The front door leads onto the stairwell. Our stair has three floors above ground level, with three flats on each level. The landings and the steps themselves are stone, and the walls are tiled – dark green up to waist-height, and cream above. I proceed down the broad spiral stairs to the ground floor, and find that somebody has left a dirty old mattress in the space at the bottom of the stairs. Somebody else has left a note, written in red pen, on top of the mattress: ‘PLEASE REMOVE – FIRE HAZARD’. I continue to the main door, the back of which is covered with printed notes: ‘PLEASE ENSURE FRONT DOOR IS CLOSED PROPERLY’ and ‘PROSIMY PRZEDNIE DRZWI SĄ PRAWIDŁOWO ZAMKNIĘTE’, both repeated several times. Upon leaving the building, I carefully close the door in order to avoid incurring the wrath of somebody whom I do not know and, indeed, may not even still live here.

Our tenement block is part of the old Leith Provident building on Great Junction Street in the centre of Leith. This is a grey sandstone building built in 1911 by the old Leith Provident Co-operative Society. The building contains three tenement stairwells and three shop units on the ground floor, the largest of which is currently empty, though previously housed a bed shop. On top of the building is a clock tower that can be seen from both ends of the street. Immediately opposite are two hairdressers. One is a more traditional barbers run by a Turkish lady, and who often sits in the shop with her baby. The other is a more stylish establishment primarily for women. I begin my short walk, past the red sandstone former Salvation Army centre that is now the Edinburgh ‘zonal headquarters’ of the ‘Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries’ – a predominantly Nigerian Pentecostal church.
I arrive at the Almond and Thompson office at 8.30 am. It is in a modern mill conversion. I key in the entrance code, enter through the glass doors, take the lift to the third floor, and head through the faux-wood door into the office.

A Letting Agency with a Difference

Almond and Thompson Edinburgh is the Edinburgh-based office of the Almond and Thompson Group. Founded in the 1980s, Almond and Thompson is a property management company that manages over 4,500 residential properties throughout the UK, specialising in the provision of both ‘affordable housing models’ to local authorities and ‘commercial property services’. Their head office is based in London, and they have branch offices in several major cities. According to their literature, they claim to ‘combine a positive caring approach to all of our clients with the commercial discipline of the private sector’ by deliberately employing staff from a range of backgrounds, including from the private sector, from local authorities and from housing associations.

Ostensibly, there are two main strands to Almond and Thompson Edinburgh’s business. The first, branded as ‘RightLet Edinburgh’, is what Tessa, the Director, describes as ‘a letting agency with a difference’. Unlike most letting agencies in Scotland, they pay their landlords guaranteed rent, do not charge their tenants deposits, and provide active support for tenants who are in receipt of benefits, including housing benefit. The result is that the majority of their tenants are on low incomes, though anybody is welcome to apply. The second strand is the Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme, whereby local councils lease properties from private landlords in order to sublet them to people in need of temporary housing, and then contract the property management functions out to private letting agencies. Because the RightLet strand of their business is predominant, the name ‘RightLet Edinburgh’, or even just ‘RightLet’, is quite often used to refer to Almond and Thompson Edinburgh as a whole, sometimes even by their own staff, though this is technically inaccurate. If the precise distinction ever seems unclear in this ethnography, that is because, at least in common usage within the company and beyond, it often is.

In the office are four blocks of back-to-back desks, each with four work stations including a desktop computer. The Customer Support Team, who take enquires from
current and prospective tenants and landlords while doubling up as front-of-house, occupy the block closest to the main entrance. The rest of the office is less clearly delineated. Members of the Field Team, consisting primarily of Property Managers – those who, amongst other tasks, conduct viewings and inspections of their specified portfolio of properties – retain desk space. Other employees, including various administrative staff, the Sales Team and the Tenancy Sustainment Advisor, also have a place in the office. Additionally, there are three separate offices on one side of the main office with glass walls – one is occupied by the Director, and the others are used for meetings. The wall on the opposite side of the main office, facing the glass offices, is almost completely covered with cabinets that contain keys to all of their properties. A kitchenette with two tables is at one end near the main entrance. Telephones ring almost constantly. The air conditioning is permanently on, even in the winter.

There are between fifteen and twenty members of staff based in the office. I say ‘between fifteen and twenty’ as the numbers have fluctuated due to a very high staff turnover. Between my initial meeting with the by-now-redundant Marketing Officer in January 2014 and the start of my stint as a perpetual trainee in the October of that year, almost every single member of staff had been replaced, including the Director. The new Director, Tessa, then left unexpectedly a few months later. Andy, the employee with whom I spent the most time, was the longest standing member of staff when I arrived, though he also left in April 2015.

This high level of staff turnover presented certain challenges for fieldwork. After a few months, the person responsible for granting me access to the office and arranging my activities – the Director – had left, and I had been around longer than a large proportion of the staff. Amongst staff, it became somewhat unclear who was nominally responsible for me, and not-getting-lumped-with-Benjamin-today appeared to become something of a game each morning for some, though perhaps that was just ethnographer’s paranoia. Despite not actually being a member of staff, I had almost become a point of continuity within the office.

The bulk of this chapter is deliberately in the form of a continuous narrative, followed by a theoretical discussion. I invite the reader to consider the ways in which the Property Manager comes to be an actor through which many of the connections that pertain to private rented housing in Edinburgh flow. Not only does he come into regular contact
with tenants, landlords, other letting agency staff and so forth; he also spends a lot of time driving around the city, walking up and down semi-private and semi-public stairwells, viewing the insides of flats and houses, and reading the signs given off by streets, buildings, and current and prospective tenants. A key if literal question, therefore, is how he manages all these relations.

**Monday Lettings Meeting**

I make myself a cup of instant coffee in the kitchenette and head over to one of the glass-walled rooms for the Monday Lettings Meeting. Monday morning always begins with a meeting about lettings. Its ostensible purpose is for the Field Team Manager to check the progress of voids (empty properties) and re-lets (newly let voids), and to ensure that the Property Managers, the Sales Team and administrative staff understand the current state of play. The meeting is chaired by Katy, the Field Team Manager. About twelve of us gather around the table, which takes up most of the room – there never seems to be quite enough space.

‘There are about ten new members of staff starting today,’ Katy informs us. ‘They will be shadowing you folks, even though some of you are still shadowing other staff yourselves.’

Katy is in her early thirties, is from the south of England, and had worked in property management in Essex before moving to Edinburgh for this job a few months ago. Attire in the office is relatively casual for the most part, though Katy is wearing a white blouse and dark suit-jacket, with her shoulder-length brown hair clipped back. Of modest stature, she is confidently-spoken and authoritative. At the Christmas party next month, she will try to persuade me and others to drink Jägerbombs with her, but I will decline. In the New Year, when Tessa leaves, she will be promoted to Director.

The main body of the meeting consists of going through printed lists of properties that contain details such as the address, number of bedrooms, monthly rent, Property Manager’s name, landlord’s name, and how long the property has been ‘void’ for. We begin with the list of voids. Katy reads out the first line of each property’s address, and
the relevant Property Manager provides a short update. Is the property let yet? If not, why not?

We begin with a flat in Sighthill. Many people have arranged viewings, but they keep cancelling or not showing up. Next is a flat in Pilton. There have been lots of applications, but the applicants keep turning out to be ‘unsuitable’. I wonder why that might be, but the list of properties progresses rapidly, usually without much detailed comment.

Sometimes, however, there is more of a backstory. We come onto a flat in Royston. The otherwise-successful applicant has been affected by the recent benefit cap introduced by the British government, and there is still a need to understand the full implications of this. Will she still be able to afford it without the full housing benefit? We cannot accept her if she will not.

Next up is a flat in Leith. There has been one applicant, but she has given us conflicting information. She claims to have no current tenancy as she is staying with a friend, and thus has no reference from a current landlord. But then she indicates on her application form that she is claiming housing benefit, which means that she does have a tenancy. Does this mean that she is likely to receive a poor reference from her current landlord or letting agent, and is trying to duck out of it? Yes. In fact, the property management company has been traced, and a reference request has been sent.

We then move on to a flat in Gorgie. ‘There was an applicant,’ David, the Property Manager responsible, tells us, ‘but it seemed like a funny kind of flat-share. It looked like it was just a couple originally, but then it became apparent that they were going to move in their extended friends and family, so we had to stop the process.’

Next is a flat in Portobello. We hear that the applicants are a couple, one of whom is a former RightLet tenant from several years ago when she had a different partner. Apparently, she fled domestic violence without informing us, and still has rent arrears from 2009 of about £3,000. How are we to deal with this? There is no standard protocol. Fleeing domestic violence should not be a reason to refuse, but… we will need to discuss this with her.

We then hear of a flat in Clermiston. The landlord had been trying to gain access to the property for months, but when she was finally able to arrange a time to do so, she found that the keys that we have for the property did not work. She cannot change the
locks either as she cannot even gain access to the stairwell. We are just going to have to find the keys.

We move on to a property in Drylaw. It has historically had many problems, and has been trashed several times. Unusually, we are paying the landlord guaranteed rent while the void works are being carried out, so as not to lose another of his properties.

‘Because he’s nice and understanding,’ Katy explains. ‘Some landlords are better gone, but not him.’

Finally, we discuss a property down in Selkirk in the Borders – already slightly unusual for being so far outside the Edinburgh urban area. ‘The property is up to standard and the rent is low,’ Farhad from the Sales Team tells us, ‘but it is haunted.’

Julie, its Property Manager, agrees. ‘I get an eerie feeling every time I go in,’ she shudders. ‘Something about the layout and the shape of the staircase.’

‘Perhaps we could do some targeted marketing for people who like ghosts,’ Farhad suggests.

Into the Field

About an hour later, the meeting finishes. I am spending the rest of the day with Andy, who, as usual, has been in the office since around 7.30 this morning. I sit with Andy watching him answer emails and telephone calls from tenants and landlords, and schedule viewings, inspections, visits and void reports in his calendar. The computerised system that he and everyone else in the Almond and Thompson Group use is called Veco – a specialist piece of ‘property software’ developed by Eurolink for estate agents, property managers and other property professionals. I will return to Veco in more detail in the next chapter, but for now, it is worth noting that this is the primary documentary tool that allows Andy to access formalised data about tenants, landlords and properties, and enables him to plan his working activities.

Andy is employed as the Property Manager for the north of Edinburgh, and is responsible for a portfolio of just over a hundred properties, mostly in areas such as Leith, Granton, Pilton, Muirhouse, Drylaw, Restalrig and Portobello. He is twenty-nine, tall and thin, with wavy black hair, a groomed beard and bold black-rimmed glasses. He usually
wears a waistcoat and bow-tie, as he is today. He grew up in Cramond in Edinburgh and went to the Royal High School – the school that one went to frequently comes up in conversations with people who grew up in Edinburgh – but now stays in Prestonpans in a private rented house with his girlfriend and ‘the wee one’, or his girlfriend’s ten-year-old daughter. Andy has worked mostly in property management at a range of different companies since leaving school, and by all accounts appears very dedicated to his job. Frequently, he is the first to arrive at the office in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.

After about an hour of desk work, it is time for us to go out. Andy and I grab our jackets and head out of the office, down in the lift and outside, where Andy’s car is parked on the road. As usual, he apologises for the state of his car and shifts papers and other objects from the front passenger seat onto the back seat. We get in, drive off, and, about three minutes’ later, stop by Victoria Park in Trinity. Trinity is something of an affluent enclave between Leith, Newhaven and Granton, with leafy streets lined with some quite substantial detached Victorian sandstone villas set back from the road, often behind high hedgerows and large cast-iron gates. By this point, I have been with Almond and Thompson long enough to realise that we will not be visiting a property here. Andy takes off his blazer, puts on a leather jacket, and gets out of the car for a cigarette. I remain in the car listening to dance music on Forth FM until Andy removes his leather jacket, puts his blazer back on and is ready to head off again.

**Void Report**

‘We’ve got a void report in Drylaw the now,’ Andy tells me as he drives us down Ferry Road. ‘Tenants just moved out. Nice couple with two wee ones. Been in the property for three years and kept the place immaculate. Even redecorated it themselves.’

We park outside the property and leave the car. It is a ground-floor ex-council **cottage flat** – a type of housing common in most of Scotland; four-in-a-block with two single-floor dwellings on the ground floor, and two similar dwellings above, each with their own external front door. In common with the rest of Drylaw, and indeed many council-built housing estates in Scotland, the building is grey and rendered with unpainted pebbledash.
Drylaw, including this building, was built in the 1950s as a rehousing programme for residents of slum areas, especially in Leith. Although this flat was originally owned and managed by the city council, it is now under private ownership, having been purchased at some stage by its former tenant under the Right to Buy legislation. From my immediate vantage point, the other flats in the vicinity have a mixture of different tenures. Those with more individual front doors – perhaps uPVC with patterned windows and brass knockers – are likely to be either owner occupied or privately rented. Those with more functional plain-coloured front doors are likely to be still council-owned.

The front doors of both the flat that we are visiting and the flat above are adjacent to each other at the side of the building. The front garden has been gravelled over, and the path up to the front doors is a bit overgrown with grass. There is a large skip next to the front doors containing miscellaneous household junk. Andy assures me that this belongs to upstairs.

We enter the property. As RightLet properties are let unfurnished, the place is virtually empty. The front door enters into a narrow hallway with no windows, other than in the door itself. Immediately to the left is a toilet and shower room. Further down on the right, and at the far end of the hallway, are the doors to the two bedrooms. On the left, opposite the bedroom on the right, is the door to the living room. Upon entry to the living room, the kitchen is through a door to the left, and opposite are big sliding doors that provide access to the back garden.

Apart from in the bedrooms, the walls are all painted magnolia, and there are wood-effect floor tiles throughout the property. I cannot help but feel that ‘immaculate’ was perhaps a bit of an overstatement, however. Clipboard in one hand and pen in the other, Andy begins what is for him a routine procedure. The void report form itself guides the process, as it demands information about every aspect of the property that is deemed relevant for this purpose. On the form are the following subheadings: ‘Exterior’, ‘Hall’, ‘Reception room 1’, ‘Reception room 2’, ‘Kitchen’, ‘Bedroom 1’, ‘Bedroom 2’, ‘Bedroom 3’, ‘Bedroom 4’, ‘Bathroom’ and ‘Toilet’. Not all are relevant in this instance. Under each subheading is the following list: ‘Flooring’, ‘Walls’, ‘Ceiling’, ‘Windows’, ‘Doors’, and ‘Furnishings’. Next to each item on the list are two checkboxes: one labelled ‘Good’, the other ‘Work required’. Some rooms have additional items listed. ‘Kitchen’ includes ‘Oven’, ‘Stove’, ‘Refrigerator’, ‘Freezer’, ‘Sink’, ‘Taps’, ‘Washing machine’,
and invite the inspector to indicate whether or not they are working. Likewise, ‘Bathroom’ invites the inspection and testing of ‘Toilet’, ‘Sink’, ‘Bath’ and ‘Shower’. A separate subheading covers the boiler and radiators. Finally, there is a field for the gas and electricity meter readings at the end.

The first step is to find the boiler, try to switch it on, and hope that it comes on. If there is central heating, which there is in this case, find the controls and, again, try to switch it on. If and when it comes on, note down on the form that it is working. We seem to be all right in this case, thank goodness; otherwise it will be a cold hour as we stand around completing the process.

Now, we go into the living room. Observe the floor, walls and ceiling for any signs of damage. The floor is dirty, though nothing serious. There are, however, a number of holes in the walls. ‘Those holes must have been covered up with pictures before,’ Andy says. ‘But the landlord shouldna mind too much as the tenants have paid to redecorate it, so that’s money he’ll no have to spend.’

Switch the lights on and off. Open and close the windows. Check the hinges on the doors. Keep noting everything down. Andy does not otherwise speak much during this process. Outside of training sessions, he is used to carrying out void inspections alone, and he is not pretending to train me in this instance. I stand around feeling slightly awkward, shifting and tapping my feet as I wait for the heating to come on.

We go into the kitchen. Again, the same process is carried out, but this time, we need to test the appliances too. Turn the taps on and off. Turn the oven on and off. Turn the hob rings on and off. Turn the fridge on and off. Note down the results of each test on the form. No obvious problems here.

And now we inspect the bathroom. Turn the taps on and off. Turn the shower on and off. Take the opportunity to go to the toilet. Flush the toilet. Tick more boxes.

We then go into one of the bedrooms. ‘Someone’s clearly been smoking in here,’ Andy comments. ‘They’re no meant to dae that, but it’s no as bad as it could be.’ I am not totally convinced – there is a very strong smell of cigarette smoke, and there are more holes in the walls here too, but I remind myself that we have seen far worse. The other bedroom is in better condition. As before, Andy continues to observe the floors, walls and ceilings, to check the lights, radiators, doors and windows, and to record his findings.
Next, we go outside into the back garden. The tenants do not appear to have done much with it, but the lawn seems tidy enough. Check the back door, the pipes, the guttering and the drains, and continue noting everything down on the form.

Finally, it is time to go back inside. Turn the boiler off. Find the gas and electricity meters and note down the readings on the form. Go to the toilet again. Make sure that the windows are all closed and the lights are all switched off. Leave the property, ensure that the front door is properly locked, and record any final observations about the outside of the building.

Visits

We get back into the car and drive off in the direction of Pilton, another housing estate adjacent to Drylaw.

‘This one’s a lassie that’s tried to redecorate her flat and made a mess of it,’ Andy tells me as we drive. ‘And now she’s saying it’s uninhabitable unless we sort it out for her. We need to go and see what the deal is.’

We arrive in Pilton. Andy is relieved that the schools are not currently on holiday because he worries that children would damage or break into his car if they were. Pilton consists mostly of rows of grey pebbledash three-storey council and ex-council tenements, built during the 1930s and 1950s, again as part of slum clearance programmes. The area, Andy tells me, has a reputation for young joyriders who steal cars and motorbikes, and drive them recklessly around the area. Quite a lot of Andy’s properties are in Pilton, and I have become familiar with the area as a result. The specific street, he tells me, makes a significant difference in terms of letting properties. Nobody wants to live on West Pilton Gardens, because that is where the joyriders drive. Flats on nearby West Pilton Lea, on the other hand, attract far more interest as it is a cul-de-sac.

‘You wouldn’a think just one street would make such a difference, but it does,’ Andy says as we park up. ‘Most folk wanting to rent here already ken [know] the area cause that’s where their family stays and they want to be nearby, so they ken which parts are dodgy. You seen the online police reports for different parts of Edinburgh? Some crazy shit goes on here. Gang violence and stuff. Worst area for shootings.’
We are on West Pilton Gardens. There is an assortment of rubbish strewn all over the front gardens of the tenement blocks and in the street. It has been like this for weeks. One of the bins appears to have been set on fire and is now half-melted.

‘The council wouldna get away with that in Morningside,’ Andy comments, ‘would they? They just dinna care here.’ Morningside is a famously genteel area in the south of Edinburgh.

We leave the car and head into the tenement stairwell – no security door or entrance buzzer in this block. Inside is dark and dingy, not least because the lights are not working. The floor and stairs are concrete, and the walls appear to have been painted dark green a long time ago, but the paint is flaking off, and people have taken the opportunity to scratch their names on the walls. There is a strong smell of cigarette smoke. We proceed up the stairs to the top floor and knock on the door.

A woman aged perhaps in her late twenties, and wearing a grey tracksuit top and pink floral pyjama bottoms, answers the door.

‘Morning Kirsty, how you doing?’

‘I’m right enough,’ she replies. She beckons us in and leads us through the hallway and into one of the bedrooms. Much like the stairwell, the flat is dark.

The flat itself is laid out around a straight and narrow hallway. On the left, the first door leads to the kitchen and the second to the bedroom into which Kirsty leads us. On the right, the first door leads to the other bedroom and the second to the living room. The bathroom is a small windowless room at the end of the hallway, opposite the front door.

The bedroom contains a mattress on the floor covered with a duvet, but little else. The dark green wallpaper has been partially stripped off. Approximately half of the walls have been covered with light pink paint, sometimes over the remaining wallpaper, sometimes not, and not in any particular systematic fashion.

‘Right, so you started redecorating then Kirsty?’ Andy asks.

‘Aye right,’ she replies, ‘but I wisnae really well enough to finish it.’

Kirsty then leads us back out into the hallway and into the other bedroom. This room is completely devoid of furniture. About two thirds of the carpet has been pulled up and stashed in the corner.

‘I canna use the room without the carpet,’ she says.

‘Did you pull that up?’ Andy asks.
‘Aye, I was planning on replacing it, but I’ve just no managed to dae it.’

‘Right enough,’ Andy says. ‘Can we sit down somewhere?’

Kirsty leads us into the living room. There is a black leather sofa, matching armchair, and television in the corner. The light-green walls are bare, and appear dark due to what little light there is being obscured by net curtains over the window. A bald man in a tracksuit is sitting in the armchair. Kirsty, Andy and I all sit down on the sofa. Andy gets out his pen and clipboard, and makes notes on a similar form to the one he had used for the void report.

‘So, I see that you’ve made an attempt at redecorating this place,’ Andy begins, ‘but you’re just gonnae hae to get it finished. It’s no our responsibility or the landlord’s responsibility to finish what you started, but it shoulna be too hard. It’ll just be a case of stripping the rest of the wallpaper off and getting some mair of that pink paint for the rest of the walls, then it should be looking quite nice. And that carpet, you could just put it back down for now if you wanted.’

‘Okay then,’ Kirsty responds meekly. ‘I’ll get it finished. I’ve been better recently anyway.’

‘Aye, that’s good then,’ Andy continues. ‘Otherwise, this place isna looking too bad. This room’s clean enough, same with the hall. Any problems with the bathroom and kitchen?’

‘No, they’re fine.’

‘I’ll just hae a wee look on the way out then.’

Kirsty shows us the kitchen and bathroom and, after some words of encouragement from Andy, bids us farewell. Andy and I head back down the stairs, out of the building and back into the car.

‘I dinna ken what the hell she’s been doing,’ Andy begins. ‘Clearly she’d made no attempt to redecorate that room properly. Just paint sloshed about over parts of the walls. You dinna decorate rooms like that, do you? And then she’s wanting us to finish it. Same with the carpet. Canna see why she’s pulled parts of it up and then left it. And who was that man sat in the living room? Seemed a bit odd, didn’t he? Didna say anything. Just stared blankly. Probably stoned.’

‘He doesn’t stay there then?’ I ask.

‘Nah, there’s no man on the lease. Probably her boyfriend or something.’
It occurs to me that Andy is taking the opportunity to think aloud about the preceding situation via me, largely because I am there – ordinarily, he would be working alone. We drive a short way around the corner for our next visit and park outside another row of grey pebbledash tenements.

‘There’s an Arab family, just moved into a flat here,’ Andy tells me. ‘We need to talk to the husband as the wife disnae speak any English. Husband disnae speak much English either, but at least knows some. I just want to check up on them to make sure they’re getting on alright as they seemed a bit confused before.’

We enter the stairwell, much like the previous, and knock on the door on the ground floor immediately to the right. A woman wearing a hijab opens the door.

‘Sky?’
‘Is your husband in?’ Andy asks slowly and clearly.
‘Eh… no.’
‘Okay, I’ll call back later.’ We leave the tenement block and head back to the car.
‘She thought we were Sky TV,’ Andy comments to me, ‘so things are looking up.’

We are on the move once again, this time back to Drylaw. We park outside a row of grey pebbledash cottage flats, again a mix of council and ex-council. Having arrived a bit early for the appointment, we sit in the car for ten minutes. Andy looks through emails on his smartphone before filling me in with the details.

‘Their living room has just been redecorated. They werna ventilating the property, so there was mould everywhere. It’s amazing how some folk dinna ken you have to open the windae when you’re showering and like.’

We leave the car, head up the garden path, and are greeted by a man, a woman, and two large dogs. Both people are casually dressed and probably in their forties. The man is balding, and the woman has bleached shoulder-length straight blonde hair.

‘Mind if I have a look at the bedrooms and bathroom?’ Andy asks.
‘Aye, sure, we’ll just be in the living room.’

Once again, the flat is structured around a single hallway. This time, the living room is the first door to the left and looks out the front, whilst the kitchen is the first door to the right. The door to the larger bedroom is further down the hallway on the left, and the doors to the bathroom and smaller bedroom are opposite on the right.
Andy and I head down the hallway into one of the bedrooms, which appears to be a child’s. The walls are painted blue, and the duvet cover has a racing-car theme. Andy pays close attention to the mould on the window frame and on the walls around the window. With his pen and clipboard, he notes down the problem. We then do the same for the other bedroom, bathroom and kitchen, both of which have similar cases of mould growing around the windows, before heading into the living room.

The man and woman are already waiting for us on the peach-coloured velveteen armchairs. Andy and I sit down on the sofa. In contrast to the rest of the flat, the room is well presented. The walls have been covered with new green shadow-striped wallpaper, and the ceiling looks recently repainted. The heating is turned up high and the windows are all wide open. The dogs cuddle up to their owners. There is also a grey tabby cat sleeping in a basket alongside five multi-coloured kittens.

‘Are yous doing okay then now?’ Andy asks.

‘Aye, we are,’ replied the woman. ‘And just had five new kittens too!’

The mother cat opens her eyes and looks towards me. I sit making kissing noises to her and her kittens while Andy and the couple talk.

‘It’s looking great in here now, isn’t it?’ Andy says. ‘Obviously the rest of the property’s gonnae have to be redecorated as there’s a lot of mould around the windaes in the other rooms.’

‘Aye,’ the man interjects. ‘We’re keeping the windows open as much as we can now.’

‘Aye right,’ Andy responds, ‘as long as you’re opening them when you’re showering and boiling water, you’ll be fine. It’ll probably be about another month now until we can get the rest of it done, but I’ll speak to the contractors and try and get that sorted for you.’

The man and woman thank us and see us out. We head back down the garden path and into the car. Andy rolls his eyes as he sits down in the driver’s seat.

We drive back through Pilton and over to West Shore Road by Gipsy Brae Recreation Ground to have lunch. Or rather, I have my packed lunch and then wander aimlessly around the park for twenty minutes. Andy does not eat, but swaps his blazer for his leather jacket to have a cigarette outside before getting back into the car to read and answer emails on his smartphone.

After lunch – ‘lunch’ in Andy’s case – we are on our way, this time to a second-floor tenement flat in Restalrig, still in the north of Edinburgh, but substantially further east.
Andy fills me in with the details during the drive there. ‘Two young girls, only nineteen and twenty,’ he says. ‘The one said the other moved out and hasna been paying rent, but that’s no the full story. I think they’re both still living there but trying get away with paying less. And now they’re wanting to move out anyway.’

When we arrive at the flat, we are greeted by two young women, who lead us into the living room. One of the walls in the living room has been painted, albeit not very neatly, in Barbie pink. A young man with a shaved head is tidying the kitchen, which is through a door just off the living room.

‘Have you been fibbing to me Hannah?’ Andy asks before sitting down to hear the full story. Hannah explains that her friend did move out a few months ago as they had found living together difficult, but that another friend of hers – Lucy, sat down in here with us – has moved in. Hannah admits that she has rent arrears and suggests that she could ask her mother for help.

‘Dinna worry,’ Andy interjects, ‘we can set up a payment plan. Are you working or on benefits just now?’

‘I’m working part-time just now, and I’m moving out to stay with my Aunt in Oxgangs next month, so I’ll no be paying rent then.’

‘Do you think you could afford £30 a week?’ Andy asks.

‘Yeah, that should be fine,’ she replies. ‘I’m sorry about it all. I didna ken how important it was, same with phone contracts and stuff. But I’m starting to take mair responsibility now.’

‘And what about the wall? I thought you said you were gonnae paint it a neutral colour.’

We all laugh. ‘I think we wanted something a bit girly and different,’ Hannah says, ‘but we can paint it back to how it was.’

Andy thanks them both and we head back to the car and drive back towards Pilton.

‘You wouldna think she was just nineteen,’ Andy says to me, driving. ‘I suppose it’s because she’s a bit larger than average, ken what I mean. I had reservations about taking on someone so young, but we all used to make these kinds of mistakes. Seems like she kens what she done wrong now and is getting her act together.’
Our final task for the day is a viewing of a two-bedroomed flat in Pilton. Like many of the other flats that we have visited in the area today, it is in a grey pebbledash three-storey tenement block. We park outside. This time, the tenement block has an entrance buzzer and there is a queue of about fifteen people waiting outside the front entrance. Andy rummages around in his bag, and then in his trouser and jacket pockets.

‘Have you seen a set of keys?’

‘No,’ I reply. Here we go again.

We get out of the car and Andy proceeds to empty his bags, pockets, car’s glove compartment and boot, and shifts the seats backwards and forwards. This has happened several times before. I wonder if we will have to keep the viewers waiting for half an hour while we go back to the office. Fortunately, Andy finds the keys in the folder alongside the paperwork that any applicants will have to complete.

Andy opens the outside door and leads the queue of people up to the second floor and into the empty flat, down the hallway and through the door at the end into what would presumably be the living room. The larger bedroom is to the left, and the bathroom and smaller bedroom are to the right. All the walls are painted white, and there is red carpet in every room that looks like it has been there about thirty years. Other than the bathroom, the ‘white goods’ (i.e. cooker, washing machine etc.) in the kitchen, and the electric heaters that adorn one wall in each room, the place is completely bare. The living room is by far the largest room with windows that look down to the quiet street below. The kitchen is immediately off the living room, and not much bigger than a large cupboard.

As usual, Andy and I stand in the kitchen whilst the viewers look around in their own time. I look out of the window into the communal garden below. It is getting dark, but I can still make out the piles of rubbish – mostly bottles, cans and plastic bags – that have accumulated in the space.

The flat is crowded. Some viewers leave with a brief nod after a few minutes – not for them, so it seems. A young woman asks a question about bills, thanks us, and then leaves. After about ten minutes, a queue of sorts forms in the living room outside the doorway to the kitchen.
First in line is a young Scottish couple with a daughter aged about five years old who have been given notice to quit on their current flat as their landlord is selling. They ask for the application form and lean against the kitchen work surface to fill it in together. Conveniently, they have all the required documents with them: photographic identification, two months of bank statements, two months of payslips, proof of housing benefit and details of their current letting agency. After completing the form, they hand their documents to Andy, thank us, and leave without much comment.

Next in line is a woman, probably in her mid-thirties. She has three young children, all of whom are with her today. Andy has met her at previous viewings.

‘I really need to move to Pilton as soon as possible,’ she exclaims. ‘I’m in Muirhouse just now, but it’s so far away for picking up my oldest child from school. She lives with her father near here, and I have to bring her back to him every evening.’

Her stated intention is to live in this flat with her two younger children. She produces all her required documents, including a British passport – I surmise that she is probably a naturalised citizen as she is not a native speaker of English. The children run amok in the living room.

‘I’m just desperate to find somewhere soon,’ she comments as she fills out the application forms. ‘I can’t tell you how relieved I’d be to get this flat. It’s been so hard walking back and forth so much every day. I really hope it gets sorted.’ After handing over the forms, she gathers her three children and bids us farewell.

Finally, we speak to two young Polish men – brothers, in fact. One of them does most of the talking.

‘We’ve just suddenly had to move out of our flat because the landlord had aggressed us. It was horrible. We’re now homeless and staying in a hostel, so we want to find something quickly.’

‘Okay then, so are you working or in receipt of benefits?’ Andy asks.

‘I was working,’ the young man replies, ‘but I quit my job last week after the landlord aggressed us to look for a new flat.’

‘And I also quit my job at the same time to help him look for a flat,’ his brother adds.

Andy appears puzzled by this. ‘So, you quit your jobs to look for a new flat? Because of how we operate, you need to either be working or in receipt of benefits to rent from us.’
The brother who had done most of the talking becomes visibly and audibly annoyed by this. ‘So you have to depend on the state in this country?! You’re not allowed to save money and stand on your own?!’

‘Other letting agents might require you to pay six months’ rent up front in that situation,’ Andy explains, ‘but we require you to either be working or in receipt of benefits.’

‘Well I can pay six months now.’

‘If you’re able to pay six months’ rent now,’ Andy continues, ‘then post an ad on Gumtree and someone will surely accept you. A lot of private landlords would jump at that.’

The two men leave disgruntled. Andy and I ensure that the lights are all switched off before heading back to the car. We then drive back towards the office.

It is during the drives back to the office in the evenings that Andy tends to relay more of his views to me on various topics – tenants, landlords, other staff, where to live, schools, politics and so forth. On this occasion, some of the prospective tenants who came to the viewing are ripe for comment.

‘That woman with the three children. Her story is very inconsistent. I showed her a three-bed two months ago, and now she wants a two-bed. And then, she was telling me she was staying on Easter Road, but now it’s Muirhouse, but the same story about needing to move nearer to pick the wee one up from school.’

‘Muirhouse is right next to Pilton,’ I muse.

‘Exactly! Nice lady, but very switched on. A lot of folk would think, foreign woman, she disnae understand what’s going on, but she does. She kens exactly what’s going on. I think she’s trying to get a second flat, paid for through housing benefit, to claim additional child benefit for the other wee one while still living with the father. I think the father is still her partner, and she still lives with him. It might be legit, but I’m suspicious.’

‘Do you get folk doing that then, keeping an empty flat in that way to claim extra benefits?’

‘Aye, sure. And there was one flat – went for a visit once, and found completely different tenants staying there. The official tenants were claiming housing benefit on it, and then subletting it out to these other folk.’
Andy’s thoughts turn to the young Polish men. ‘Why did they quit their jobs to look for new flat? I just dinnae understand why the one thing would lead to the other. You dinna quit your job just because you’ve had to move out of your flat. I think it’s mair likely that they lost their jobs and then their landlord evicted them because of rent arrears, but they dinna want to admit it. And all that guff about not depending on the state… what’s that all about? Seems like for show.’

**Knowing the Private Rented Sector**

During my time with Andy, he would almost invariably introduce me as a ‘student’ who wanted to ‘find out about property management’. Indeed, this was by far the most common interpretation of my interests by staff at Almond and Thompson. Property management is, after all, what they see themselves as doing, and whilst they understand that they do this within the private rented sector, notions of ‘the private rented sector’ *per se* are rarely at the forefront of self-descriptions of their work. Nonetheless, in his typical working day, Andy is thoroughly embedded within the Edinburgh private rented sector and engages with a wide variety of aspects of it in a number of different ways: discussing the progress of properties during lettings meetings, corresponding with landlords, carrying out void inspections, visiting tenants, holding viewings, and accepting documentation from applicants. A case could certainly be made that the private rented sector as it is could not function without people like Andy who facilitate relations between tenants, landlords and physical property.

Where, therefore is the private rented sector located for Andy? It is, to a large extent, out there, in ‘the field’, as Almond and Thompson Edinburgh employees call it. The built urban environment is always present, though the social relations through which urban space is produced are appreciated from his distinct vantage point as Property Manager. In this, I cannot help but see certain parallels with the ethnography of the landscape of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths in south-west England by Tilley & Cameron-Daum (2017). With a nod to Heidegger, Tilley & Cameron-Daum (2017: 20-1) argue that landscapes ‘gather’ topographies, geologies, plants and animals, persons and their biographies, social and political relationships, material things and monuments, dreams
and emotions, discourses and representations and academic disciplines through which they are studied’ (emphasis mine). Describing their text as ‘an act of gathering in which the sum is more than its individual parts’, they seek to ‘evoke the sheer complexity of the reciprocal manner in which persons engage with landscapes and landscapes engage with them from a variety of personal, moral, social, emotional, ethical and political perspectives’. Does the private rented sector as a geographically situated phenomenon similarly ‘gather’? I contend that it does, and that physical space is integral to this process.

Andy’s knowledge of the built urban landscape covers both the exterior and the interior. The intersection between the interior and exterior is explored by Hirschon & Gold (1982) and Booth (1999), with emphasis upon the street as an extension of domestic space, though I am not convinced that this is appropriate here, at least from the vantage point of the Property Manager. In the vein of Pitkin (1993), the urban landscape itself may be imagined as interior as well as exterior, intersecting the public with the private. What is illustrated in this chapter, therefore, is in part an interior landscape of Edinburgh. Not only do the streets, parks and building exteriors constitute the urban landscape; so do the tenement stairwells and the individual flats themselves. To borrow from Hirsch (1995), this is not merely a stage for social activity; the landscape constitutes a complex network of social actors including tenants, landlords, Property Managers, neighbours, visitors, bureaucrats, activists and onlookers, as well as buildings, streets and public spaces. These, then, to return to Tilley & Cameron-Daum (2017), may be understood as the things and relations that the landscape gathers. The boundaries are porous, and the connections potentially limitless, of which a fraction will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Property Managers such as Andy thus have a unique vantage point over this landscape. Every working day, he observes not only the exterior landscape, but also the interior landscape – the stairwells, the void flats and the occupied flats. The people with whom he comes into contact through these processes – landlords, current tenants, prospective tenants, contract repair workers and so forth – constitute the foreground actuality of the urban landscape. And moreover, Andy’s status as Property Manager – one who facilitates these relations and, under certain conditions, gains and grants access to property that he neither owns nor occupies, provides a novel means of access to this social and physical world.
Considering the ways in which knowledge of the urban landscape is produced, Amin & Thrift (2002) employ three metaphors that are useful for our purposes here. The first of these is transitivity, or flânerie (Amin & Thrift 2002: 10). Can the Property Manager be understood as flâneur of the landscape, wandering from street to street, stairwell to stairwell, flat to flat, observing the signs of life, animate and inanimate, in both void and occupied properties? I hesitate to impose this metaphor too literally, not least as this knowledge is very much produced in conjunction with existing documentary knowledge of properties, streets, landlords, current and prospective tenants that are available, and observations are driven in part by a need to meet the bureaucratic requirements of documents such as void report forms. That said, ad hoc observations clearly do come into place.

The second of these are rhythm and rhythm analysis (Amin & Thrift 2002: 16), or ‘the daily tempo of the city’ (Amin & Thrift 2002: 22). The traffic flows and the pathways taken between different areas and different streets. The movement to and from cars, up and down stairs, and between flats. The set inspection procedures carried out with the aid and under the instruction of formalised documents. The brief and formulaic encounters with tenants in their homes. The flows of prospective tenants in and out of flats during viewings, the asking and answering of questions, the handing over of papers, and the signing of forms. The Property Manager does, in this sense, follow certain procedures, and his working day does entail a certain degree of predictability, even if each specific encounter is unique.

The third is through urban footprints and ‘namings’ (Amin & Thrift 2002: 22), whereby narratives of the city are constructed and come to be memorialised over time. As property manager, Andy is adept at reading signs. Signs left by previous occupants of voids are sought out, found, evaluated and recorded through formalised documentary processes. Physical evidence, combined with knowledge accrued via interaction with tenants, enables Andy to reconstruct narratives around the activities imagined to have taken place. Signs are not limited to the material, however. Andy’s highly specialised knowledge of Edinburgh allows him to draw particular conclusions based upon his readings of social signs provided by tenants and prospective tenants. Being mistaken for Sky TV apparently indicated that the tenants were settling in successfully. Apparent inconsistencies or oddities in people’s stories are keenly detected and then interpreted in
light of prior knowledge. Narratives are thus constructed around the relations between people and properties based upon these subjective interpretations. Combined with the formalised documentation of events and observations, these narratives play a central role in the process of property management. Every property has a story that may be evoked during business activities such as Monday Lettings Meetings, and thereby constitutes the means through which the management bureaucracy comes to be understood.

The above frameworks, however, deal principally with the city or the urban landscape; Andy participates in this, but it is not the full story. Can we recover the private rented sector here? Almond and Thompson Edinburgh may well distinguish between ‘office-based teams’ and ‘field-based teams’ amongst their staff, and Property Managers may well be designated as ‘field-based’, but in reality, all employees retain personal office space, and all Property Managers are expected to attend the lettings meeting every Monday morning to provide updates and hear the updates of others.

Knowledge of the private rented sector requires not just informed perception, but specialised expertise. There are certain uncanny similarities between the weekly lettings meeting depicted in this chapter, and the weekly Listings meeting in Historic Scotland’s head office depicted by Yarrow (2017), concerning the appropriate levels of statutory protection of buildings deemed to be of historic importance. Here at Almond and Thompson Edinburgh too, empirical knowledge of properties, derived from specialised epistemological procedures that entail the formalised gathering and recording of data, is always the starting point, but each property, each tenant and each landlord has, in a sense, a character and a story; flats may be ‘haunted’, landlords are subjectively evaluated, and the biographies of tenants require interpretation and reconstruction beyond what appears on file. For employees, property management requires the co-ordination of a range of expertise, and the weekly Lettings Meetings facilitates this process.

Such meetings also, to borrow from Brown et al (2017: 18), exist in part to ‘service or deliver the ethical mission of the organization’, or at least two particular missions in this instance – to ensure that ‘voids’ are ‘remarketed’ and then re-let as promptly as possible both for the benefit of the landlord and, evidently, the progress of Almond and Thompson as a business. Such concerns may not always be conscious priorities for Andy in his daily work, though performative acts, such as weekly lettings meetings, do at least render them
part of the tacit, ‘ordinary ethics’, to return to Lambek (2010), that is intrinsic to his activities and observations in ‘the field’.

To return partially to Amin & Thrift (2002), and to attempt to transpose their analyses of the city to the private rented sector, the sector is to be conceptualised not as a diverse yet ultimately total entity, but as a site of potentiality in which a plethora of overlapping and malleable networks interact subject to contingencies, and in which generalisations as to common perspectives are somewhat suspect. My analysis therefore concerns the moments of encounter (Amin & Thrift 2002: 30) that may be followed by the ethnographer in drawing the connections required for the production of the ethnographic text (cf. Marcus 1995). These moments of encounter provide an interactive window on the sector that recognises its processes as more than a series of face-to-face relations, but that nonetheless accepts the limitations of a holistic analysis.

**Conclusion**

As an ethnographic subject, the Property Manager provides an entrance point to a particular set of social, economic and environmental relations and their ethnographic description and analysis. Indeed, following the Property Manager has provided an opportunity to begin, after Latour (2005), tracing these associations in order to construct a uniquely situated ethnography of the broader private rented sector in Edinburgh: one that encompasses both interior and exterior space, and considers the role of wider social and political processes in the production of property relations. In practical terms, the connections that may be followed from the Property Manager lead in a number of interlinked directions. Most obviously from this case is the tenant’s experience of private rented housing. A related strand concerns the buildings themselves and the social relations through which they are experienced, including the networks of occupants, their diverse tenures, and the other actors associated with them – including landlords and letting agents. It is through tracing and reassembling these associations that a situated ethnography of the Edinburgh private rented sector may be produced. Analogous methodologies for the study of other ‘sectors’ are thus invited.
As far as this chapter specifically is concerned, however, I argue that the process of property management in Edinburgh, as seen through the role of the Property Manager at Almond and Thompson, entails the specialised reading of signs, and the construction of narratives based upon, but not limited to, these specialised readings. By ‘reading of signs’, I include the assessment – almost clinical – of the persons with whom the Property Manager comes into contact, as well as the formalised procedure-led observation of the physical signs of damage or otherwise to property. It is precisely this combination that lends itself to a landscape-based analysis; one where the interior intersects the exterior, and that gathers social and economic relations and activity.

The specialised reading of signs and construction of narratives is, as it turns out, a recurrent theme in subsequent chapters. Indeed, Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the readings and usage of formalised documents by the office-based teams at Almond and Thompson. The following chapter, however, remains in the field, as they call it, and continues to follow Property Managers, but considers how the reading of signs – amongst other things – contributes to their ethics of access to property.
Chapter 2: Ethics of Management

The Problem of Access

Pest Control are coming round at eight o’clock this morning. Yasmine, my flatmate-landlady, saw a mouse in the kitchen last week. I am with Almond and Thompson again today, so I am up and about and will be out soon enough. I have not seen or heard any mice myself yet, and, consequently, am not entirely convinced by the value of this activity, but figure that it will be interesting to meet Pest Control nonetheless.

The entrance bell rings. Yasmine buzzes the caller into the stairwell and opens our front door. Up the stairs comes a tall, slim man, probably in his fifties, largely bald, and carrying what looks like a small toolbox.

‘Morning!’ He exclaims as he ascends the stairs.

Pest Control, Yasmine and I gather in the windowless kitchen. I am dressed, but Yasmine is still in her dressing gown. Yasmine explains where and when she saw the mouse.

‘I’m gonnae put a box down by the fridge, and another one in the boiler cupboard,’ Pest Control announces loudly, and with surprising enthusiasm for this time in the morning. He sets his toolbox on the kitchen work surface.

‘It can be a losing battle with these tenements,’ he comments, again loudly, as he rummages around in the toolbox. ‘The ones on the east side of Leith Walk are the worst. The mice stay in the walls mostly. Sometimes folk’ll phone ye in the middle of the night cause they can hear scratching, and they think it’s in the bedroom – they dinna ken it’s in the wall.’

He takes a small packet out of the box and crouches down by the fridge. ‘What’ll happen,’ he continues, matter-of-factly, as he does this, ‘is that the mice’ll eat the poison, and then go back into the wall, then probably make their way up into the roof and die there, so you’ll no hae to deal wi a deid moose [not have to deal with a dead mouse] on the floor.’

Yasmine and I exchange half-reassured glances as Pest Control gets up and returns to the toolbox. ‘I went tae [to] a flat in Marchmont the other week,’ he talks, ‘and there were
three students there – all girls. “You are going to catch them humanely, aren’t you?” Naw, I’m gonnae poison ‘em!’ He seems genuinely delighted by such a prospect.

After making his way into my bedroom to place another ‘box’ in the boiler cupboard, he returns to the kitchen and takes some papers out of his shoulder-bag – including a bill for £50.

‘I’m just needing your payment details there,’ he says to Yasmine, who begins filling it in. ‘Give it about three days, and then put some chocolate on the floor in the evening. If it’s no there in the morning, then call me again. If it’s still there, then the mice are away.’

I’m slightly sceptical about this – after all, he said himself that it was a losing battle – and I’m surprised by the cost. Ten or so minutes after arriving, he bids us goodbye, and I quickly gather my things together to head out to the Almond and Thompson office.

**Ethics of Access**

Mice always have access, as I discover as the months go on – the mice, it transpires, were real. For the rest of us involved with the private rented sector in one way or another, however, access has to be gained. Indeed, ‘gaining access’ turns out to be a recurrent concern for Almond and Thompson employees at most levels. Employees frequently speak of a need to ‘gain access’ to property so that repairs can be carried out and inspections completed. Property Managers facilitate relations between landlords, tenants, contractors and themselves, but breakdowns in these relations can sometimes lead to difficulties with physical access to property. The Property Manager, therefore, has to gain access to property with permission from the tenant or landlord, where applicable, and facilitate the access of contractors – plumbers, electricians, joiners, pest controllers and so forth – when necessary.

Whilst ‘gaining access’, for Almond and Thompson employees, tends to be spoken of explicitly in terms of Property Managers, landlords and contractors obtaining permission from tenants to access property, it does occur to me that this notion of gaining access could just as easily be inverted. Tenants, ultimately, also have to gain access to property from landlords, in this instance via a letting agency. A key role of Property Managers,
and indeed property management, therefore, is to facilitate the gaining of access in both directions. Property Managers, as we will see in this chapter, occupy a space between landlord and tenant, and frequently find themselves having to shift perspective from the viewpoint of one to the other in order to ensure that their respective interests are supported as fully as possible.

The issue of access for tenants will be explored more directly in Chapter 3, as will the roles of the office-based teams at Almond and Thompson in facilitating access from both sides. For now, however, I remain with the Property Manager. The dilemmas and decisions that arise as part of this mediating role between tenant and landlord are manifested prominently and observably through the Property Manager’s problem of physical access to property. As with Pest Control’s decision to poison rather than ‘humanely capture’ intruding mice, the role of the Property Manager in the facilitation of landlord-tenant relations and the gaining of access demands the exercise of ethical judgment. What makes this judgment specifically ethical? It is ethical in part because, after Macpherson (1978: 4), the enforceability of property rights depends upon the belief that property rights are not only legal rights but also moral rights, but it is also ethical because Property Managers themselves employ moral reasoning in explaining their own actions, as we shall see. Thus, my aim in this chapter is to explore the ethical practices of property management primarily through the problem of access on the part of the Property Manager.

How, then, is ethical judgment exercised here, and what is its role within the successful practice of property management? Given that the bulk of the Property Manager’s work takes place ‘in the field’, the act of crossing the thresholds of properties that they neither own nor occupy is their most direct experience of ‘access’ or lack thereof. Much of the time, as we see from the previous chapter, access is relatively unproblematic, as the typical procedures function as desired: voids are successfully accessed with keys, and tenants are available to let the Property Manager in. On other occasions, however, the Property Manager encounters barriers to access. What, then, are the ethical implications of crossing or not crossing the threshold, and how, where applicable, are decisions as to the appropriate course of action made? In addressing these questions, I not only explore the world of the Property Manager further; I also aim to provide a foundation of the dual themes of ethics and access that will be developed further in subsequent chapters.
Given my contention, after Faubion (2001), that ethics is constituted in the self in relation to others, and is thus fundamental to social life, my argument that the ethical is integral to property management should not come as a surprise. Let us return, then, to Lambek’s argument that ‘practice is always understood in relation to [ethical] criteria and based on judgment about the relevance of specific [ethical] criteria’ (Lambek 2015: 129). In relation to what ethical criteria, and on the basis of what judgments about the relevance of these criteria, do Property Managers understand their practice?

I contend that it is worth returning to the metaphor of the ‘moral laboratory’ espoused by Mattingly (2013, 2014) here, and consider how a range of activities partaken by Property Managers produce ethical reasoning, focusing on notions of time-wasting and responsibility, and the practice of entering properties uninvited. Through ethnographic description, I endeavour, in part, to draw attention to the events that serve, for Property Managers, as experiments in ethics or morality, and through which notions of what is good and proper are produced. It has not, however, been possible or even desirable to focus exclusively on observed events here; emic reflections gleaned via interviews have been employed alongside etic observations.

**Keys**

I am out in the field today with David, another Property Manager, and we have just arrived by car in Prestonfield on the southern side of Edinburgh for a viewing. We pull up outside a three-storey cream-coloured tenement block, likely built by local government during the 1920s or 1930s, and virtually opposite a primary school. There are already a couple of people milling about outside, probably waiting for the viewing. Leaving the car, we head over to the external door, which is open, and enter the stairwell, where we find a queue of about a dozen people along the stairs up to the first floor. David quietly greets people as he heads up the stairs to the door, and I follow. Taking out a ring of keys, he tries the Yale key in the appropriate Yale lock.

David is in his late twenties and grew up in Edinburgh, where he attended the private Stewart’s Melville school. He is somewhat more reserved than Andy, and less strikingly dressed, preferring nondescript collared shirts, conventionally short brown hair, a
groomed beard and a long black woollen coat. David completed a postgraduate degree in property management a few years ago in Aberdeen. Following that, he had a couple of work-experience placements in surveying and residential letting, which led to a job as Property Assistant at another private letting agency in Edinburgh. Five months ago, after he had been there about a year and a half, the ‘right job’ for him came up at Almond and Thompson. As Property Manager, his job involves the management of 174 privately rented properties. As with Andy, this ostensibly entails arranging viewings for prospective tenants, proposing suitable tenants to landlords, carrying out inspections, reporting back to landlords on the condition of their property, and ensuring that any repairs are carried out properly.

Thirty seconds later, still in the stairwell, nothing has happened. David then spends about the next fifteen minutes trying to unlock the door with what, as far as I can tell, is clearly not the correct key. The people in the queue exchange knowing glances, and some eventually break the silence and begin chatting. I stand watching, helplessly.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to cancel the viewing,’ David finally announces. ‘I’ll contact you all when we’ve sorted the key out. It’ll probably be about a week on Wednesday.’

‘I hadn’t realised there was gonna be so many folk at one viewing,’ a middle-aged woman comments to no-one in particular, clearly annoyed. The rest of the people exchange groans and slowly make their way down the stairs and outside.

One man waits behind to speak to David. ‘I very urgently need this flat,’ he says. ‘My granddaughter is at the primary school across the road and she has epilepsy. It’s very important she has a relative nearby who can get into the school quickly if need be. Do you know how long it’s gonna be until…’

‘I’ll get back to you when we’ve sorted the keys out,’ David responds. ‘As I say, we’re probably looking at towards the end of next week.’

‘Is there any way I can get priority given the situation?’

‘It’ll be dependent on the background checks, and then it’ll ultimately be up to the landlord,’ David answers.

‘I just canna stress enough with her having epilepsy and all, it’s really important for me to be close by, and it needs sorted out soon.’
‘Yep, I understand. We’ll get back to you.’ The man heads out down the stairs, clearly frustrated by the situation. David and I head back to the car.

A few hours later, after David and I had visited a number of other properties for inspections, void reports and viewings, David turns to me and says that he wants to try the keys in the door of the Prestonfield flat ‘just once more, just to make sure’. We drive back to Prestonfield, leave the car and head back into the stairwell and up the stairs. I stand watching while David spends about fifteen minutes trying the keys in the lock, then I have a go too.

‘Nope, still not fitting,’ he says. ‘Wonder if the previous tenant had the locks changed… but somebody must have got in here to do the void report, and the contractors must have got in to clear it out. Maybe they’ve brought back the wrong keys? At least I know it’s definitely not me.’

Time-wasting

The vignette above conveniently introduces many of the main themes that are central to this chapter. David fails to gain access to a property, ends up wasting time, disappoints and frustrates his prospective tenants in the process, negotiates with the pleas of a prospective tenant with reference to established procedure, tries to resolve his apparent failing with the key, and clears himself of personal culpability for it. He also finds himself in a distinct ‘in-between’ position here; not between tenant and landlord, but between prospective tenants and an empty property to which he is unable to facilitate access due to not having the correct keys. What stands out more for me, however, is that problems of access led to the wasting of time, and that this, in turn, threw up further ethical questions, in this instance regarding the need of a prospective tenant to find somewhere to live.

Indeed, as my time with Almond and Thompson progressed, I came to notice that a considerable amount of ‘time-wasting’ occurs during their work activities. ‘There is so much time-wasting on this job, it’s unbelievable,’ employees of various roles said to me, or words to that effect. Viewings are arranged to which nobody turns up. Visits are organised but the tenants are not there. Contractors are sent to carry out repairs, but the
tenants are out and have refused to allow entry without their presence. Keys get lost or do not fit. Frequently, time-wasting is a direct outcome of an inability to gain access to property. Time-wasting is a source of frustration for Property Managers in particular, and there is a desire to keep it to a minimum, though it is accepted as part and parcel of the job.

Let us turn to the popular adage, generally attributed to Benjamin Franklin, that time equates to money. This is not merely a cliché. Adam (2003: 98-9) argues that the development of the modern, waged economy has coincided with the ‘transformation of lived time into a commodity that we can use, allocate and exchange on the labour market’. This has a number of specific ethical consequences, including that ‘efficiency and profitability are tied to speed’, that ‘any un-used time is money wasted’, and that ‘compression and rationalisation schemes become implemented in the cause of global competition’. This process, to quote from Thompson (1967: 90-1), has produced an ethical standard in which ‘all time must be consumed, marketed, put to use; it is offensive for the labour force to merely “pass the time”’.

Does time equate to money in the business of property management? In one sense, it quite literally does. Tenants pay rent for specified periods of time in exchange for their occupation and usage of a property. Failure to find a tenant for a property entails the forgoing of rent by both landlord and letting agency, and thus amounts to time wasted. As Almond and Thompson Edinburgh pay guaranteed rent each month to their landlords after a tenancy has been secured, landlords do not have to worry about whether or not tenants pay their rent on time. Consequently, ensuring that tenants pay their rent is a particularly high priority for the letting agency, as they, as a company, risk finding themselves out of pocket otherwise, though the sheer size of their enterprise combined with rents set at the levels of maximum housing benefit rather than at ‘market’ rates does shield them to a considerable extent from any immediate impacts of this. Some of the ways in which employees engage with tenants to ensure timely payment of rent are explored in Chapter 4.

In another sense, however, the temporality of tenancy and rent is really rather different from this traditional labour-orientated equation between time and money. Adam (2003: 98-9) claims that the ‘money value of time [...] is exclusively tied to paid work’, but the existence of time-specific leases would appear to undermine such an argument. Where I
do return to agreement with Adam, however, is that the commodification of time coincides with the creation of ‘non-temporal time’, to which social (and economic) life is orientated, hence the concerns over ‘wasting time’, amongst others. Time does not merely structure activity; time is also controlled.

Paid work is, of course, far from absent from the business of property management, but for our Property Managers, as salaried employees of Almond and Thompson, the direct link between time and money is less immediately apparent, even though it is they who are most likely to experience time-wasting on a day-to-day basis. David, for instance, returned to the flat in Prestonfield, the door of which he could not open, to try the keys just one more time, even though this amounted to more time wasted. Almond and Thompson, as an abstract entity, may well have an interest, in neoclassical economic terms, and indeed in Adam’s terms, in reducing time-wasting as part of reducing costs, but this is not immediately felt by employees other than in the form of redundancies, which can and do happen. Andy, whom we met in the previous chapter, and will meet again in Chapter 4, is known to take calls from his tenants on his mobile phone at home in the evening, sometimes talking to them for up to an hour, even though he is not paid to do this. In this instance, time is quite literally not money. What, then, are the ethical criteria that drive actions such as this, and how are said criteria produced?

Of course, any attempt at reading the daily working lives of Property Managers, or of a letting agency, or of the private rented sector based upon the classic anthropology of time, as Franch & Sousa (2015) do for daily life in a Brazilian school, may wish to distinguish structural time from lived time. All time is lived, but not all time is necessarily structural. It is structural time that guides the outcomes of employment contracts, wages, tenancy agreements and rents, whilst time wasted is, in this sense, lived and unmeasured, at least for Property Managers.

For the Property Manager, then, time-wasting is a source of frustration. Insofar as the property manager understands the need to limit the wasting of time in ethical terms, it is concerned with the need to facilitate relations between landlords and tenants – or prospective tenants, in the case of my experience with David above. David regretted the delay and frustration caused to prospective tenants as a result of time wasted. It also likely caused a delay in the successful letting of the property and, by extension, a delay in the landlord receiving rent, as guaranteed rent is usually only paid to the landlord during a
tenancy. Indeed, we may remember from the Monday Lettings Meeting in the previous chapter the priority accorded to ensuring that properties are let as quickly as possible, subject to the finding of suitable tenants, partly in order to avoid losing ‘good’ landlords. Time wasted, then, has the potential to frustrate these relations.

For now, however, I wish to focus upon a more immediate, practical manifestation of time-wasting, and the ethical dilemmas that it produces. Property Managers not only need to get into empty property to carry out void reports and to hold viewings, but also to access occupied property in order to carry out inspections and facilitate repairs. Sometimes, however, tenants are unresponsive, or even try to frustrate the process. Unlike the scenario in the vignette above, where David’s inability to access the flat eventually turned out to have been caused by contractors returning the wrong keys after cleaning the void, time-wasting is more commonly caused by tenants failing to be there when they say that they will be there. On other occasions, however, landlords are either non-communicative, or refuse to grant permission for repairs to be carried out.

In relation to what ethical criteria are endeavours to avoid or overcome time-wasting, including the decision to enter property without permission, understood? What moral and ethical understandings arise from such actions? Is there a point at which no more time should be wasted, and at which Property Managers have to enter tenants’ spaces without obtaining their permission, or at which repairs have to be carried out without landlords giving Almond and Thompson the go-ahead? It turns out that the answer to both these two latter questions is yes, as this chapter should hopefully illustrate.

‘The meat in the sandwich’

The everyday tasks and responsibilities that are integral to the work of Property Managers like David and Andy require them to engage with both tenants and landlords on a personal level, as the previous chapter illustrated. These relationships are integral to the successful negotiation of access to property on their part. A few weeks after the key fiasco, I interview David about the relationships that he has with his tenants and landlords. A key theme that emerges is that there are contractual relationships with tenants and landlords, as enshrined through documents such as tenancy agreements, in relation to which broader
practical relationships with tenants and landlords are to be understood and negotiated, but they do not inevitably determine what happens in practice. To run it through Lambek’s terminology, contractual relationships form part of the ethical criteria in relation to which practice is understood, but said practice requires continuing judgments about the relevance of said criteria.

David explains that the ‘basic principle’ is that he is employed as the landlord’s agent, which means that his primary responsibility is to make sure that the landlord’s property is kept in good condition. However, he finds that it is the relationship with the tenant that is more important ‘in reality’, as the day-to-day communication is primarily with the tenant, and that he has to have ‘a strong stick’ with them if they are not looking after the property. Equally, landlords apparently only get involved when there is an issue. ‘I’m really the meat in the sandwich between the two,’ he says, ‘trying to keep both parties happy’.

David admits that obtaining adequate co-operation from landlords in order to ensure that properties are suitably maintained for tenants ‘can be a big problem’. Landlords sometimes refuse to pay for repairs. ‘There are certain legal minimum requirements for the property,’ David explains, ‘so if there is a repair that has to be done, it has to be done, and that’s sort of the end of the conversation. If it’s a cosmetic repair and they don’t want to spend money, then we would just have to take their instruction on that.’ There are, however, certain repairs that are ‘just defaulted as a matter of urgency or safety’. Some landlords are very happy to take recommendations, such as replacing an old but still-working washing machine, or replacing a dirty or worn-out carpet. Some landlords ask for quotes and think about it. Others will wait a couple of years until it is absolutely necessary. Tenants sometimes get frustrated waiting years for non-urgent repairs for which the landlord is refusing to pay.

David’s landlords are fairly diverse. ‘I think the majority have occupied the property and then moved on to live somewhere else and then kept it to rent it out,’ he says. ‘You find these landlords have a more emotional attachment because they’ve lived there for a while, and they’re more likely to keep it up in a good condition.’ David does, however, have a number of landlords who have three or more properties as an investment, who are ‘really more concerned about the bottom line, rather than just minor maintenance’. He also suspects that a fair proportion of his landlords are ‘accidental landlords’, which
include people who have inherited a property from a relative, or who would like to sell the property, but due to ‘three, four, five years of poor property market’, they have decided to rent it out instead, and are ‘just kind of ticking over until the time is right for them’. David has noticed a ‘tide change’ recently, where tenancies have ended, and instead of re-letting the properties, the landlords have taken the property back with intention to sell, ‘just because the market has picked up a bit and they can get a bit of value back on the flat’.

Over the past year, David has had half a dozen ‘out of the blue’ calls from landlords asking him to serve notice on the tenants because they want to sell the property:

*They’re perfectly entitled to do this, so it’s just a case of informing the tenant and giving them a notice to quit, which is two months. It’s a difficult conversation to have with the tenant. I don’t particularly enjoy doing it. I have to phone and explain, give them the bad news, the owner wants the property back, just say a bit about what’s going forward and try to facilitate that the best I can. If I’ve got a property they want to move into, I can try and move them, but it’s always a bit of a bad call to make. I apologise for giving them the bad news. A lot of tenants to be fair to them take it on the chin and go, okay, that’s life, they know obviously they’re in a rented flat, they know this day might be inevitable, so a lot of them sort of get on with it.*

Fairly often, however, David’s tenants abandon their house or flat without notifying him. They just stop paying rent and move out. This is one likely consequence of Almond and Thompson not taking deposits from tenants, as it removes a significant incentive for following the official procedure with respect to notice periods. David says that he often finds that properties have been abandoned, ‘often left in a poor condition with lots of damage, perhaps doors ripped off the hinges, windows smashed, filthy, and because key meters tend to lose credit and have not been topped up, the power is off, which means any food left in the fridge goes off and it smells.’

David explains which tenants tend to do this:

*I think we have what I consider two types of tenant. We’ve got the long-term tenants who are settled, perhaps have a family, and they’re tenants for ten years or so and they make the property their own. But then there’s a high proportion of our tenants who are very transient. They’ll have a lease, they’ll get into trouble with rent arrears perhaps, or other criminal or antisocial behaviour, and they’ll just leave*
the property after six months or a year, and then you’ll never hear from them again. A couple of occasions have happened where the landlord’s goods have been stolen when they’ve left the property, they’ve taken the washing machine or the fridge, which is then reported to the police. But you can never tell if you meet a good tenant, you can never tell how it’s going to end up. They can pass all the checks, references, everything like that, then circumstances change, and then a year down the line, they’ve wrecked the place and they’ve left in the night.

If tenants are consistently unresponsive, David tends to suspect that they have either abandoned the property, or that they have something to hide. If, after multiple failed attempts to make contact, including turning up at the property two or three times, he will write the tenants a letter to say that he will enter the property with keys, as that is a condition of the lease. David explains how he feels about entering a potentially inhabited property in that way:

“There’s always a slight trepidation. Vast majority of the time, they’re not actually going to be in. If they’ve got something to hide or they’ve not been looking after the property, and you say you’re coming on this date at this time, they’re gonna make themselves scarce, they’re not gonna want to speak to me. But you never know whether the person who’s in the flat is a tenant or a friend or something like that, so they can be surprised. Or, I go round and they’ve got dogs, and I wouldn’t enter because I don’t know the dogs, and I wouldn’t take the risk.

So far, the procedures seem straightforward: do not deviate from the terms of the lease, make several attempts at contact, state clearly what will be done and when it will be done, and do not take risks. I am, however, most struck by David’s statement that, when a landlord wishes to take back an occupied property, it is his job to ‘try to facilitate that the best [he] can’ while being apologetic towards the tenants. This, it seems, can be extended to much of David’s work – trying his best to facilitate the relations between tenants, landlords and property with the least detriment to any one party, whilst acknowledging that his ultimate priority is to the landlord as his or her agent, subject to certain legal constraints. There is a need, then, to shift between thinking with the tenant in mind and thinking with the landlord in mind in attempt to keep both sides happy, which presents challenges.
It might, however, be argued that the primary object of ethical regard is sometimes the property itself. If the tenant fails to keep their house or flat in good order, this can indicate, for David, a lack of proper care on their part for the landlord’s property. If the landlord fails to maintain their property to a suitable standard, this can indicate a lack of proper care for the tenant. In one sense, by reading the property through the methods described in the previous chapter, the Property Manager is able to construct narratives as to the care or lack thereof of both tenant and landlord. But equally, prioritising care for the property, regardless of whether it is the landlord or the tenant (or both) that may be required to take action, can help to ensure that relations between landlord and tenant remain smooth.

As far as David’s everyday or ‘ordinary’ ethics are concerned, they appear to be driven largely by utilitarian considerations. It should be said, however, that some Property Managers at Almond and Thompson, such as Andy, take their ethical responsibilities beyond those outlined by David here. Equally, not all Property Managers agree with David that ‘you can never tell if you meet a good tenant’ either. Both of these issues will be explored further in Chapter 4. For now, however, the ethics advanced by David should be seen as an ethical foundation of sorts insofar as the maintenance of property, the facilitation of landlord-tenant relations, and the continued satisfaction of both sides are concerned – all of which are necessary for understanding the problem of access, to which I now return directly.

‘He’s burgled his own flat’

David mentioned above that there had been occasions where the tenant had abandoned the property and stolen some of the landlord’s furnishings in the process. As it happens, I encountered this on one occasion during my time with Almond and Thompson. I was out in the field with Tim, another Property Manager.

Tim is in early thirties, had previously worked for a high-street bank, but had always been interested in property and property management, and, as he wanted a career change, he applied for his current job at Almond and Thompson last year and was successful. Tim is responsible for managing some of the properties that Almond and Thompson manage as part of their Private Sector Leasing (or ‘PSL’) contracts that they have with local
councils. In summary, Almond and Thompson let out a number of properties on behalf of private landlords to local government to be used as temporary accommodation for homeless people until they are able to find or be found permanent housing, usually socially rented. In contrast to conventional private renting, neither the landlord nor the letting agency have any say over who occupies the property as this is all determined by the Council. I would not argue that these ostensibly different property relations determine the behaviour of either tenants or employees, though Tim does note that he was particularly attracted to his current job because it was ‘sort of an extra challenge’.

‘I’ve always looked for the jobs that I’m doing to build my CV, and it’s a very specialised type of work that we do here, especially with the PSL side of things,’ he tells me. ‘If you went to work for a normal sort of property management company, you may have an easier life, but in terms of building your own experiences, and building your own skills in challenging situations – you get some very challenging situations coming out of it – it was what I was looking for.’

This is something of a recurrent theme at Almond and Thompson, the ‘letting agency with a difference’ as Tessa, the Director, described it to me. One hears frequent references to ‘the nature of our clientele’ and variations thereupon. I have never heard anyone state explicitly what they take this to mean, but the sense is that this makes working at Almond and Thompson more ‘challenging’ than working at other letting agencies. It is also acknowledged that managing PSL properties is generally even more ‘challenging’ than managing RightLet properties, which Andy and David manage.

Tim and I are driving towards Musselburgh, a town just over the border in East Lothian that is still effectively part of the Edinburgh urban area. The tenant reported a burglary about three weeks ago. Apparently, the burglars had stolen almost everything in the flat, including the washing machine, refrigerator and all the tenant’s clothes, but he had since been ignoring all of Tim’s further attempts to contact him. Tim has already hinted to me that he thinks that something suspicious has been going on.

‘Will it be okay, turning up unannounced like this?’ I ask Tim.

‘I’ve tried telephoning, texting and leaving voicemails, but there’s still no response, so we just have to turn up,’ he says. ‘For the clientele we deal with, obviously they are homeless, they’ve come from bed and breakfasts or hostels, or they’ve just come out of prison and they may have mental health issues. It is time-wasting for us but we have that
process of trying to build up that relationship with the tenants so they know who we are and they’re not sort of sceptical about why we’re coming.’

Once again, the Property Manager finds himself in between the landlord and the tenant, though this time, the role of the Council in supplying the tenant adds an additional dimension.

‘What will happen if the tenant is not there?’ I ask.

‘I’ll knock loudly, and I’ll shout his name and shout where I’m coming from. Actually, I went into one that the tenant had told us they’d left. The Rents Team said they’d left four months ago. I was chased from the property basically.’

‘So they hadn’t left?’

‘They were in rent arrears and wanted to try and get away with it for four months and they were still in the property,’ he replies. ‘So I still knocked, they didn’t answer and I thought, definitely not here, went in, started walking up the stairs and heard someone running along the landing. I was like, oh right, still here.’

We pull up outside a grey-pebbledash tenement block on a council-built housing estate, and then head into the stairwell. The door to the ground-floor flat in question is ajar and looks like it has been kicked in, secured with wooden planks, and then kicked in again. Numerous leaflets dating from the 2012 council election, by this point nearly three years ago, are lying on the floor by the door. Tim knocks. ‘Mr Jamieson,’ he calls, ‘I’m from Almond and Thompson! Hello?!’ No response. The circumstances clearly demand a bit of improvisation. We push the door open and, with some hesitation, enter the flat.

The flat is effectively a bedsit with a separate kitchen and bathroom. It certainly looks ransacked. The lights have been left on and all cupboard doors are open. The ‘white goods’, as we call them, are indeed missing from the kitchen. A few articles of clothing are strewn about over the floor. At one end of the living room is a wall-bed, half pulled down, with sheets dangling off. The place could also do with a clean.

‘Looks like he’s burgled his own flat,’ Tim muses. ‘What kind of burglar would steal all someone’s clothes? He’s made off with the white goods and moved out.’

It strikes me as the most plausible explanation. Once again, the Property Manager is employing a kind of forensic reading of the physical space within the property in order to reconstruct a narrative about, in this instance, the behaviour of the tenant.
Just as Tim and I are leaving the flat, a man with a large bulldog on a lead makes an abrupt entrance into the stairwell. Tim glances at me, suddenly looking rather terrified.

‘That door’s been like that three weeks now,’ the man says. Tim immediately seems relieved.

‘Have you seen the tenant at all since?’ Tim asks.

‘Naw, he’s gien aff [gone off],’ the man responds. ‘Reckon he done that himsel.’ He and the bulldog make their way up the stairs.

‘Phew,’ Tim quietly says to me. ‘Thought that was the tenant come back.’

The next task is to call for an ‘emergency joiner’ to re-secure the door to the flat, which Tim promptly does, though is told that he will not be able to get here for another two hours. We will have to wait here in the stairwell until he arrives as otherwise the unsecured door would be left unattended – even though it has been left unattended for the past three weeks. We stand around in the stairwell for a while, sit in the car for a while, and then wait in the stairwell for another while. Tim deals with some emails on his smartphone. More time-wasting, then. I take the opportunity to write notes.

Eventually, a white van arrives and the emergency joiner enthusiastically greets us in the stairwell. I have seen him around the office and have previously chatted to him briefly – he seemed rather excited by my project, which has not been a universal sentiment. He is also one of Almond and Thompson’s go-to contractors. Tim explains what seems to have happened, and the emergency joiner gets to work fitting a bolt and padlock to the outside of the door. It takes him all of fifteen minutes.

‘Usually we’d serve an Abandonment Notice now,’ Tim says in my general direction. ‘We’d fix the Abandonment Notice to the front door with an expiry date after which we’d get the locksmith out and get the locks changed. Sometimes we even do it if we don’t believe the tenants have actually abandoned the property, because the strong wording usually prompts them to get in contact. But there’s no point in serving it this time because the tenant would have to contact us to get back into the property anyway.’
Keeping Everyone Happy

The fact that Tim’s property portfolio is part of the Private Sector Leasing strand of Almond and Thompson’s business introduces an additional actor to the relations that property management strives to facilitate: local government. A number of weeks after the events described above, I interview Tim about the specific dynamics that this produces.

Tim explains that it is technically the Council, rather than the person who occupies the property, that is classed as the ‘tenant’ of Almond and Thompson as far as the legal paperwork is concerned; the occupant is technically a subtenant of the Council. However, Property Managers, including Tim, invariably refer to the latter as ‘tenant’ in everyday discourse. In order to keep the Council happy, Tim has to make sure that the occupier is happy and that the property is in good condition for them. They then also offer the landlord what Tim describes as a ‘good package’ in terms of their guaranteed rent and the fact that they are not responsible for any damage costs. ‘I think our responsibilities do lie with the Council and then with the landlord,’ Tim says, ‘which is not to say that we don’t care about the actual person living there, but it’s a balance that you have to try to get.’

Tim admits that the right balance can be difficult to achieve:

*Obviously you’re trying to please the Council. Sometimes you’re having to say to the landlord, ‘You need to do this work’, and they’ll come back and say it’s tenant damage. It’s not really tenant damage. The tenant may not have looked after the property very well, but they’ve not deliberately broken it. They’ve just not cared for it in the best possible way they could, so it’s difficult conversations you have to have with the landlord about that. When the Sales Team are trying to sell them PSL, they’re made aware of what type of tenant it will be. It still doesn’t make the conversations with them about repairs any easier though!*

Tim finds that PSL landlords tend to be ‘a bit more hands-off’ than other landlords. This is especially apparent with voids, or recently vacated properties:

*Obviously we’re gonna be asking them that they need to redecorate their properties, but they ask, ‘Why do we need to redecorate?’ And a lot of the time, it’s because they haven’t done anything in five years and the place needs freshened up. And they’ll say, ‘The tenants haven’t looked after it well and this is why we’re having to do it,’ and it’s not the case. We’d usually say after three years that you need to*
thinking about redecorating, re-carpeting the property, so if they’re getting to five years, they’re doing very, very well from it.

However, because the landlords have signed a lease contract with the Council, even if they do not agree to it, Almond and Thompson can simply go ahead with the work and subtract it from their rent. ‘We hope to avoid getting to that stage,’ Tim tells me, ‘because obviously that’s a complete breakdown in the relationship. Usually when we say we’ll get it done, they know there’s no other option and they’ll say, “Right, go ahead, I’m not happy about it, but I know you’re gonna go ahead and do it”’. Tim hopes to avoid that scenario, but concedes that it does happen sometimes.

As with David, Tim finds that his landlords cover a broad spectrum of how they acquired the property. Some landlords have bought the properties purely for investment, some have lived in the properties before, some have lived in them but have moved away for work but want to get some revenue before they come back, and others have inherited the property but have decided to keep hold of it as an investment. Tim explains some of the impacts that this can have:

Those who are running it as a business are probably a bit more difficult in terms of getting work done, but the ones who have perhaps moved away, they obviously want to keep the property up to a good standard if they’re planning on moving back into it one day. I don’t think there’s a landlord out there who really wants their property to be in a bad condition. They want it to be treated well by the tenant, and if the tenant’s not doing that, or if they think the tenant’s not doing that, then that’s when they’ll start getting a bit off about repairs. They’ll think, ‘Well why should I do that when the tenant’s not doing what they should do?’ So again, conversations where we’ll have to step in and speak to the tenant as well.

Tim tells me that a few weeks ago, he had been told by a landlord that his own contractors had been to a property and reported to him that it was ‘a bit of a mess’, and had been asked to go and have a look. Tim went to the property, had a look, agreed that it was a mess, and asked the tenant to tidy up, which she duly agreed. Half an hour later, Tim received a phone call from the office saying that she had phoned the office furious because he had asked her to tidy up. ‘But,’ Tim says, ‘we need to tell them that, because it isn’t their property. Yes, we want them to make it a home, but they can’t leave it dirty, because if they leave it dirty long enough, it’s gonna build up into a major problem which
we’re then gonna have to pick up the bill for, as it’s classed as tenant damage.’ Consequently, as Tim explains, it is in Almond and Thompson’s interests to ensure that the property is well maintained, both from a financial point of view, and from a point of view of keeping the landlord and the Council happy.

Tim explains that if they have any issues with a PSL tenant, they have to report that back to the Council. As the tenant will be on a waiting list for a permanent socially-rented house, the Council need to know if the tenant has in any way breached their terms. The most common cause for reporting tenants to the council is ‘antisocial behaviour’, often after neighbours have telephoned to complain about noise or about rubbish being left around.

Once again, the Property Manager finds himself (or herself, though most are men) in between the landlord, the occupier and, in this instance, the Council. Consequently, there is a need to shift perspectives between thinking with the landlord in mind, with the occupier in mind and, here, with the Council in mind. Again, much as with David above, the ultimate ethical concern can appear to lie with the care for the property itself, as by ensuring that the property is suitably maintained, relations with both landlord and occupier are more likely to remain unproblematic, and the Council is less likely to complain. To return to the specific issue of access for Property Managers, I contend that the decision to cross the threshold without obtaining formal permission, as Tim and I did on that day in Musselburgh, is grounded at least in part by the need to ensure these relations remain as conflict-free as possible – prioritising the needs of the landlord where the occupier has clearly contravened their responsibilities, for instance – and that the property itself is kept in good order.

**Trepidation**

David mentioned the ‘slight trepidation’ that he always feels when entering a potentially inhabited property without the tenant’s permission, and there is no doubt that my experience with Tim that day in Musselburgh was scary, but that is far from the only scenario here that is liable to produce such feelings. I experienced it enough times whilst
in the field with Property Managers, and can only imagine how it would feel if I were to be working alone, which Property Managers usually are.

I was out in the field with Lisa, one of only two women Property Managers at Almond and Thompson Edinburgh during my time there, and who, like Tim, is also responsible for PSL properties. Lisa is in her mid-thirties, originally from St Andrews, and had previously worked for Accommodation Services at the University there before joining Almond and Thompson a few months previously. Our working day had begun with an uneventful lease-signing with a very quietly-spoken young woman with a baby at a house in Haddington in East Lothian, but things became somewhat less routine from my perspective when we had to do a ‘high risk’ house visit in Tranent, just outside Edinburgh.

‘So, why is this visit “high risk”?’ I ask Lisa as we drive along the A1 back from Haddington towards the outskirts of Edinburgh.

‘I think there’s been a history of domestic violence,’ she replies. ‘Some tenants are down as requiring a Support Worker to be present, but this one just requires two people to visit. Usually one of the other Property Managers or just anyone else from the office would come. The fact that you are with me makes it okay.’

Another condition of access for Property Managers, then, is bureaucratic notions of safety. Inhabited properties where it has been determined by either the Council (in the case of PSL) or by Almond and Thompson that the tenant poses a potential danger require additional support for the Property Manager, otherwise access is, in this sense, disallowed according to their own procedures, regardless of the tenant’s views on the matter. I am unsure what to make of the idea that I now appear to have a formal role in this visit, if only as a ‘backup’ in the event of difficulties with the tenants. I do not know Lisa well at this stage, but it does occur to me that probably neither of us would be particularly well-placed to fend off violent behaviour from the large man that I am currently imaging at least one of the tenants to be. I understand that we are conducting this visit because Lisa had been made aware of complaints by neighbours about the mess in the front garden.

Lisa deliberately parks about a hundred metres away from the house that we are visiting, and safely around the corner. We get out of the car and walk along the street. Lisa seems visibly nervous, which makes me feel even more nervous. After a few minutes, we reach a grey-pebbledash ex-council house with a small gravelled area in front. Amongst the gravel is a large amount of dog excrement. The front door is open and I can
hear multiple dogs barking, as well as at least two children playing. A man and a woman, both likely in their late twenties, come out to meet us. The woman makes little impression upon me, but I notice that the man is wearing a tank top and has the appearance of an amateur bodybuilder. I cannot help but remember what Lisa said on our way about ‘high risk’ and ‘domestic violence’, but then quickly remind myself that this could refer to the woman or even to some other tenant for all I know. Indeed, stereotyping, or at least typecasting, plays a large part in the work of Almond and Thompson, where Property Managers typically have portfolios of between one and two hundred properties, and where most tenants are known primarily through documentary data and through brief, sporadic encounters in their homes such as this.

Lisa explains to the man and woman that the front garden needs to be cleared of the dog excrement, and then asks if she can have a look around the house. They apparently accept both of these things without saying a great deal. Lisa and I head in. It is a small house with a living room and kitchen downstairs, and two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. I count three dogs, two cats and a guinea pig downstairs, and the smell is as might be expected. Lisa takes out a copy of the house inspection form, this time with duplicating paper underneath, and proceeds to allow the form to drive her observations.

Living Room. Doors: Good. Windows: Good. Curtains/Blinds: Good. Floor: Work required. Lights: Good. Outlets and switches: Good. This process, which is now familiar to me, continues throughout the rest of the rooms. Under ‘Exterior’, the front garden is predictably very much ‘Work required’. By this point, the man has gone out, and Lisa hands the woman a copy of the form.

‘You’ve obviously got a lot of pets here,’ Lisa says, ‘which is okay, but you need to ensure that they’re not making too much mess noise, otherwise we’re going to keep getting complaints of antisocial behaviour. But if you sort out the front garden area, that will make a big difference.’

The woman quietly accepts this, and Lisa and I head back to the car. Lisa seems rather relieved. ‘That wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be, but I’m glad to have had you with me,’ Lisa says. ‘I still never quite know whether to tick “Good” or “Work required” though. Not much in that house is good with all those dogs and cats, but if I say that work is required, it might imply that it’s something urgent, which it’s not.’ This is not the first time that I have observed a Property Manager deliberate over the ambiguities inherent in
the house inspection form, and given David’s and Tim’s reflections, it strikes me that the
decision as to whether or not work is ‘required’ has implications for the ongoing
relationships with and contentment of both tenants and landlords. We get into the car and
drive off.

‘You know,’ Lisa says to me as we drive over towards Prestonpans, ‘I used to be one
of those people who thought that people who were on benefits were lazy and just needed
to make a bit more of an effort, but working here has changed my perspective. So many
of our tenants have so much going on in their lives that it’s really hard not to sympathise
with them.’

We arrive outside a new-build block of flats right along the coast in Prestonpans,
outside the city limits, but still just about on the edge of the Edinburgh urban area. It is
past three o’clock and, as it is winter, it is already starting to get dark. ‘I think this flat
might have been abandoned as we’ve not heard anything from the tenant for a while,’
Lisa tells me, ‘but I just want to check to make sure.’

We walk over to one of the ground-floor flats. It has its own front door that opens
directly onto the car park. Lisa knocks, and knocks again, and then calls through the
letterbox. ‘Right, not in,’ she says, unlocking the door and stepping in.

At that moment, a young man appears in the darkened hallway.

‘Whoops,’ Lisa says quietly. ‘Oh, sorry,’ she says to the man.

‘Oh, hey, don’t worry,’ he says. He is wearing a sleeveless vest and boxer shorts, and
looks and sounds like he has only just woken up. I surmise that he cannot be much older
than sixteen.

‘Just wanted to make sure everything is okay for you,’ Lisa says. ‘Is it okay if I just
take a look around?’

‘Yeah, sure… sure…’

The form comes out again and Lisa looks discerningly at the floors, walls and furniture.
There is a rather strange smell in this flat, which is generally untidy with numerous
ashtrays about the place. The duvet is on the sofa in the living room rather than in the
bedroom, and a school uniform is hanging over one of the chairs. I had at first assumed
that his ‘innocent’, boyish appearance just made him look rather young for his age, but
clearly he is only about sixteen after all. The man – or boy – does not say much, but does
not seem bothered by our presence. There is only one bedroom, and he apparently lives here alone.

‘You’re aware of the mould in the bathroom and bedroom?’ Lisa asks after about five minutes.

‘Yeah, that’s why I’ve been sleeping on the couch,’ he says.

‘We’ll get that sorted out, but have you been opening the window while showering?’ Lisa asks, ticking ‘Work required’ in the appropriate box on the form.

‘No…’

‘You really need to open the window while showering.’

‘Ah, okay, I didn’t know…’

Lisa thanks the young man, who then thanks us in return. We leave and head back to the car.

‘How young is he?’ I ask Lisa as we drive off.

‘Looks barely fourteen or fifteen,’ she replies. ‘I can’t help but feel a certain responsibility to them, but it’s amazing how so many people don’t realise that they have to open the window when showering. Hopefully now he knows, it should be alright. Decided to turn a blind eye to the strong smell of weed though… one step at a time!’

Conclusion

In the introductory chapter, I distinguished common notions of ‘economy’ from the etymological sense of ‘eco-nomy’ or oikonomia, meaning ‘household management’, perhaps slightly mischievously to provide an opportunity for the study of property management within the private rented sector from the perspective of economic anthropology. Hopefully, the two ethnographic chapters thus far will have illustrated that the management of private rented housing is fundamentally concerned with the facilitation of property relations between physical properties and those with different enforceable claims upon said properties, i.e. between tenants, landlords, letting agents and the state. The exchange of money in the form of rent for specific rights to the usage of property is clearly one aspect of this, but the management and processing of financial transactions is not one of the more prominent ‘management’ activities that occupies the
time for which Property Managers are at least officially paid. Rather, the bulk of their working time is occupied by the facilitation of relations between people, and by ensuring that properties are physically maintained to a standard that is deemed suitable. Indeed, prioritising care for properties themselves can help to ensure that these relations remain as smooth as possible. Sometimes, however, as Lisa suggests above, it is permissible to turn a blind eye to certain things if it appears likely to help to cultivate positive relationships in the long run.

Let us return, once again, to Wilk’s notion of the moral economy, whereby ‘behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right’ (Wilk 1996: 38). Does such a desire guide property management, or at least the management as practiced by Property Managers at Almond and Thompson Edinburgh? In a sense, yes, though, after Lambek (2010), with continuing reference to specified ethical criteria, in this instance property law, signed leases, and in-house bureaucratic procedures and policies. The ethical, however, is not merely a function of the economy or the eco-nomy; ethical deliberation is integral to the continuing management of property relations. Further to this, in the vein of Mattingly (2014), the practice of property management itself provides opportunities for moral reflection that, in turn, informs their future ethical judgements that constitute the practice of property management. Ambiguous and trepid scenarios, moreover, provide occasion for further moral experimentation and for future reflection, from which Property Managers subsequently draw, as part of the process.

On the specific problem of access, which is central to the practice of property management, there is ordinarily a need for Property Managers to obtain permission from tenants, landlords or both, where applicable, to access property. This is ultimately a basic element of procedure, albeit one that contains ethical implications. Where permission to access cannot be obtained after repeated attempts, Property Managers may choose to enter the property regardless. The decision to do so stems from their position between tenant and landlord (and the Council, in the case of PSL properties). Property Managers not only seek to ensure that the interests of both (or all three) are served as well as possible providing that they have not otherwise contravened their responsibilities; reading the condition of properties becomes the primary means by which the levels of care shown by both tenants and landlords are determined, and care for properties becomes the primary
way in which Property Managers aim to ensure that tenants and landlords (and the Council where applicable) are kept happy.

In terms of the broader private rented sector, then, the role of those ‘in between’ tenants and landlords, such as Property Managers, and the ethical decisions that they have to make in terms of managing is substantial. Although not all landlords let out their property to tenants via letting agencies, the actions of letting agencies, and their employees in particular, are, in practice, elemental to the facilitation of property relations within the private rented sector. This chapter has focused on Property Managers, not least because, within Almond and Thompson Edinburgh, it is generally Property Managers who interact directly with physical property out in the field. Their work is, however, supported by a range of other actors within the office-based teams who also read for signs, construct narratives, deal with the problem of access and grapple with the ethical issues that the practice of property management throws up – and who thus also contribute to the facilitation of property relations within the private rented sector. It is these actors who are the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Bureaucracies of Management

Documents as Technologies of Access

Once again, I enter through the faux-wood door into the Almond and Thompson office, hang my coat on the coat stand, put my sandwich box in the fridge, make myself a cup of instant coffee, sit at one of the small round tables in the kitchenette area and wait for the weekly Tuesday Training session. This event, it occurs to me, is likely to be rather crucial, as about half the staff only started yesterday, and most of the rest have only been here a few weeks.

After about fifteen minutes, we all gather in the main part of the office, sitting on the swivel chairs between the desks. Tessa, the Director, stands in a visible place in front of the glass offices to introduce the meeting.

‘It’s great to be standing in front of a sea of new faces,’ she begins. ‘We’ve had feedback from landlords. They’ve complained of inconsistencies, a lack of call-back, and confusion over who they were speaking to at a given time.’

A handout consisting of two printed A4 sheets stapled together are passed around the room. Tessa is in her forties and is tall with long, flowing brown hair. She has previously mentioned to me that she went to Holy Rood Roman Catholic High School in Edinburgh and completed a Masters in Housing Studies at Heriot-Watt University.

‘The purpose of today’s training,’ Tessa continues, ‘is to show you how to book a viewing, and how to log a repair, as the majority of enquiries we have are of this nature. Most of the time, the Customer Support Team will be responsible for these tasks, but it’s useful if everyone can do this in case the phones get busy – which they do.’

We split into two groups. My group gathers with our swivel chairs around one of the computers with Helen, who is normally responsible for carrying out background checks on prospective tenants, and is one of the few people who has been in the company longer than a few months. She is in her thirties, heavily pregnant, and from Shetland. Helen talks us through the process:

*When booking viewings, we must ask the prospective tenant questions to check they are eligible. Ask if they are working or in receipt of benefits. If they’re in receipt of*
benefits, you can work out their affordability based upon who is moving into the property. If they’re working, you can do a quick calculation to let them know if they have the affordability. Monthly rent times thirty should be equal to or less than their salary. There are problems in some cases, for example, they might have no children just now, but they could have them later if they’re trying to gain custody of them, but the eligibility criteria for housing benefit will be based on their situation now. We need to make sure that the rent is not unmanageable for them. People sometimes get angry with us due to these restrictions. Or they might see the property as a way to get access to their children.

Everyone sits in silence, looking in Helen’s direction, nodding occasionally and perhaps moving their swivel chairs slightly from side to side. I sit with my notebook writing down Helen’s words as near to verbatim as possible:

*Once you have established their affordability, you can move onto the next stage. Tell the applicant that they must have all the required documents prior to viewing. Copies of their last two months’ bank account statements, proof of income – the last two months’ worth of payslips if they’re working, copies of all their benefit award letters if they’re on benefits. We also require a copy of their photo ID. Stress that they must bring all these documents to the viewing. If they tell you they don’t have the documents, advise the applicant to get on the phone and request copies and to call us back when they have them all. We help tenants set up housing benefit. We must ask whether any children over sixteen are in education, working or on benefits. Once the applicant confirms they have all the required documents, how many bedrooms they need and the affordability, then you can book them a viewing.*

This is a lot of information to take in. I am taking notes because that is what I do, but I am struggling to keep up. Glancing around, I see some mildly confused faces. Helen then swivels round to her computer to demonstrate how to book a viewing on *Veco*, the property management software. Unfortunately, I cannot see what she is doing from where I am sitting, and neither can many others as about ten of us are huddled around one computer. Helen continues to explain what she is doing:

*Select the property the applicant wants to view form the ‘available properties’ on Veco. Open the calendar on the property page to see if we have any viewings already in the diary. If there are any viewings already booked, and space is
available, add another appointment. We carry out eight viewings at any one time – four at the same time, followed by another four viewings fifteen minutes later. The first four appointments should be booked for an hour, with the following four booked for forty-five minutes. If there’s no viewing booked yet, check the ‘Marketing Letting Details’ page and check the ‘Viewing Arrangements’ to see how we get access to property for the viewings. If it says ‘we have keys’, we can go ahead and book a viewing. Rule of thumb is, we need to get all our properties let so book a viewing for a-s-a-p. Add the appointment time in the Property Manager’s diary. Now complete the ‘Applicant Record’ form, adding the property address, applicant name and telephone number to the appointment. Advise the applicant that they must call on the morning of the appointment between 9.30 and 10 am to confirm they will be attending. Then finally, give them the full address.

I am somewhat relieved that I will not have to do this myself as I think I would struggle to remember the full process. Fortunately, the handout explains all these steps – though without screenshots – so I will have the opportunity to revisit it later.

The two groups change over. We move to the other side of the office, and gather round Ellie, the Customer Support Manager, who is going to show us how to log a repair. Ellie begins with an introductory spiel:

When logging a repair, we should let the tenant speak and try not to interrupt. What they think is wrong isn’t necessarily true, but there is always a backstory. We need to determine liability, and asking how and why they think the damage has occurred can give an indication of this. If a contractor needs to go in, ask if they are happy for us to let them in with keys. If so, jump for joy. If it’s the tenants’ responsibility, we try to take a full payment prior to the repair, but if not, we put in a payment plan. The reality though is that nine times out of ten, we never get the money back. We need to manage expectations in the timing. Advise them whether it is urgent or non-urgent, and what this means for the time scale. ‘Urgent’ means it should be made safe within twenty-four hours, but not necessarily fixed. ‘Non-urgent’ means a member of the Customer Support Team will deal with it within twenty-four hours.

Ellie is originally from the Scottish Borders, but has spent the past fifteen years in London working in fashion design, having only recently moved to Edinburgh and begun work in property management. She demonstrates how to log the repair on Veco, which
contains fields for all the relevant details, such as ‘Address’, ‘Date’, ‘Status’, ‘Priority’, and ‘Descriptive Notes’. Most of us still cannot really get a clear view. She apparently inputs some sample notes into the appropriate field, and, helpfully, slowly reads aloud as she does so: ‘Took… info… from… tenant… advised… washing… machine… out… of… use… as… leaking… etc.’

‘It’s really important to log what you’ve asked them to do,’ Ellie concludes, ‘as this switches the liability. Ask as many questions as you can. With electric showers, for example, this can help determine whether we need a plumber or an electrician.’

The training session finishes and people return to their usual positions.

**Documenting Access**

The previous chapter focused on the ways in which Property Managers facilitate relations between landlords, tenants, contractors and themselves, and how breakdowns in these relations can sometimes lead to difficulties with physical access to property. Not only do landlords and letting agents have to gain access to property from tenants, however; tenants also gain access to property from landlords, and contractors – plumbers, electricians, joiners, pest controllers and so forth – gain access from both. A key role of Property Managers, and indeed property management, therefore, is to facilitate the gaining of access. The work of Property Managers at Almond and Thompson, however, is supported by members of the office-based teams, as gleaned from the training session described above. How, then, do they contribute to the facilitation of access?

Weber ([1924] 1978: 957) famously argues that ‘[t]he management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the “files”), which are preserved in their original or draft form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a “public” office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, make up a “bureau”’. We have already encountered formalised documents as technologies of property management for Property Managers, driving their inspections of both let and void properties in the field. For office-based staff, engagement with documents takes the centre stage in their work. If, as Weber says, modern office management is based upon documents, what is the role of documents
within the office-based side of property management?

Riles (1998: 378) argues that documents should be understood as ‘aesthetic objects’ rather than merely as ‘instruments of political or ideological control’. Whilst I do not dwell on the visual form of documents to the same extent as Riles, not least because my informants here are not directly involved in their design, this is nonetheless the approach that I broadly adopt here. Documents within Almond and Thompson Edinburgh do not convey ‘transparent meaning’ (Riles 1998: 386) that facilitates property relations and property management; they directly contribute to the creation and constitution of both of the management of property relations and of the property relations themselves. The question to ask, therefore, is how.

The remainder of this chapter is split into two principal sections. First, we encounter the Customer Support Team, who support Property Managers by activities such as those encountered in the training session, amongst others. Second, we meet the Property Management Co-ordinators, whose responsibility it is to conduct background checks on prospective tenants based upon documentary evidence. The core theme is that documents and bureaucratic procedures are mobilised to determine who may be granted access to property, and to what end, but that procedures are not merely processual, and documents are not merely signifiers. Rather, both are technologies of property management, the usage of which demand ethical reflection and deliberation.

**Customer Support**

For the rest of the day, I am shadowing the Customer Support Team, who sit by the main entrance to the office. The first time I came into the office, before formally starting fieldwork, there was a separate reception desk here, but now the Customer Support Team have to cover this role between them. There are four desktop computers around a square table, though only two are in use today – one by Beatrice and one by Vanessa. Ellie, whom we met earlier, sits at the head of the table with a laptop.

Beatrice is in her early twenties, tall with long dark hair, and is originally from southern England. She is wearing tall, wide-calf brown-leather boots, dark woollen tights, a short bright-yellow pleated skirt, white blouse and black suit-jacket. Initially, I sit with her.
‘I’ve only been here since July, and I’ve had literally no training,’ she explains, matter-of-factly, with a slight eye roll. ‘I graduated from Edinburgh University, came here as a temp and then got made permanent.’

Beatrice immediately returns to work. Despite her claimed lack of training, I am struck by how she manages a system as apparently complex as Veco so smoothly, with seemingly effortless facility. Numerous desktop windows are open at any one time, and the telephones ring almost constantly.

I had not until now appreciated just how many layers of data and administration are contained within Veco – details about properties, landlords and tenants. It occurs to me at this point that every property, every landlord and every tenant has, in a sense, a story recorded on the system.

The telephone rings. After five or so seconds, Beatrice picks it up.

‘Good morning Almond and Thompson, Beatrice speaking, how can I help you?’

Securing the telephone receiver between her left ear and shoulder, Beatrice clicks on ‘Actions’ on the menu bar and selects ‘Property Finder’. A new window opens, containing a search box at the top, and a long list of addresses in a box below with a scrollbar to the right. She begins typing. ‘2’. The list still extends beyond the box, but all addresses now begin with ‘2’. She then adds ‘6’. The list visibly shortens to all addresses starting with ‘26’. As she continues, typing ‘Sighthill’, the list further shortens until only ‘26 Sighthill Terrace’ remains. She clicks on it, and a window entitled ‘Property Details’ opens.

Across the top of the window, immediately beneath the menu bar, are a series of tabs: ‘Main Details’, ‘Marketing Lettings Details’, ‘Marketing Sales Details’, ‘Marketing Descriptions’, ‘Distribution’, ‘Auction Details’, ‘Photos’, ‘Calendar’, ‘Market Appraisals’, ‘Security’, ‘Financial Details’, ‘Important Dates’ – there are more to be accessed via toggle buttons that I am unable to see. Beatrice immediately clicks on the ‘Calendar’, looks at something, and frowns. I am unsure precisely what it is that she is looking at, as this process is all so rapid, so mechanical.

‘I’m sorry, but there aren’t any more viewings left on that property at the moment,’ she says down the telephone. We don’t schedule any more viewings for a property once we’ve had five or more applicants, but we can put you on the waiting list if you like? … Are you working or in receipt of benefits? … What is your salary?’

Beatrice opens the Windows calculator application, and multiplies 520 by 30, giving
15,600. Satisfactory, apparently.

‘Can I take your name and contact telephone number?’

Beatrice then adds a man’s name and telephone number to a list, which already contains six or seven names.

‘We’ll get back to you if none of the current applicants are successful. Were there any other properties you were interested in?’

There’s a pause of about thirty seconds, during which Beatrice tilts her head from side to side, scrunches her mouth and shoots me the odd sideways glance.

‘In theory, no, we don’t accept pets, but sometimes there is flexibility if the landlord is keen to rent the property, so I can ask him if you like? … Tenancies are typically for six months and on a rolling basis after… Okay, thank you very much then… yes, goodbye.’

Beatrice rolls her eyes again. ‘Some people phoning feel the need to give their life story. I also find it hard to speak to people with limited English. I’m worried I appear frustrated or patronising. The rental process is complicated, and I often get frustrated with people who struggle to understand my explanations. Sometimes people get frustrated by the no-more-viewings-after-five-applicants thing, but it’s partly for convenience and partly so we don’t give them false hope.’

I sit watching Beatrice’s activities on the computer. Emails are read and replied to. The mouse is clicked. Windows open and close rapidly. Tabs are switched. Details are input into forms. Fingers fly over the keyboard. At this stage, I have little idea precisely what she is doing much of the time. Responding to email enquiries seems straightforward enough, but the administration entails a large number of technical terms that I do not yet understand. The rapid completion of the tasks also renders the process hard to follow, and I hesitate to distract Beatrice by asking lots of questions. For someone who has had ‘literally had no training’, I am impressed.

‘Gah!’ Beatrice bangs her fist on the desk. ‘Sorry I’m not really talking to you, I’m just getting really stressed right now. Last Thursday, I was up until midnight finishing all this stuff off at home.’

The entrance buzzer rings. Beatrice leaps out of her seat, thunders over to the office entrance, and picks up the receiver.

‘Almond and Thompson! … Third floor.’

She sits back down and returns her gaze to the computer screen. A minute or so later,
a man, aged perhaps in his mid-thirties, wearing a black leather jacket, enters the office carrying a bundle of papers. Beatrice turns towards him.

‘Good morning, how can I help you?’

‘I’ve brought my application form and payslips,’ he answers in a Polish accent.

‘Great.’ Beatrice briefly scans the application form. ‘Just take a seat there,’ indicating the sofa adjacent to the door, ‘and Andy will be with you shortly.’ She darts over towards Andy’s desk further back in the office, and returns a few seconds later. The man sits down to wait.

The telephone rings again. ‘Good morning Almond and Thompson, Beatrice speaking, how can I help you? … I’m sorry, but the Property Manager is not available at the moment. Can I take your name and contact telephone number and ask him to call you back?’ Beatrice has a clear formula for talking on the telephone. She uses substantially the same words each time, and has a predictable stress and intonation.

I continue observing Beatrice’s activities until she suggests that I go to have my lunch. I sit alone at one of the tables in the kitchenette area, contemplating the office environment while eating my sandwiches. Most people are sitting working on their computers. Tessa is in a meeting with Kirsty in one of the glass offices. Andy rummages around in one of the key cabinets, before leaving the office in his coat, presumably for the field. The telephones continue to ring. A woman is standing at the printer. The entrance buzzer rings, which Beatrice once again answers. A man enters and is told by Beatrice to take a seat. It is not noisy, but there is a constant murmur of voices and machines, including the sound of the air conditioning. I consider putting my coat on, but think better of it. After making myself another cup of instant coffee, I sit idly perusing the Vogue magazine that happens to be lying on the table.

After lunch, Beatrice suggests that I might want to sit with Vanessa for a while, and I agree. Vanessa is about the same age as Beatrice, and smaller, with shoulder-length blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. She grew up in Edinburgh, and had previously worked as a cleaner in this very office before being employed in Customer Support. She is currently in the process of writing an email. Unlike Beatrice, Vanessa talks me through what she is doing.

‘The repairs timetable is five days for urgent non-emergency repairs, which can upset tenants,’ she explains matter-of-factly. ‘We must contact the landlord first and then
arrange the contractors. But this landlord’s done a bunk.’

‘Done a bunk?’ I ask.

‘Done a bunk. His house has been repossessed and the tenant has been served an eviction notice. We need to carry out urgent repairs to the heating, but he’s not replying. So I’m thinking the property manager should be able to bypass the landlord and send the contractors in.’

‘Why do you need the landlord’s permission?’ I ask.

‘It’s to determine whether they’d prefer to use their own contractors. In this case, it’s not an emergency, but we canna just leave it in January if the heating’s no working and the tenant’s still there.’

Vanessa continues typing her email. It appears to be a last-ditch attempt at contacting the landlord.

‘Tenants are often a bit of a pain too though,’ she continues as she types. ‘They change their minds, they phone constantly, they re-interpret, they get rattty. Some are even mental.’

‘Mental in what way?’ I ask.

‘One tenant took us all the way to the ombudsman because we’d given his mobile number to Argos so they could deliver a new mattress. He went ballistic. In this situation, we have to be like the third wheel, going between the tenant and both the landlord and any contractors or deliveries, which frustrates people on all sides.’

‘There’s the issue of dealing with tenants with special needs,’ Ellie chimes in – she’s been sat at the end of her table, working quietly on her laptop. ‘They can have problems with the property that throw them off entirely – things that would be minor issues to you or me are a big deal to them. Yesterday, a tenant said he’d had to move out of the property as the shower and oven were broken, even though he still had a bath and a hob. His support worker had played a role in encouraging him not to pay rent. I heard him speak on the phone for over an hour, hearing his backstory – he’d also had his fridge cleaned, but it was still slightly dirty. Hearing him, you might think the property was uninhabitable, but in reality, the problems are minor. So it’s about getting the balance right.’

Having sent her email, Vanessa switches to the ‘Property Details’ page on Veco in order to update the repair log. On this occasion, I get a better look at the content under the ‘Main Details’ tab. It consists of a form with a long list of fields: ‘Reference’, ‘Portfolio Reference’, ‘Property Status’, ‘Property Type’, ‘Property Category’, ‘Address’,


The buzzer rings again, and Beatrice immediately jumps out of her seat and darts over to the receiver in an identical manner to previously. ‘Almond and Thompson… third floor.’

A minute later, three women plus a baby in a pushchair enter through the main door. They are all casually dressed with shoulder-length dyed-blonde hair, though apparently representing three generations – one in her early twenties with the pushchair, one perhaps twenty years older, and the other likely in her sixties. Daughter, mother and grandmother?

‘My daughter’s got mushrooms growing in her flat,’ asserts the middle woman to Beatrice. ‘Environmental Health are coming tomorrow as the repairs have no been carried out. We’ve been calling over and over again, but we keep getting told that the landlord’s gonnae dae [going to do] the repairs himsel [himself].’

Beatrice pays attention to the story, asks some relevant questions – the flat is in Dalkeith – asks them to take a seat, and heads over to the area of the office where the Property Managers sit. The three women sit down awkwardly and proceed to chat amongst themselves. Beatrice returns to her desk and continues work.

Vanessa, meanwhile, is looking at ‘Created Work Orders’ on Veco. It is an administrative log that allows for the monitoring of the length of time that it takes to respond to and complete repairs.

‘A C1 repair will automatically create a to-be-completed-by time twenty-four hours later,’ Vanessa explains, ‘but we should really be sending somebody out within three
I nod without really understanding what a ‘C1 repair’ is.

‘Otherwise, it’ll probably be a C2 repair. Contractors must be given a completion time a day before it actually needs done, as this gives us a bit of slippage,’ she continues. ‘But if completions are not happening within the required time frame, the solution will be to tell contractors that other people will be used in the future.’

I nod. C1 repairs are urgent. C2 repairs are not.

‘The first step though is always to gain access from the tenant and the landlord,’ she continues. ‘Chances are, at this time of the day, neither will be in, so we can log any attempts to contact them by phone, text or email.’

‘Part of the problem with repairs is that tenants are sometimes confused about who to contact,’ Ellie chimes in again. ‘I’ve just been on the phone to a tenant telling us the property was uninhabitable. It’s been damp since they’d moved in, there’s an open vent next to the sewer and a rat infestation. They’d been in contact with the landlord in the past as he’d visited them a few times, but they’d no reported anything to us. We canna ensure that correct procedures are followed if they dinna tell us.’

The three women in the seating area with the baby chat amongst themselves. They seem marginally more agitated than before.

The telephone rings. ‘Good afternoon Almond and Thompson, Vanessa speaking, how can I help you?’

I cannot guess much of what this conversation is about as Vanessa’s responses are limited largely to ‘right’ and ‘hmm’. While still on the phone, she uses the Property Finder to search for an address in Musselburgh, opens the appropriate Property Details page and, scanning across the tabs at the top of the window, scrolls along to find one entitled ‘Works Orders’, which she selects. My attention is drawn to a large text box entitled ‘Notes’, the contents of which reads: 13/1/15 Tenant’s boiler broken. She has two young children and asthma. Claimed someone from Scottish Gas came to look at boiler 12/1/15 who declared non-repairable and left reference number. Need to retrieve details from Scottish Gas to progress with repairs with landlord. Phoned Scottish Gas, but no record of visit.

‘There seems to have been an overall breakdown in communication,’ Vanessa says to whomever is on the other end of the phone. ‘We’ll speak to the tenant again, and we might have to get Scottish Gas to come back out … okay, thanks then, bye.’
Vanessa adds the following to the Notes: *Tenant phoned East Lothian Council, who contacted us directly. Turns out tenant got Scottish Gas to come out herself, but this not included under landlord cover.*

‘See what we mean about tenants being unsure about who to contact?’ Vanessa comments.

The three women with the baby are clearly getting frustrated now. Fortunately, Tim, their property manager, comes over.

‘There’s mushrooms growing in my daughter’s flat,’ the middle woman complains again, loudly and briskly. ‘And when that workman came to redo the shower, he put nails and plaster into the washing machine. And now the washing machine’s no working.’

‘Okay, I’m very sorry about all this,’ Tim says, taking out his smartphone. ‘I’ll go out to the property tomorrow to see what’s going on if that’s okay with you?’ He does something with the smartphone for a few seconds. ‘How about eleven in the morning?’

‘Sure,’ the daughter nods.

‘My daughter’s got severe anxiety,’ the mother explains with a distinct sense of urgency as the four of them – including the baby in the pram – head towards the door. ‘She canna get out much so she’s in the house mostly, and she needs me to dae [do] a lot of things for her. So it’s really important it’s all sorted out as soon as possible. It’s been like this for a long time now and she’s been getting very worried about...’

‘Oh absolutely, I understand,’ Tim interjects. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow then!’

**Procedures**

*We canna ensure correct procedures are followed if they dinna tell us.* Those words from Ellie continue to ring in my head, as to my mind at least, they would appear to sum up so much of what the Customer Support Team is about. Customer Support Advisors are less personally involved than Property Managers with tenants, landlords and properties, but they facilitate interaction between them by being the first port-of-call for any contact to the company, and through the following of certain bureaucratic procedures.

In shadowing Beatrice and Vanessa, what stands out to me is the extent to which data is logged. When prospective tenants telephone to arrange a viewing, their interest is
checked against existing viewers and applicants, and then recorded, either on the viewings calendar or on the waiting list. When a tenant telephones or emails to report something that needs to be repaired, the Customer Support Advisor asks multiple questions in order to fulfil the repair log’s requirements. Progress is tracked and data is updated accordingly with information about dates, contractors and works carried out, which are then retained for future reference. Each property, in a sense, has its own documented story that is to be interpreted and reconstructed from the available textual data.

At least as significant, however, is their facilitation of gaining access. Indeed, it is clear to me that much of their work is concerned with obtaining permission from the relevant people for a particular person to access a property. When a tenant reports a problem with the property, permission must be sought from the landlord in order to carry out the repair in case they wish to handle it themselves. Once this permission has been granted, it is necessary to gain permission from the tenant to allow the contractor access to the property in case they are not in. If they refuse, the Customer Support Advisor will ask them to make sure that they are in when the contractor arrives. Frequently, they refuse, but are then not in, and, as a result, access is denied, time is wasted, and the cycle begins again. In exceptional circumstances, however, the standard procedures may be bypassed. Where a landlord has ‘done a bunk’, as Vanessa put it, the Property Manager is able to authorise contractors to carry out repairs without the landlord’s permission after giving a final warning. Vanessa’s description of their role as sometimes like a ‘third wheel’ between tenant and landlord offers something of a counterpoint to David’s aim to be the ‘meat in the sandwich’ between them. If the latter characterisation is the ideal, then the former may well be closer to the reality at least some of the time.

More crucially, however, is that the following of procedures is neither wholly predetermined nor merely instrumental. Rather, action, as I argued in the previous chapter, demands ethical judgment. Procedure, to return once again to Lambek (2010), amounts to the criteria in relation to which practice is understood. The relevance of procedure is continually subject to judgment. When repairs are logged, for instance, the ‘procedure’ is always to ‘determine liability’ – a subjective if procedure-driven ethical judgment that is deemed more reliable with the accretion of further specific details, all of which are to be recorded for future reference and potential re-evaluation. Procedure endeavours to reduce the ‘inconsistencies’ that Tessa, the Director, informed us at the start of the training.
session that landlords had complained about, but ultimately, to borrow the frame of analysis of Latour (2005), actors within property management are mediators, not mere intermediaries. That is to say, they do not simply process relations between tenants, landlords and property by the passing on of information, documents, money and so forth; their facilitation of these relations, and the judgments, including ethical judgments, that it demands, contributes to them in their own way.

The logging of data into formalised documents is central to the work of Customer Support Advisors. Reed (2006) argues, in the context of a prison in Papua New Guinea, that both prisoners and wardens perceive that agency lies, at least to some extent, with prison documents, at least in the sense that the practice of form-filling entails responses to pre-specified criteria. Here likewise, for Customer Support Advisors, much as with Property Managers, pre-existing documents drive their observations and questions. Less clear at this stage, however, is the role that the reading of documents has in the process of property management. The following section shifts focus to another character – the Property Management Co-ordinator – to consider one scenario in which this comes into play.

**Background Checks**

I am sitting with Alison at her desk. Like most staff members, she has joined the company within the past couple of months, and her primary job-title is ‘Tenancy Sustainment Advisor’. Although she grew up in Niddrie – a council estate in the south east of Edinburgh – she has spent the past twenty-six years working in ‘tenancy sustainment’ in and around Bristol, initially in the voluntary sector, though mostly for local government. She moved back to Edinburgh last year and, after a period of temping, found this job via an employment agency. It is her first time working for a private letting agency, but as it ‘ticked all the right boxes’ and had a ‘decent salary’, she went for it.

Alison has been keener to talk to me than most others in the office, and has frequently offered to help with any questions when I have chatted casually with her in the kitchenette. She is in her early fifties, has long, straight, dyed-black hair, and is wearing large square black and gold-plated stud earrings.
Alison’s role as a Tenancy Sustainment Advisor will be explored in the following chapter. For the equivalent of two days a week, however, her job title is ‘Property Management Co-ordinator’, which in this instance means that she is responsible for carrying out background checks on prospective tenants. This is her task this morning. A pile of A4 envelopes sit before her on her desk. Alison takes the top envelope, opens it, and takes out a series of documents: a tenancy application form, a passport photocopy, bank statements, and payslips, all pertaining to a certain Ms Sophie Smith.

Alison begins by checking that the applicant’s personal details on the application form – name, nationality and date of birth – match those on her passport photocopy. Sophie is British, female, and was born on 17th July 1991. So far, so good. Alison continues skimming over the application form: Sophie is applying as a single occupant for a one-bedroomed flat on West Pilton Gardens – yes, that road again – and wants to move in on 1st February. She has lived with her mother on Granton Terrace for the past seven years.

Alison stops, stares at the section entitled ‘Income’, and frowns. Her employment details strike me as uncontroversial: she works three days a week in a ScotMid shop and earns £609.23 per month. Under the heading ‘Income from any other source’, however, is a brief statement from Sophie: ‘My grandmother gives me her weekly Attendance Allowance of £55.10.’

‘That’s funny,’ Alison comments with raised eyebrows. ‘That’s not really what Attendance Allowance is meant to be for…’

‘What is it meant to be for then?’ I ask.

‘My mother has Attendance Allowance, and it’s to cover small additional care costs. It’s not really meant to be something you just give to a relative. It might be that she’s going to help her grannie every day, but there’s always a danger of families putting pressure on their elderly relatives over this sort of thing. We might have to flag it up, but let’s get on with the background checks first.’

Alison opens Internet Explorer and accesses ‘ECCO’ on the City of Edinburgh Council’s website. ‘ECCO’ stands for the Edinburgh Common Client Outcomes monitoring system.

‘The first step is an ECCO check,’ Alison explains. ‘This tells us if the applicant has had any anti-social behaviour orders in the past six months, or if they’ve had any contact with social services – like, if they’ve maybe gone to them for advice with rent arrears. It
only works if they’ve lived continuously in Edinburgh during that time, but it’s something.’

Alison types in Sophie’s name and date of birth into the short form on the website and presses enter. Nothing comes up. Good. Next, she accesses the Experian CreditExpert website, logs on, selects the ‘Tenant Checks’ tab, and then clicks on ‘Instant Report’. In the subsequent form, she enters Sophie’s name, date of birth, National Insurance number and current address, and then clicks ‘Go’.

‘It’s all to do with affordability,’ Alison explains, as we wait for the online credit check to process. ‘Not to say that we’re not going to offer them a property, because if you’re bankrupt, it’s only for a year, and then you can wipe the slate clean and start again. So we won’t hold that against people, but if they haven’t told us in the first instance, we might ask, what else are they not telling us?’

The report loads. Alison’s eyes widen. Sophie apparently only moved to Granton Terrace three months ago, having spent the previous two years at an address in Restalrig.

‘Right! So she’s shafting her grannie and lying about her address history because she’s going to get a bad reference,’ Alison sums up in a slightly amused tone. We’ll have to query this, but let’s continue with the affordability check for now.

Alison opens a multi-coloured Excel spreadsheet. It contains fields entitled ‘Number of Bedrooms’, ‘Number of Tenants’, ‘Monthly Rent’, ‘Monthly Wage’, a long list of different benefits and tax credits, plus another for ‘Any Additional Income’. She explains the process:

*We’re putting in all the benefits, tax credits, that sort of thing, just so they know if they’ve got a shortfall, because if they’re gonna claim some housing benefit, they might have a shortfall of say £40 a week, which they have to be told right at the beginning, otherwise it’ll create rent arrears, which is where tenancy sustainment comes in, because if we don’t tell them right at the beginning, and they go in thinking they’re gonna get full rent and they don’t, then three, four or five weeks down the line and they’ve got nearly £200 rent arrears, then that’s impacting upon their ability to sustain the tenancy.*

Alison inputs ‘1’ into ‘Number of Tenants’, ‘1’ into ‘Number of Bedrooms’, ‘£450.00’ into ‘Monthly Rent’, ‘£609.23’ into ‘Monthly Wage’, and ‘£55.10’ into ‘Any Additional Income’.
The spreadsheet automatically produces some new figures at the bottom. ‘£273.79’ has appeared in the cell next to ‘Housing Benefit Entitlement’; ‘£176.21’ next to ‘Shortfall’; and ‘£938.12’ next to ‘Total Income’. At the very bottom, ‘£312.71’ has appeared in the cell entitled ‘Affordability’, which has turned red. Alison comments:

_Nope, she’s not going to be able to afford this. Monthly income must be at least rent times three, and she’s under. She’s entitled to £273.79 per month in housing benefit, but she’ll have a shortfall of £176.21 that she’d have to pay herself. That’s the thing with applying for a one-bed as a single applicant – it works out more expensive, and she’s not entitled to any child benefits either as she has no children. We might be able to do a bit of income maximisation, but otherwise, it’ll probably be a case of pointing her towards a cheaper property when one comes up._

‘So is that then end for her now?’ I ask. Alison replies:

_No, we’ll still try to obtain a reference for her so that they’re on record in case she wants to apply for another property. Ideally, we want the previous landlords or letting agents. Sophie’s saying she’s been staying with her mother for the past seven years, which is no good as it’s family, but as I say, I reckon she’s been renting that flat at Restalrig, so I’ll have to try to track the agent or landlord down._

‘Do you get many negative references?’ I ask. Alison responds:

_I’d say probably five or ten percent of the one’s I’ve done since I’ve been here have been negative, and even then if you pick it apart and say, okay, let’s speak to this person, then most of the time it’s not as bad as it actually looks. It’s usually down to them needing support. Something’s happened because there were support needs that were not identified. Most of the time it’s a rent arrears situation and it’s usually down to the benefit cap, you know, they didn’t sign on, they got sanctioned. Nobody’s perfect, and it’s tough, especially if you’re in receipt of benefits as they muck people about a lot of the time, and it’s very rare in my experience – and I’ve done this a long time – that a benefit claim is skipping through the daisies. Most people, there’s always some problem going on. It can cause a lot of anxiety for the tenant._

‘And what do you do if you find that they are claiming benefits that they’re not entitled to?’ I ask. Again, my short question leads to a detailed answer:

_Well, as a former council officer, it was always drummed into us, you know, if you
see anything that seems suspicious, somebody’s committing benefit fraud or something then you need to alert us straight away. It’s almost like a treaty, and obviously, conflict of interest, I’ll speak to them first, but I’ll say to them, you sign kind of an agreement that if you told us anything then we’d have to pass it on. So I’ll give them a chance to make that call, and if not, I’ll make it for them. I’m happy for them to come here and help them do it, because I wouldn’t want them to get into any major trouble, and it’s for our benefit as well as if we’re going to house them and there’s a discrepancy with their income, we might not get our rent.

Alison clearly knows her stuff. I ask short questions, and almost invariably get a long flowing discourse in response that draws upon her extensive experience of working in the housing sector. I ask Alison how much influence she has in the final process of selecting and approving tenants:

Well obviously I’ll discuss, I’ve heard from this person, I’ve met that person, they’re in temporary accommodation, they’re pretty much homeless, and obviously if everything’s all good, then it’s a favourite myself because obviously it’s all part of what we do. I just had a conversation earlier with the Director about this because, you know, it’s all why RightLet was established in the first place – it’s about supporting people into housing who are unable either to get a deposit, or if you’re in receipt of benefits, most private landlords don’t want to touch you. So that’s why we’re very popular with people who don’t work.

Alison now turns to Veco, which is already open in the background. She clicks on ‘Actions’ on the menu bar and selects ‘Quick Lettings Applicant’. The window that appears is divided into two sections: a section entitled ‘Search’ above, and a section entitled ‘Applicant Details’ below.

‘We now need to find out if we already have Sophie registered with us,’ Alison explains as she types ‘Smith’ into the field marked ‘Surname’ in the ‘Search’ section and presses enter. Predictably, numerous Smiths appear on the list immediately below. However, there is no Sophie Smith.

‘Right, so we’ll need to register her then,’ Alison says. She begins to fill in the ‘Applicant Details’ form on the same window. Down the left hand side are fields entitled ‘Reference’, ‘Title’, ‘First Name’, ‘Other Names’, ‘Surname’, ‘Address’, ‘Communication Type 1’, ‘Communications 1’, ‘Communication Type 2’,
‘Communications 2’, ‘Registering Office’ and ‘Responsibility Of’. The Reference number has been generated automatically, and the form already indicates that the Registering Office is ‘Edinburgh’, and that this applicant is the responsibility of ‘Alison Taylor’. After filling in Sophie’s names and address, her email address and telephone number are put into the Communications fields.

Down the right hand side are fields entitled ‘Applicant Type’, ‘Property Type’, ‘Furnished’, ‘Budget per week’, ‘Budget per month’, ‘Rent Period’, ‘Min Bedrooms’ and ‘Max Bedrooms’, followed by a large text box for ‘Notes’. Alison proceeds to fill this out too. The ‘Applicant Type’ is ‘Single’ and the ‘Property Type’ is ‘Flat’. Furnished? ‘No’. Budget per month is ‘£312.71’ as per the affordability check. The Rent Period is ‘per month’ – this cannot be modified on the system – and the minimum and maximum bedrooms are both ‘1’.

Alison clicks ‘Save’ at the bottom. ‘Even if we don’t offer her a property just now, keeping her on file might be useful if she applies again at a later date,’ she explains as she puts the papers back into the envelope and puts the envelope to one side. ‘I’ve got to head off to the Drumbrae Library just now to hold one of my surgeries. You’d be very welcome to come along one of the days if you wanted. But do you want to sit with Helen just now?’

Alison departs, and I shuffle on my swivel chair over to where Helen is sitting, which is just next to Alison’s desk. As another Property Management Co-ordinator, Helen is also responsible for carrying out background checks on prospective tenants, but unlike Alison, it is her only role within the company. She has just begun the process with new prospective tenants – a Mr Daniel Johnstone and a Ms Emma Wright, applying as a couple. Their application form, passport photocopies, bank statements and benefit award letters are all laid out in front of her.

Helen repeats the same process that Alison carried out above: ECCO check, credit check and affordability check. On this occasion, there is nothing suspicious.

‘Well that’s all exemplary,’ Helen concludes. She opens the ‘Quick Lettings Applicant’ window and searches for ‘Johnstone’. Daniel Johnstone appears on the list. Helen clicks on his name, which opens another window containing a range of personal details. The date of birth and the National Insurance number both match.

‘Interesting,’ Helen comments. ‘So it looks like he was a tenant with us about four years ago, but with a different partner… he didn’t mention that! And they’ve still got rent
arrears from when they moved out in December 2010… didn’t mention that either! Okay, well we can add his current partner to the database, but let’s see what else there is…”

Helen selects the tab entitled ‘References’, and finds a link to a PDF file, which she opens. It’s a reference letter from a previous landlord dating back from when Daniel and his ex-partner had first become tenants. The landlord’s letter explained that they were aware of complaints from neighbours, an arrest for assault, and that they had also heard of suspected drug dealing from the property.

‘Ooh,’ Helen says as she looks over the letter. ‘Well it seems like we accepted them before… but you wouldn’t have suspected any of that from the ECCO, credit and affordability checks. Just goes to show. Not to say we won’t offer them the property, but we should probably query it to make sure.’

**Reading for Character**

It strikes me, then, that ‘property management’ is not simply concerned with properties; it also entails the management of persons. Tenants, even potential tenants, are managed by the formalised system, as a log of their interactions with Almond and Thompson is held indefinitely for future reference. Indeed, data gathered and held on prospective tenants has implications for gaining access. To be considered for access to a property, prospective tenants have to pass a series of objective and subjective tests. If Alison or Helen is satisfied with an applicant, their details are passed to the Property Manager of the property for which they have applied. It is then ultimately up to the landlord to approve any new tenants. If there are multiple suitably qualified tenants, then the Property Manager will present the landlord with a choice. The process of tenant recruitment, then, has certain similarities with the processes of employee recruitment in Britain: applications are submitted, appropriate documents are provided, character references are read, background checks are carried out, and then eventually, if successful during the initial screening, the candidate is met by the hiring manager before a final decision is made. To borrow the concept of ‘human resource management’, itself strongly linked to recruitment at least amongst larger employers in Britain and beyond, it may be noted that prospective tenants are, in a sense, given the careful management and storage of their data, treated as
a resource by Almond and Thompson.

Property Management Co-ordinators, as we see here, have a number of tools available to them in carrying out background checks, and they are not necessarily limited to the data that applicants present to them as part of their current application. At least as significant, however, is the way in which their existing specialist knowledge enables them to draw conclusions that may seem opaque to those on the outside. How did Alison conclude that Sophie was ‘shafting her grannie’? Ultimately, through her extensive experience of tenancy matters through her work in the voluntary, public and now private sectors in both Edinburgh and Bristol, she has seen enough comparable cases to suspect certain things. Consequently, she and others are able to construct a character, a story and a biography of a person whom they have never met, and may never meet, based upon a series of documents, a set of technical tools, and a wider background knowledge of the sector.

Not only do Alison and Helen construct characters of prospective tenants based upon documentary evidence; prospective tenants supply characters of themselves as part of the application process. One of the required documents is even called a ‘character reference’. To what extent can the character represent the person? Referring to the documentary practices of neonatal intensive care units in the United States, Heimer (2006: 116) argues that documents ‘bolster the construction of biography—not just by supplying evidence of the child’s fragility or the nature of the illness, but also by offering a text from which glimmers of personality and relationship can be extracted’ – and we see Alison in particular constructing biography and personality of a prospective tenant here from the available documents. Equally, I am struck by the argument put forward by Jacob (2007: 250) with regards to hospital consent forms in both the United States and Israel, which is that ‘the consent form neither represents nor reflects the person who signs it but is rather an alternative term for the person herself’ that is ‘constituted and preserved by legal and bureaucratic documentary proceedings’. I contend that here, too, the character of the prospective tenant has, in a sense, a life of its own apart from the person who submitted the documentation from which it is derived. Jacob asserts that ‘patients understood that the agency sought after by the hospital did not lie with them but with the technology of the filled consent form’ (Jacob 2007: 257). Likewise, agency in the tenancy application process may appear to lie with the required documentation and numeric tools, regardless
of what prospective tenants ‘understood’ upon their submission in this instance, as it is via these technologies that the initial decision to proceed with an application is made.

That said, to what extent can the documented ‘character’ be separated from the person who has submitted the documents, and about whom additional documents are created? Keane (2016: 107) argues that ‘character is co-constructed by the individual and others’. This co-construction, Keane argues, ‘is likely to draw on what others think they already know—about the individual and his or her type of person’, in which the person’s demeanour can play a part. Reading for character, then, is a co-constructive process that entails value judgments of the applicant’s readable demeanour. By ‘readable demeanour’ here, I include material supplied directly by the applicant, the new forms of knowledge generated by the available technologies based upon material supplied by the applicant, and the character references written by others from their own subjective judgments of the applicant. These documents are, in the words of Riles (2006: 7), ‘artifacts of modern knowledge practices’, as it is through documents that this co-construction of character, prior to meeting in person, is able to take shape.

**Conclusion**

Turning more broadly to the data – characters and profiles – that Almond and Thompson holds on current tenants, former tenants, prospective tenants, former prospective tenants, landlords and properties, how are they mobilised by employees as part of the process of property management? Once again, I am struck by ethnographic parallels from hospitals. Street (2011: 831-2) argues that medical records in a hospital in Papua New Guinea are ‘not a device for moving biomedical work forward towards diagnostic closure; instead, it is a device for holding biomedical knowledge still while allowing multiple pathways for action to proliferate’. Here at Almond and Thompson, whilst certain forms of data lead to mechanically determined outcomes – affordability checks, for instance – much of the held data is similarly what allows for the proliferation of actions between tenants, landlords, properties and employees, such as the arranging of viewings, the signing of tenancy agreements and, eventually, access to property. Data here, ultimately, is mobilised and understood in relation to ethical criteria.
On the subject of ethical criteria, Maurer (2005) argues that Caribbean tax havens have adopted the procedure of ‘due diligence’ to manage risks, both financial and reputational, and compares this to the academic personal review process in universities. The latter in particular is likely to be more familiar to readers and involves, amongst other things, checking for consistency between different documentary forms, and making sure that listed publications actually exist. ‘In the process of review’, Maurer (2005: 489) writes, ‘facts are less important that their ethical warrants’. Likewise, for Caribbean tax havens, ‘[i]n doing due diligence, people are not simply verifying the identity of a client. They are engaging in a form of practice that always has the potential to fold back on itself and is provisional, probabilistic, and open-ended’ (Maurer 2005: 491). At Almond and Thompson, tenants always have the potential to get into rent arrears or cause damages. Background checks, including but not limited to affordability checks, help to determine the likelihood that a tenant will be able to ‘sustain the tenancy’, as Alison put it, and thereby minimise risks for Almond and Thompson. Prospective tenants who do not meet both objective financial criteria and subjective criteria of character are not granted access to property. Ultimately, bureaucratic procedures seek to maintain the financial and reputational stability of the organisation, which are themselves ethical aims and ethical criteria.

The documents produced by Almond and Thompson employees on their past, present and prospective tenants and landlords – and their properties, rented or owned – are collaborative in the sense that their content is ultimately dependent, however partial, on the person – or property – about whom they are written. The narratives and characters constructed by employees through the usage of these documents are, to return to Keane (2016), co-constructions. Does this have implications for the deployment of ethical criteria in relation to, for instance, whether or not a prospective tenant should be deemed suitable? Keane (2016: 92) argues that ethical life is dependent upon intersubjectivity in the sense that it is not purely the result of an individual psychological disposition such as empathy, but is rather ‘built up, reshaped, or undermined, in time, between people […] by means of perceptible material forms such as language, bodily deportment, and so forth’. The documents are, in this sense, parts of the conversations between letting agency employees and their landlords and tenants. As Keane (2016: 109) argues, the devices that govern successful conversation ‘are not merely technical means of traffic control and
establishment’, but also ‘offer affordances that people can draw on as they evaluate one another’ whilst ‘projecting a sense of self and responding to the sense of self projected by others’. The production and interpretation of documents within the Almond and Thompson office, then, is an intersubjective process. Might this process, à la Mattingly (2014), entail a degree of ethical experimentation, given that the participation of decision-making actors is always, ultimately, subjective?

Whilst this chapter has continued in the form of an ethnography of an Edinburgh letting agency, I hope in so doing to have provided an additional ethnographic window into the broader Edinburgh private rented sector: namely, the ways in which office-based practices, especially formalised procedures relating to the production and interpretation of documents, are constitutive of property relations. In this sense, it has further developed the theme of access to consider the ways in which actors beyond the Property Manager find themselves facilitating the relations between tenants and landlords – be it as the ‘meat in the sandwich’ between them, as described in the previous chapter, or as the ‘third wheel’, as described here. Almond and Thompson is, however, a ‘letting agency with a difference’, as the Director put it to me that one time. Stemming from the shift in the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public to the private sectors in recent decades, they have taken on aspects of what might be described as privatised social care as part of their interactions with tenants in particular. Care, then, extends beyond the ‘due diligence’ of Maurer (2005) in terms of the management of the financial and reputational risks of the company and the following of contractual process. The next chapter develops this theme.
Chapter 4: A Positive Caring Approach

Social Work in the Private Rented Sector

It is a Monday morning in late February and I am in the Almond and Thompson office, sitting with Farhad, the Sales Manager. We have just had the weekly Monday Lettings Meeting. It is only for half an hour until Andy, the Property Manager (whom we met in Chapter 1), is ready to go out into the field, so Farhad briefly talks me through what he thinks I ought to know:

*It’s a bit dog-eat-dog in this business. We’re a full management service. Sales view the landlord and the Director as clients. The Property Managers would view both the landlord and the tenant as clients. We also don’t demand exclusivity from landlords, so if we see a flat advertised on a board and it’s still there after a while, we might contact them and give them an offer – and we don’t charge fees up front either. From Sales’ perspective, it’s about offering the landlord the best possible package. For example, landlords pay £25 a year for an out-of-hours service. If tenants have problems after 5pm, their phone calls get redirected to the Almond and Thompson office in London. Most of the time, the problems are insignificant, but tenants often need reassurance and they will send someone out if necessary, so it gives the landlord peace of mind as well.*

**Duties of Care**

Sales view the landlords and the Director as clients. Property Managers view the landlords and tenants as clients. This short exchange with Farhad prompted me to reflect upon the notions of responsibility that obtain between diverse actors within the private rented sector: responsibility towards current and prospective tenants, towards current and prospective landlords, towards the letting agency Director and other colleagues, towards physical property, towards neighbours, towards political and legal institutions, and so
forth. There is not the scope here to trace all the possible associations of responsibility, though certain specific relations come more immediately to the fore.

Let us remind ourselves of the stated objectives of Almond and Thompson – the ‘letting agency with a difference’, as the Director of their Edinburgh office described it to me. As their publicity tells us, they specialise in the provision of ‘affordable housing models’ that ‘truly combine a positive caring approach to all of our clients with the commercial discipline of the private sector’. It is notable from my observations that the majority of properties managed by Almond and Thompson in and around Edinburgh are former council properties that were purchased by their former occupants under the Right to Buy legislation and have now found their way into the private rented sector. It is apparently also the case that many of their tenants are hoping to move into council housing. Indeed, the lack of deposits charged to tenants in practice means that abandonment without notice is common – and the default explanation advanced by Property Managers when this happens is that they have probably obtained a council house.

Thus, there has, in practical terms, been a shift in responsibility in the provision of housing services from public institutions to private organisations. If they ‘combine’ a ‘positive caring approach’ with the ‘commercial discipline’ of the private sector, are we to understand that the private (rented) sector is not ordinarily ‘caring’? And what of ‘commercial discipline’? Is this to be understood in contrast to care – at least until the two are deployed and combined by Almond and Thompson in order to produce a new ‘package’, to use the term that they use amongst themselves to refer to the services that they provide to landlords? With the above in mind, my intention in the remainder of this chapter is to follow the rhetoric and practice of care through two distinct actors within the letting agency: the Property Manager, once again, and the Tenancy Sustainment Advisor.

At this point, I am reminded of a brief conversation I had with Tim, one of the Property Managers we met in Chapter 2, about the ways in which he finds himself having to support his tenants socially. He said that some tenants think of him as ‘like a council social worker’. Although he states that his main priority is towards the property itself, he does end up trying to help tenants where he can, such as by referring them on to the appropriate council services where necessary. In his case, this was in relation to the Private Sector Leasing side of Almond and Thompson, where the letting agency is renting privately-owned property out to council-designated homeless tenants via local
government, but as the remainder of this chapter will illustrate, this experience is not peculiar to it.

Indeed, David, one of the other Property Managers that we met in Chapter 2, who is not involved with Private Sector Leasing, tells a similar story:

*Particularly with the type of tenants we deal with just now, there’s a lot of social factors involved where they might be struggling with money, with health, so I always want to make sure tenants are okay. So, I do feel like I have to be closer to tenants than landlords in terms of the relationship, more in a kind of duty of care responsibility to make sure they’re able to cope and to point them in the right direction if they’re going to fall down. There are people who are more irate than usual, or you can see them getting angry, or there’s some tension building up, so it’s just a case of managing that person at the time, and reassuring them that them things will be done, to calm them down.*

It may be useful to consider this, and the proceeding ethnography, in light of the wider anthropology of care. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the literature is concerned with medicalised care (e.g. Heinemann 2013, 2015) and with domains more conventionally associated with ‘care work’, such as care for the elderly (e.g. Brijnath 2014; Buch 2013, 2014, 2015; Jervis 2001; Livingston 2003; Mazuz 2013; Russell 2001, 2007; Taylor 2008). I am, however, struck by Ibarra’s depiction of ‘emotional proletarians’ in the service sector, defined as ‘workers paid to perform not only routinized instrumental tasks, but also scripted emotional labor’ (Ibarra 2002: 345). Ibarra distinguishes between two categories of ‘emotional proletarian’. On the one hand are those such as ‘fast food servers, waitresses, and flight attendants’ who ‘school the expressions on their faces and modulate their tone of voice, faking feeling’ in order to ‘make customers feel good and produce profits for corporations’. On the other hand are those like the Mexican immigrant women private elder care providers in California in her study, who create their own routines and ‘produce authentic emotion in exchange for a wage’ (Ibarra 2002: 346). The word ‘proletarian’ has economic, social and cultural connotations, at least in Britain, that render it inappropriate for Almond and Thompson employees – indeed, stereotypically, it would be associated far more with many of their tenants whom we have encountered thus far. Perhaps a broader notion of ‘emotional employee’ or, alternatively, a narrower notion of the ‘emotional manager’ would be more suitable here. Nonetheless, I invite the reader to
reflect upon the applicability or otherwise of this broader claim of a distinction between those employed to feign ‘care’ because it is in the interests of the business, and those employees whose work tasks lead to the production of what Ibarra calls ‘authentic emotion’.

Unqualified Social Worker

Andy grabs his jacket from the coat stand and indicates to me that he is ready to go. I thank Farhad and follow suit, grabbing my sandwich from the fridge as we head out through the faux-wood door, down the lift, out of the building and onto the street where Andy’s car is parked. We get into the car and drive off, this time towards the south west of Edinburgh.

‘This guy is a fucking pain,’ he says as he drives with Capital FM on in the background. ‘He was on the phone to me over an hour the other night, until about eleven.’

‘An hour? When you were at home?’ I ask.

‘Aye, he’s always doing it. Constantly. He asks me the same questions that he already kens [knows] the answer to again and again and again. He has my mobile number so he just calls whenever he’s wanting to complain about something. The shower and oven in his flat have broken, and he’s no satisfied with the way his fridge’s been cleaned, so now he’s saying the flat’s uninhabitable. He’s effectively moved out of the property and is threatening to withhold his rent.’

‘Oh him! Customer support folk were dealing with him the other week, I remember. Do you have to speak to them if they call you in the evenings?’

‘I probably shouldna,’ Andy replies, ‘but I feel a duty to my tenants, and I couldna get him to go away. In the end, I telt [told] him I had to go to bed, and he was shocked I wisna just there for him twenty-four seven. I just dinna ken [don’t know] what some folk think.’

‘Christ.’

‘As I say, it’s five percent of tenants that take up ninety-five percent of your time. Most you hardly ever hear fae [from], and would maybe like to hear fae a bit more. But with some, it’s one thing after another. Thing is, I ken he has mental health issues, but I often feel like an unqualified social worker. I ken it’s the nature of our clientele, but we’re no actually trained to deal with this stuff.’
'Is that a common view amongst property managers here?’ I ask.

‘Aye, yeah. Takes so much of your time too, but you have to be prepared to deal with it. And the other thing is, some of these tenants have their own support workers who sometimes contact us too. This guy does. I think the support workers are sometimes egging the tenants on. Like, a tenant has telt their support worker that the flat’s uninhabitable, and then the support worker encourages them to withhold their rent, but they’ve no actually seen the flat for themselves, so they dinna ken if it’s uninhabitable or no.’

We park on one of the side roads in Dalry. This is an area of traditional sandstone tenements, probably from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, rather than a former council estate.

‘I’m gonnae hae [going to have] a cigarette first, so I dinna ken if you’re wanting to sit in the car?’

‘Aye, sure,’ I respond. Andy gets out of the car, takes off his blazer and puts on his black leather jacket. He wanders up and down the street smoking while I sit listening absent-mindedly to Capital FM. A few minutes later, Andy opens the door, changes back into his blazer, and we head over to one of the entrances. Andy takes out a large bunch of keys, tries a few of them, and eventually we gain access to the stairwell. There is a large skylight at the top, so it is not too dingy, though the floors could do with a clean.

After climbing two flights of stairs, we approach one of the doors. Andy knocks, waits a while, and then knocks again. ‘Helloo?’ No response. He pulls out the bunch of keys again, and begins trying them in the lock until one of them fits and lets us in.

It is a small one-bedroomed flat. The bedroom is through a door immediately to the right and contains little more than a double bed and a chest of drawers. The next door along leads to the living room and kitchen, which is a single larger room with purple walls and a light wood-effect lino floor. Other than the purple walls, the most noticeable thing in the living room is a large black-and-white photograph of a white tiger, perhaps a square metre in size, on one of the walls. Back into the hall, and immediately opposite the front door, is the door to the bathroom, which is a small windowless room containing a toilet, sink, and combined bath and shower. Andy wonders around the flat looking at the walls, ceilings, floors, windows, and kitchen work surfaces. He opens the fridge, frowns slightly, turns the hob rings on and off, tries the oven, tests the taps, checks the shower and goes
to the toilet. I also wonder around, sometimes watching Andy, and at other times investigating the flat myself. It is true that the oven and shower are not working, but the hobs are fine, there is still a bath, and I can see no obvious problem with the fridge.

‘Tell me,’ Andy says to me after about ten minutes, ‘is this flat uninhabitable?’

‘No,’ I answer, thinking of my own flat, complete with broken oven, broken heating, temperamental toilet and no living room.

‘Seriously, he should just terminate his tenancy now if he’s no wanting to live here. The rent is only five-twenty a month for a one-bed in quite a central location. There’s very few one-beds in Edinburgh, and certainly not at that price. I think it’s just he’s no wanting it any more, especially as he’s threatening to withhold the rent. He should make it available for someone who needs it. Makes me so angry.’

We leave the flat and head back down the stairs, out into the street and back to the car. Sitting down, Andy briefly checks the schedule on his smartphone, pulls on his seatbelt and starts the engine. We drive towards Pilton via the affluent area of Ravelston, still listening to Capital FM, but not talking. Fifteen or so minutes later, we arrive in Pilton outside one of the characteristic three-storey grey-pebbledash council and ex-council tenement blocks. I’ve been here before, and there is still rubbish strewn about over the lawn in front of the entrance. The black wheelie bin appears to have been set on fire at some point. We leave the car and enter through the main door, which is already ajar. A large collection of houseplants greets us on the first floor landing as we proceed to the front door of our next property. This time, it’s a viewing.

There’s a certain pattern to ex-council flats, at least in Pilton: a single straight corridor with rooms off either side, with the living room typically at the far end. This flat, apparently, is a ‘three-bed’, though there is no furniture, so I can only use my imagination. Andy and I wait a while, milling around and wandering in small circles. The windows on the rear side of the flat look out to the local primary school, and beyond towards the high-rise blocks of flats in Muirhouse and, ultimately, to the Firth of Forth.

‘I did have one applicant for this flat,’ Andy tells me as we wait. ‘Australian woman with a wee one, just arrived in Scotland. It wouldn’a’ve been right for her. Lovely woman, perfect references and everything, but Pilton’s just no the right area for her. She wouldn’a’ve got on well here at all.’
‘So you take into account how suitable you think the property would be for the tenant as well as how suited the tenant is for the property?’ I ask.

‘Exactly. I’d be very up-front about my views, and I probably wouldn’a process their application. Pilton can be a bit of a dodgy area, and she’d have been lonely. But I encourage Polish people to live in Pilton, because there are lots of other Polish people in the area, so I ken they’ll have a good amount of support.’

The buzzer rings. ‘Finally,’ Andy says, as he heads out of the flat to welcome them. He returns with a man and a woman, both with dark hair, and probably aged in their early thirties.

‘Feel free to take a look around yourselves, and when you’re ready, we’ll be waiting in the kitchen.’ They move from room to room, chatting occasionally in Portuguese as they do.

‘Yes, we are interested,’ the woman says to Andy and me, coming into the kitchen after about five minutes.

‘Great. So, you’re wanting a three-bed, but there’s only two of yous. Why is that?’

‘No, we are four,’ the woman replies. Then man stands by her in silence. ‘We’re a couple, and our two friends would move in too.’

‘Ah, I’m afraid that’s not allowed. Three or more unrelated persons canna rent a flat together unless it’s HMO licenced. House-in-multiple-occupancy licenced. This flat no has that. None of our flats do.’

‘Oh…’

‘Sorry about that. If you’re interested, you might want to put in for a one- or a two-bed. But if the four of yous are wanting to stay together, then you’re probably better off looking for an HMO, and there’ll be more of those closer to the centre.’

Andy leads the couple out of the flat and down the stairs.

‘We’re in a four-bed in Tollcross now, but it’s too expensive, and one of us is leaving,’ the woman explains as we exit the building.

‘Aye, I’m sorry about that. Like I say, it’s the regulations.’

The couple say goodbye and disappear into Pilton, while we get back into the car and drive off towards Granton. We are going to check up on a man whose tenement block had recently caught fire. Andy has heard that the situation is ‘right enough’, though has not yet seen the damage himself. I have no idea what to expect.
We park outside another row of grey pebbledash three-storey tenement flats, similar to the ones in Pilton, leave the car, cross the front garden and head over to the stairwell. The building does not look visibly damaged from the outside. Inside the stairwell, however, the walls, floor, steps and ceiling are all stained black, and the window looking out onto the communal back garden is broken. There is a strong smell of soot. We climb the stairs to the top floor, and my shoes become dirty in the process. After knocking on one the doors, a man, aged about forty invites us in.

In contrast to the stairwell, most of the flat is not visibly damaged, except near the front door where the walls and carpet have been stained black. The layout is once again familiar, with a single hallway, this time with a relatively large living room on the left, the kitchen and the flat’s only bedroom on the right, and the bathroom at the end.

The man, whom I surmise is probably from somewhere in West Africa, invites us to sit down in his living room. ‘I work nights and was at work when this happened,’ he tells us. ‘I spoke to the neighbour, and they said they were woken up, and had to escape through the smoke. Then the fire brigade came. The police still don’t know how it happened, but I think it was deliberate.’

‘Probably just as well you were working then,’ Andy comments.

‘It feels a bit scary living here now, but I’m just going to carry on working. There have been some problems in this area between some groups of people. I don’t know much about it, and I’m not getting involved, but I think that has something to do with it.’

‘Aye, exactly,’ Andy responds. ‘Well, I just wanted make sure you were okay really. We’ll get the walls in the hall repainted and the carpet cleaned for you, okay?’

‘Yes, sure. And what about the stair?’

‘We’ll have to negotiate with all the other owners to get that sorted together eventually, but the council might be able to get something done about the mess in the meantime.’

Andy rises as if to leave. ‘I hope things’ll be well enough for you,’ he says.

The man thanks us and we say our goodbyes before heading back down the smoke-stained stairwell and to the car. We drive off once again.

Lunch in the usual place, so it seems – the road by the Gipsy Brae Recreation Ground. I eat my sandwiches in the car while Andy steps out for another cigarette, complete with black leather jacket. I then wander around the recreation ground for about ten minutes until I surmise that it must be time to head off soon.
‘We need to head back to the office for a bit,’ Andy tells me, sounding slightly nervous. ‘Right enough,’ I reply as we drive off. I don’t give any further thought to his apparent nervousness as I sit in the passenger seat, mulling over our activities of the morning as we progress down Ferry Road. If talking on the phone to uncooperative tenants for hours after work is what the head office describes as ‘commercial responsibility’, then surely that is taking responsibility to a whole new level.

‘Seriously, you can get way too involved with folk’s lives in this job,’ Andy says after a short while. ‘I’ve got this flat in Restalrig just now. It’s supposed to be just the mother and daughter, but the daughter’s boyfriend has moved in and smokes weed in the flat. He’s no even meant to be there, and I’m trying to get the mother and daughter to understand that they need to get him to move out as he’s no on the lease. Thing is, I think they’re scared of him. Last time I went there, he came out the bedroom in his boxers, shouting at me to get out. It’s no even his flat! It’s getting to the point where I’m saying to the mother and daughter that I’ll have to serve an eviction notice on them if he doesn’t leave as they’re responsible for the weed smoking as they’re on the lease. It’s just gonnae be harsh on them as I dinna think it’s their fault – I think the daughter’s boyfriend is abusive and they canna dae anything about it.’

We pull up outside the office, leave the car and head back in. Back in the office, I sit awkwardly with Andy, watching him read and answer emails and modify his diary. He says little to me directly. To break the awkwardness, I offer to make coffee, which he accepts.

‘We need to do a void report on this flat on Elgin Street,’ Andy tells me after about half an hour. ‘The tenant committed suicide last week. Nice guy. Only stayed there a few months.’

‘Christ.’ Clearly this is why Andy seemed nervous earlier.

‘It’s really upset the neighbours as well. Thing is, they’d had bad experiences of past tenants there, and I chose him because he seemed like he’d be quiet and responsible. You know, recently divorced professional working man and all that. I ken it’s no my fault, but I find it hard not to blame myself in some way. Like, if only I’d spoken to him earlier, maybe I could’ve done something…’

‘I’m not sure you can hold yourself responsible for this sort of thing,’ I comment.
‘Aye exactly, you’re right. The other thing is that his ex-wife has been round, and has taken out some of the furniture, and now his son is claiming it disna belong to her. I’m hoping we’ll no get too involved in that, but she’s also been on the phone telling us there’s a suicide note left in the oven. We’ll have to check that out as well.’

Andy retrieves a set of keys from one of the key cupboards. We put on our jackets, grab our bags, and once again head out of the office, down in the lift and out of the building to Andy’s car.

‘So… Elgin Street,’ Andy says as we drive off. ‘That’s off Easter Road, isn’t it?’

‘Eh… maybe?’

‘Right useful you are,’ he half-jokes in response. He was correct, but we took a couple of wrong turns along the way.

Elgin Street, and indeed much of the surrounding area, is populated with four-storey sandstone tenements, mostly built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between the top ends of Leith Walk and Easter Road, up the hill and near to the city centre, the tenements here are somewhat more ornate than those further down the bottom towards the Foot of the Walk and Leith Links. Higher ceilings with cornicing, larger and often bay windows with decorative features above, and wider stairwells with coloured tiles. Adjacent to Elgin Street is a small rectangular park with tenements along all four edges. We enter one of the tenement stairwells. It is getting dark now, and only one of the stair lights is working.

‘I’m gonnae check on the neighbours first,’ Andy tells me as we approach the second-floor landing. There are three flats on each floor. Andy knocks on two of the doors in succession, but there is no response. ‘I’ll have to come back to them later, just to make sure they’re alright.’ Andy then unlocks the third door and we go inside. Slightly unsettlingly, at least for me, the lights are already on.

‘First things first,’ Andy says, leading me into the kitchen. The kitchen looks to be quite recently refitted and redecorated, with magnolia painted walls and a light wood-effect floor. Something about the heavy fire door, the room’s total lack of windows, and the ceiling that is higher than its length or breadth strikes me as eerie, though perhaps it is just because of the circumstances. Andy kneels down in front of the oven, gulps, and opens it. ‘Phew. Nothing there. Either the ex-wife has taken it, or she’s just trying to wind us up.’
Andy then carries out the now-familiar process of the void report. With the aid of the void report form, he switches on the heating, turns the lights, taps, oven and hob rings on and off, opens and closes the windows, and briefly assesses the state of walls and floors. I finally manage to make myself useful by writing down the gas and electricity meter readings as Andy calls them out while standing on tiptoes on a chair. The living room is indeed partly furnished – there is one sofa, though it would appear from the marks in the carpet that other items have been removed. The bedroom is untidy, with a few items of clothing strewn over the bed, though again, it would appear that somebody has been in to retrieve some things.

‘The thing is,’ Andy says to me, looking scared and upset, ‘I dunno how he done it.’

‘Hmm,’ I reply, imagining a handful of possibilities.

‘I’ll try the neighbours one more time,’ Andy says as he turns off the heating and lights. We leave the flat. Andy knocks on the neighbouring doors once more, but still no response.

‘What will happen to this flat now?’ I ask as we leave the building and walk back towards the car.

‘Contractors will come and clean the place and remove any remaining furniture. Then it’ll be remarketed and hopefully re-let. But we’ll have to inform any future prospective tenants what happened – in case it comes back to bite us, ken what I mean.’

‘Aye, right.’ At this point, I decide that I have seen enough for today, and as we are not too far from where I stay, I thank Andy and walk home.

**Authentic Care**

Let us return to Ibarra’s dichotomy between formal and informal ‘emotional proletarians’, ignoring the unsuitability of the word ‘proletarian’ for the moment, and consider how Andy’s activities as a self-described ‘unqualified social worker’ may fit into it. On the one hand, the strong sense of responsibility that he displays towards his tenants contributes indirectly towards the continuation of their tenancies and thus ultimately towards their financial returns. On the other hand, despite being ‘unqualified’ and thus not specifically employed to perform social care duties, Andy quite clearly displays what Ibarra would term ‘authentic emotion’ as part of his job, frequently going above and
beyond what might be expected from his job description – speaking to tenants for hours on the phone during the evening, and trying to check up on neighbours after one of his tenants committed suicide.

I have always been struck by Andy’s comment that he rejected an application for a flat in Pilton on the grounds that the ‘lovely’ Australian woman with ‘perfect references and everything’ would have been ‘lonely’ in what he regards as a ‘dodgy area’. One might expect that Andy’s objective would be to get empty properties let out as quickly as possible in order to maximise rental returns for both landlord and letting agency, and to find tenants with the best possible references and background check results who may be deemed more likely to pay their rent on time and take good care of the property. It is certainly not part of the Property Manager’s formal job description to protect prospective tenants with ‘perfect references’ from ‘dodgy’ areas contrary to their own wishes – she did, after all, choose to put in an application. Andy is of course a sample of one and, based on my experience with a range of Property Managers at Almond and Thompson in Edinburgh, takes personal involvement with his tenants to a relative extreme even within the ‘letting agency with a difference’ with its ‘positive caring approach’. Nonetheless, it did not come as a surprise to me by this stage in my fieldwork either, and I would hope by this point that certain patterns will be similarly clear to the reader with respect to the ethical judgments that obtain within the process of property management at Almond and Thompson. Far from being purely bureaucratic or procedural, though the procedural basis is always there, idiosyncratic moral reasoning enters every level of property management, to varying degrees.

In light of this idiosyncrasy, I propose turning to Mattingly’s notion of ‘first person virtue ethics’ in which the good is understood from a first-person perspective with narrative at the centre of moral action. Mattingly (2014: 56-7) argues that ‘the moral frameworks developed within first person virtue ethics offer a rich vocabulary for considering humans as “self-interpreting” moral beings whose perceptions, interpretations, and actions help shape moral subjectivities in the singular as well as the collective’. Moral striving may, therefore, be understood as ‘experimental, even perilous, traversing private and public life while also deeply embedded in the routines of everyday care’. This does not occur separately from everyday action as part of a ‘deliberative ethical moment’, but is instead ‘accomplished in the midst of the everyday as the
normative becomes subject to experiment and problematization’ (Mattingly 2014: 25-6). The Property Manager, in shifting between thinking with the landlord in mind and thinking with the tenant in mind, and in trying to empathise with his tenants, regardless of whether or not he instinctively agrees with them, is continually confronted with new ethical dilemmas that, as part of his job, demand resolution. Hence the ‘moral laboratory’, to invoke the title of Mattingly’s book, in which ‘everyday spaces can become spaces of possibility, ones that create experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived’ (Mattingly 2014: 27). It is through this process that Andy's authentic emotion – and, by extension, authentic care – come to the fore.

In the context of home care of older adults in Chicago, Buch (2013) argues that home care workers often find themselves conflicted between their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those for whom they care, especially in the context of their relatively low wages, which contributes to a rapid staff turnover. ‘Through intimate and daily acts of care,’ Buch (2013: 647) argues, care workers ‘repeatedly enacted broader social hierarchies within and on their bodies—they came to feel that their immediate bodily needs were less important than those they cared for’. Certain parallels should be readily apparent, though less clear is the extent to which Andy enacts ‘broader social hierarchies’, given that he frequently acts as an authority figure to his tenants as well as prioritising their wellbeing over his own. At best, his status in any socioeconomic hierarchy is ambiguous, not least given his formal role as the landlord’s argent. It is, however, through this ambiguity and this conflict that ethical experimentation takes place.

On the face of it, however, ‘care’ may be regarded as ancillary to the role of the Property Manager, even though the practice of ethics is present within the process of property management at all levels. I noted earlier that Andy’s caring attitude contributes to the stated ‘positive caring approach’ of Almond and Thompson, and helps tenants to sustain their tenancies, pay their rent on time and keep their homes in good condition, ultimately if indirectly contributing to the financial returns of both the letting agency and their landlords. Almond and Thompson, unusually for a private letting agency in Edinburgh, also employ a specific member of staff to deal with some of these issues, who will be explored in the following section.
**Tenancy Sustainment Advisor**

I am sitting drinking instant coffee in the kitchenette in the Almond and Thompson office once again, hoping that there will be a Tuesday Training session for me to get stuck into, or at least watch, but I have come to realise by now that there probably will not be. Tessa, the Director, unexpectedly left the company three weeks ago, apparently to go travelling around India, and Katy, previously the Field Team Manager, has now taken over from her. Tessa had been my main point of access, and it remains slightly unclear to me who I am officially supposed to liaise with now. Indeed, the staff turnover has been so great that I have been here longer than most.

Ellie, the Customer Support Manager, comes into the kitchenette. ‘It’s your last week this week,’ she asks me as she opens the fridge, ‘isn’t it?’

‘Eh… maybe?’ I reply. Is this a hint? Have they had a meeting about how to let me know politely that it is time to move on? Accepting that my perpetual shadowing will probably have to come to an end sooner rather than later, I finish my coffee while mulling over what to do that day.

Alison, jointly Tenancy Sustainment Advisor and Property Management Co-ordinator (whom we met in Chapter 2) comes into the kitchenette. She has become something of a friendly face to me since she has been here. Perhaps it is her background in the public sector that gives us a kind of mutual understanding. I am, after all, from an almost entirely ‘public sector’ family, and I discover later that ‘tenancy sustainment’ and ‘income maximisation’ is part of what my aunt and uncle do for Birmingham City Council – it had all been a vague ‘working in the housing office’ to me before.

‘We need to get you a flat to rent from us,’ she says to me. ‘A place on your own. It would be so much better for you than where you are just now.’

‘Oh, it’s not so bad really. And I only have about six months or so now, then I’m going back to St Andrews.’

‘Well, Short-Assured Tenancies start with six months, so that’d take you until about September, then you could move out. It would be worth it.’

‘I wouldn’t pass an affordability check though.’

‘I’m sure you’d be able to claim some housing benefit for it.’
‘I don’t think so actually, given that I’m technically a full-time student. Anyway, what are you doing today?’

‘Doing background checks this morning, and then going to the big Drumbrae Library Hub for one of my surgeries. Do you want to come?’

‘Sure, that would be great, thanks. Do you mind if I sit with you this morning too?’

‘Not at all.’

After a morning of prospective tenant background checks with Alison, followed by lunch in the kitchenette, we head out of the office to her car and drive off. It is quite a sunny day for March, and Alison is wearing large sunglasses with black and brown tortoise-shell frames as she drives her navy-blue 1990s Ford Escort along Ferry Road.

_Tenancy sustainment_, Alison had previously informed me, is about helping tenants to sustain their tenancies. Working closely with the City of Edinburgh Council’s _Housing Options Team_ – their emergency homeless assistance service – she typically holds two or three surgeries a week in public buildings in different areas of the city. Some of the people who attend the surgeries have been referred to them by the Housing Options Team, but they are also open to anyone on a drop-in basis.

‘I’m expecting two people today,’ Alison tells me while driving. ‘One at 2.30 and one at 3.30. Maybe they won’t show up, maybe we’ll get some others dropping in.’

We pull into the car park at the Drumbrae Library Hub in Clermiston – a council estate in the midst of ‘bungalowland’. We enter through the plate-glass automatic doors into the bright, white-washed library. Alison indicates to the receptionist – a young bearded man whom I’m sure I recognise from somewhere – that we are here for the RightLet surgery, and we are then directed up the stairs to the mezzanine floor. Alison is clearly familiar with the procedure.

Up on the mezzanine floor, we find a small office where the surgery is to take place. The window is directly opposite the glass door. Inside is a small desk in the middle of the room, with the short end against the right-hand wall, and two chairs on either side. On the desk is a computer. Alison and I sit down at the desk with our backs facing the open door.

‘I keep asking them if they can move the computer around the other side so that clients can see me as they come in,’ Alison comments as she logs onto the computer, ‘but apparently it has to be this way round for security reasons. They need to be able to see through the glass door what I’m doing on the computer, and who the clients are too.’
We sit there for a while, occasionally chatting idly. We knew we were a bit early, but time moves on. It’s now 2.50 and no-one has showed up.

Eventually, two women appear at the door.
‘Is this the RightLet surgery?’
‘Yes, please come in!’

‘Oh sorry! We were waiting just outside for half an hour, but we thought you were with somebody else,’ the older of the two women explains. She is probably in her forties, has light brown hair in a bob, and is wearing a black and white striped jumper with a black jacket.

‘Oh no, sorry, this is Benjamin, my colleague,’ Alison explains. ‘He’s a PhD student working with us. Are you happy for him to sit in on our meeting?’

The older woman gives an encouraging look to the younger woman, who answers in the affirmative. The two women sit down in front of us on the other side of the desk. The younger woman, probably her mid-thirties, has blonde hair in a ponytail and is wearing a grey hoodie. She looks exhausted and has eczema on her wrists and neck.

‘That’s the problem with this room having the computer facing this way round… anyway, never mind, let’s get started,’ Alison says. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘This is Sarah,’ the older woman says, pointing to the younger woman, ‘and I’m Jill, her support worker.’

‘Yes, I think we’ve met before,’ Alison says in the direction of Jill. Sarah begins her story:

_I’ve been renting a house in Clermiston direct from my landlord with my three young children since I split from my partner two years ago. Things started out well, but then he started refusing to carry out repairs. The heating’s no been working for several months now, all over the winter. We’ve had to use electric heaters, but I’m no working and I canna afford it. I’d ask him to repair the heating, but he’d just threaten us with eviction. I’m just wanting to get out as soon as I can really, but with two of the children settled at school here, I’m terrified of getting evicted at short notice._

Alison, Jill and I listen intently to Sarah’s story without commenting.

‘He keeps walking into the house uninvited and unannounced,’ she continues. ‘He shouts at me and it scares the children. Like I say, it seemed good at first as he was known
to one of my ex-partner’s colleagues, and the rent wisna too high, but it’s gone like this. I pay the rent on time, it’s just that he’s refusing to repair anything.’

‘Walking into the house uninvited and unannounced is definitely not legal,’ Alison muses aloud.

‘Show Alison your lease,’ Jill advises Sarah.

‘Oh yeah, I brought this,’ Sarah says, taking a single A4 sheet of paper printed on both sides. ‘This is my lease. It’s for two years. Thought you could maybe have a look at it?’

Alison looks sceptical as she examines the piece of paper. Her mouth curls slightly as she turns it over and back again a couple of times. ‘It’s saying it’s for two years, but there’s no such thing as a two-year lease,’ she says. ‘I’ve never come across a two year-lease before. It just doesn’t exist. The document is also far too short – they’ve not given us anywhere near the usual details. I just don’t see how that could be legally valid. Looks like he’s just made that up. Don’t think you’d have any problem getting out of this if you wanted to.’

‘So yeah, the whole situation has made me so stressed – I canna work anymore and it’s made my skin come out in all this rash. I’m just desperate to find somewhere else.’

Alison turns to the computer and opens Notepad and the calculator application. ‘You say you’re not working, so are you in receipt of benefits?’

‘Yeah, Employment and Support Allowance, child benefit and housing benefit.’

‘So ESA, is that seventy-three ten a week?’

‘Aye, that’s right.’ Alison records the figure on Notepad.

‘And child benefit, you’ve got three children right?’

‘Right.’

‘So that’ll be twenty-seventy a week for the first and then thirteen-seventy each for the other two’. Alison adds these figures to the list on Notepad. ‘And what ages and genders are they?’

‘Two girls aged seven and five, and one boy aged three.’

‘So you’ll be wanting a three-bed… that’ll give you up to three-five-four forty-six in housing benefit.’ Alison adds this to Notepad before adding all the figures together using the calculator application. ‘So, four-seven-five sixty-six a week times four-point-three-three… call that two thousand and fifty-nine pound sixty. Monthly income must be at
least rent times three, so divide that by three… and we get six-eight-six fifty-four. So six-eight-six a month is the maximum rent you could afford then.’

Sarah nods.

‘Let’s see what we have,’ Alison begins as she accesses the Almond and Thompson online property search tool. ‘Location… Edinburgh,’ she comments as she fills out the search form. ‘Furnished… ours are almost all unfurnished, so I’ll go with Any. Price… no minimum, to… six-eight-six per calendar month. Bedrooms… three to no maximum. Search.’

Two properties show up on the next page, both in Lochend, an area in the northeast of the city.

‘Would Lochend be any good to you?’ Alison asks.

‘Eh… I used to stay in Lochend a while back. But with two of the children settled in school here, I really need to be in Clermiston or at least not too far away. They seem to be doing pretty well in the school, and I’m no keen on moving them.’

‘Fair enough, well, we can add you to our database of prospective tenants so that we can contact you later if anything comes up. Are you happy for us to do that?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Right you are then.’ Alison takes a physical notepad and pen out of her handbag and turns to a blank page. ‘Can I take your full name then please?’

‘Sarah Whitelaw.’

‘And a contact telephone number?’

Sarah gives a number, which Alison writes down.

‘And do you have an email address?’

‘Yeah, I’ll write it down for you if you like.’ Alison hands her the pad and pen. She writes down an email address and then hands the pad and pen back to Alison.

‘Great, well we’ll get you added to our database. I’m sorry we don’t have anything suitable just now, but I hope things work out for you. Thank you very much then!’

Sarah and Jill stand up, thank Alison in return, say goodbyes, and head out of the office. A man, tall, slim and bald, perhaps in his fifties, pokes his head around the door.

‘Is this RightLet?’ He asks in a North American accent.

‘Yes, please come through,’ Alison responds, pointing to the seats opposite us. He sits down. ‘What can I do for you then?’
‘Well, I was made redundant eighteen months ago. I’m living in Cramond at the moment. I’m a chemical engineer and had some savings, but I really need to find a smaller one-bedroom place and then hopefully get back into work. It’s just quite hard to be taken seriously by landlords and letting agents when you’re not currently employed.’

‘Well that’s where we come in,’ Alison responds. ‘So are you in receipt of benefits?’

‘I get contribution-based Job Seekers Allowance. I’m not actually a citizen, but I have indefinite leave to remain. It’s seventy-three ten a week, I think.’

‘Yep, that’s right.’ Alison notes £73.10 onto Notepad, which is still open. ‘And do you claim housing benefit just now?’

‘Well actually, I’m staying in my apartment in Cramond rent-free at the moment. I was basically renting from a friend of a friend – it’s his place really, but he’s abroad. When I lost my job and couldn’t afford the rent, he said I could carry on living there, but I really feel I should find somewhere else now.’ The man seems embarrassed by the situation.

‘Do you have a partner or any children?’

‘No, I’m just single.’

‘Well, as a single adult over thirty, you can claim up to two-six-hundred six-forty-four a week in housing benefit. But you probably won’t be claiming as much as that. Are you in receipt of any other benefits?’

‘No.’

Alison does some slightly more complex calculations by feeding these numbers into the calculator application. ‘Twenty-four thirty-seven a week times four-point-three-three… call that one-hundred fifty fifty. The problem is that there aren’t many one-beds in Edinburgh anyway, and you’re not going to find anything for that. I wonder if there are any other ways we could maximise your income…’

‘Probably not. I’m not going to qualify for disability benefits or anything like that, and I don’t have any children.’ He seems disappointed. ‘I have some savings, so I might be able to pay some rent up front, but otherwise, I think it’s going to be a case of waiting until I manage to find a job again.’

‘Okay, well we can take your name and contact details anyway if you like? Otherwise, a lot of private landlords would probably be quite happy to take you on if you can pay rent upfront.’ Alison hands him the notebook and pen, and the man writes down his name,
address, telephone number and email address, and then hands it back to Alison. John Grant is his name.

‘Well, thank you anyway,’ he sighs slightly.

‘Thanks for coming,’ Alison replies as he heads out through the door. She logs off the computer, gathers her things, and we leave the office, back down the stairs and out of the Drum brae Library Hub to the carpark and into the car. We drive off. After a few minutes, Alison, still driving, switches the car CD player on. ‘I love Frank Sinatra,’ she says as she begins to sing along.

Ethics of Tenancy Sustainment

A few weeks later, I meet Alison to discuss ‘tenancy sustainment’ further. She has a particular way of explaining her work to me; an apparently straightforward question leads to an initial straightforward response followed by a stream of related information. It is evident that Alison has a detailed command of the system, and that it is not an abstract set of processes for her. Rather, different aspects of the system – surgery, income maximisation, benefits, tax credits, bedrooms, viewings, databases – directly invoke or call upon others through the course of her discursive loops. I ask Alison a few short questions, she provides expanded answers based upon narratives about the difficulties faced by tenants and the support that she provides them, always linking it back to the notion of ‘tenancy sustainment’. The following discourse struck me as particularly illustrative:

Well, as well as doing everything I do, I also get the rent management team emailing me saying this chap has been in this property for three months, he hasn’t paid his top-up [rent minus housing benefit], as they call it, or he wasn’t aware that he had to, or he was kind of in denial that he had to, he just forgot he had to pay twenty quid a week, which is eighty quid a month, three months later that’s two hundred and forty quid. Unless we get him back on track, that’s threatening the tenancy, so it’s a case of me maybe liaising with the Property Manager to get him into the office on a Thursday, because I do a Thursday surgery in the office to chat to people if they’re having problems with the benefit cap, if they’re having problems with
different things, it could be a genuine mistake, or it could be, you know... or there might be some way to maximise their income as in there’s something they’re entitled to they’re not getting.

Throughout all this, there remains, from my perspective, an elephant in the room. I have been wondering for a while now how I might address this, but I finally decide to bite the bullet.

‘You’ve worked in tenancy sustainment in the voluntary sector and in the public sector for a long time,’ I begin. ‘Almond and Thompson strikes me as quite unusual in being a private letting agency that employs a tenancy sustainment advisor. Is that the case?’

‘Yes, I think it is quite unusual. I don’t think I’ve come across a private letting agent with a tenancy sustainment advisor before, no. But I think it would be in the interests of other private letting agents to have somebody on their team who provided support to people claiming benefits as it would help reduce rent arrears, especially with the benefit reform, increased unemployment, the growth of the private rented sector and all that.’

‘So… do you find that working for a private letting agent as opposed to either for the council or for a charity changes the dynamics of your work?’

‘As in… in what way?’

‘I suppose I mean,’ continuing to beat around the bush, ‘how does it compare?’

‘Oh it’s very much the same, but very different. Yeah, the same but different. I wasn’t doing the background checks before, but I’ve always done income maximisation, surgeries, that’s sort of thing. Should they be on ESA rather than JSA? Would they benefit from a Debt Relief Order? Do they have undiagnosed social anxiety and need a referral to mental health services? It all comes under the umbrella of supporting the tenant to sustain their tenancy.’

The word ‘sustain’ may, at least at the time of writing, be evocative of environmental sustainability to many readers. Indeed, as a twenty-year-old undergraduate, I held the elected position of what was then ‘Sustainability Officer’, previously (and subsequently) known as the ‘Environment and Ethics Officer’, at the University of St Andrews Students’ Association, which broadly involved campaigning to make the Association and the wider University community more (environmentally) ‘sustainable’. The University of St Andrews also provides courses in ‘Sustainable Development’ to which anthropologists often contribute. The idea that things should be ‘sustained’ is, in this sense, understood
as virtuous. To return to the category of care in light of this emphasis on ‘sustainment’, I am struck by the claim made by Buch (2013) that ‘good’ home care of older adults in Chicago is principally about ‘sustaining personhood’. Alison’s job, by contrast, is to sustain tenancies, but is this an end in and of itself for her?

I see an apparent disjunction at the heart of Alison’s work. On the one hand, she is personally motivated by the desire to help tenants and prospective tenants, and employs language and methods acquired from her work in the public and charity sectors. On the other hand, she is also effectively employed as a sales agent for a private letting agency – her ‘surgeries’ draw in new business, and her ‘income maximisation’ practices help to ensure that the letting agency and their landlords receive their rent in full and on time. This apparent disjunction – or perhaps conjunction – should be understood as an adaptation to the gradual shift in housing provision from the public to the private sectors. Alison merely stated that she thought it would be ‘in the interests’ of other private letting agencies to employ tenancy sustainment advisors. Of course, it may well not be a disjunction for Alison at all; the elephant in the room is my own. Perhaps this experience has been far more of an ethical conundrum – or moral laboratory, channelling Mattingly (2014) – for me than for Alison, but it is through the need to balance interests in this manner that new personal virtues are developed.

So, in what sense is the practice of ‘tenancy sustainment’ in the private rented sector grounded in the practice of ethics? Mattingly (2013: 318) endeavours to ‘foreground those events that serve as experiments, small inaugurations into something that might constitute a fleeting experience or might portend a future different than one had envisioned’, and to recognise ‘moral transformation and the moral striving surrounding it that is at once experimental, even perilous, and also deeply embedded in the routines of everyday life’. Is the daily work of the Tenancy Sustainment Advisor a site of moral transformation? At the very least, the practice of negotiating the potentially competing interests of tenants, landlords and the letting agency – and ostensibly trying to serve them both – would appear to demand the production of particular virtues in relation to which practice takes place. In Alison’s case, the relevant virtue would appear to be ‘helping tenants to sustain their tenancies’ – a ‘good’ practice that apparently transcends the specific property relations in which she operates.
Conclusion

I began this chapter with a cursory unpacking of Almond and Thompson’s formally stated aim to ‘combine a positive caring approach to all of [their] clients with the commercial discipline of the private sector’. We certainly encounter a sense of care and social responsibility from our Property Manager and Tenancy Sustainment Officer in this instance. Andy finds a disconnect between where his responsibilities lie in theory – with the landlords – and where they tend to lie in practice – with the tenants, and finds himself, in his words, acting the role of an unqualified social worker in the process. Alison, moreover, displays very little in the way of an overt sense of responsibility towards either the landlords or the business at all, even though a case could be made that her job exists largely to attract new tenants and ensure that said tenants will pay their rent. Rather, she conceptualises her work entirely as providing a service to tenants and prospective tenants in need – very much as a continuation of her previous work in the public and voluntary sectors.

Almond and Thompson’s formal mission statement, and indeed their wider business model, were of course not written by Andy or Alison. It was not even written by anyone in the Edinburgh office, but is rather a product of central management based largely at the head office in London. I had no direct interaction with the London office during fieldwork, and it is not often a highly visible actor for most employees of the Edinburgh office either. Of more immediate concern, therefore, is not the mission statement itself, or the motivations of higher-level management, but the ways in which Edinburgh-based employees negotiate and, where applicable, reproduce these values or virtues through their work with tenants, landlords, properties, state bodies and other actors, as it is through these associations that the relations of property, responsibility and care within the private rented sector are continually constituted.

Van Eijk (2017) argues that the privatisation of care – referring principally to clinical care in this instance – increases costs and adds additional bureaucratic levels. It is beyond my remit to address the relative financial merits of different housing models here, but I cannot avoid the conclusion that the large-scale transfer of council-owned properties into the private rented sector has led to additional layers of payment, profit and management in the form of the letting agency, including the practice of tenancy sustainment. Almond
and Thompson may be a ‘letting agency with a difference’ in providing additional support services that would previously have been provided by the state, but these are in one sense a means to ensure that privately rented properties are suitably maintained and that rents are paid on time. Their mission statement, and indeed the actions of their employees, may appear to distance themselves from ‘politics’ in pursuit of a ‘positive caring approach’ and ‘efficiency’ (the latter rarely evoked by the actual employees with whom I worked).

What does seem clear to me is that the current economic and political context engenders a particular state of affairs for the private rented sector in which the lines between business and social care are blurred. Does this new social, political and economic reality itself engender particular types of ethical relations? Whilst I do not seek to speculate as to possible alternatives, it does occur to me that the politically fragmented nature of rented housing in Scotland today, with competing and perhaps contradictory interests at its core, lends itself well to an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics, or at least in the sense of ‘ordinary ethics’ in the vein of Lambek (2010) – an ethics that is grounded in everyday practice. Returning to Mattingly (2014: xvi), I argue that taking ‘people’s moral projects and their beliefs about the good seriously’ – what she terms ‘first person virtue ethics’ – can shed light on how the process of property management is played out in practice, which itself is integral to an ethnographic understanding of the private rented sector.

The major caveat, of course, is that the very nature of property relations in the private rented sector, with all their implications of vested interests and inequalities of ownership, by definition imposes certain constraints – or at least disincentives – upon the virtues that may be freely and explicitly espoused. In certain respects, this is somewhat reminiscent of the alleged contrast between politics and humanitarianism. Fassin (2007: 509) argues that there has in fact been a tendency towards the merging of politics and humanitarianism, and that claims to the contrary can ‘relegate the dominated and the excluded to this depoliticized space, leaving the political space to the dominant and the included’, and risks ‘denying the possibility of a political life to those who are subjected to them in practice’. Does the economic reality of private property serve to ‘depoliticise’ activities such as ‘caring’ property management and tenancy sustainment and deny its practitioners the possibility of political engagement? I invite readers to reflect further upon this question. For now, however, my primary comment is that ethics or ‘the good’ – including
any first-person virtue ethics – is always ultimately contextual within the constraints of the wider political economy.
Chapter 5: Tenant Engagement

The Representation of Service Users

I am going to be late for the meeting. I could have walked, but I thought I would get the bus as it is a November evening in Edinburgh and I was already running a bit behind schedule. There has been a minor road traffic incident on Leith Walk, and the bus has had to be diverted up Easter Road, and we are now stuck in a traffic jam. Sitting towards the front of the upstairs of the double-decker bus, I exchange glances between my phone and the windows, pondering whether I should stay put, get out and run, or give up on the meeting altogether and go home. I remember that Emma has specifically invited me, and wonder whether it would be more embarrassing to swan in fifteen minutes late, or just not turn up at all and apologise later.

It is just as well that I decided to stay on the bus, as just as we pulled onto Princes Street, the heavens opened. Leaving the bus, it cannot have been more than a thirty-second run across the road to the Shelter Scotland office, and yet by the time I had been buzzed into the building just off Charlotte Square, my shoes had given way to the rain and I was utterly drenched. Into the lift, up to the top floor, buzz through the second security door and into Shelter Scotland’s reception area. Emma has come through to meet me. I rapidly apologise and she, understandingly and cheerfully, leads me into one of the partitioned glass offices behind the reception area where five people are already assembled around a table. This is the November meeting of Shelter Scotland’s Edinburgh Private Tenants’ Forum. The meeting is led by two young Shelter Scotland employees, Emma and Mark, both from the Policy and Campaigns Team. Also present are Harry, a tenant and member of the Edinburgh Tenants’ Federation, Michael, a volunteer from Citizens’ Advice Scotland specialising in housing who also happens to be a landlord, another woman who remained largely silent throughout, and, now, myself.

Mark begins by introducing the Scottish Government’s Consultation on a New Tenancy for the Private Sector – a document that outlines proposals for changes to private sector tenancy legislation for public consultation. The key purpose of this meeting, we learn, is to inform Shelter Scotland’s response to the Consultation. A general discussion
about private rented housing immediately breaks out, quickly leading to the consensus that rent levels in Edinburgh have recently increased.

‘Who sets the rent?’ Harry asks, rhetorically. ‘Letting agents set the rent. They’re another tier of profit – or rather expenditure – put onto landlords. So why do landlords invest in property? Because the government has encouraged it via deregulation since 1989 as they either cannot or don’t want to provide social housing. The problem with the Consultation’s proposals is that they only look at ways to control rent once a tenant is already in the tenancy, which doesn’t necessarily help to keep rents down across the board.’

‘We need to come up with a proposal that would be politically acceptable for the main political parties to implement,’ Mark says, ‘which might include a cap on rent increases in line with inflation.’

‘So in what circumstances might the landlord still be allowed to increase their rents under hypothetical rent controls?’ Michael asked, also rhetorically. ‘Landlords have to be allowed a reasonable return on their property, otherwise they will have no motivation to invest. They ought to be justified in putting the rent up if they have improved the property. This could be subject to the agreement of the tenant, or there could be rental inspectors who would decide whether or not an increase was justified.’

‘There’s no need for landlords to increase rents after making improvements,’ Harry interjects, ‘as they would be increasing the overall value of their property. Frankly, landlords get far too much money anyway, though there’s little point in more legislation if it canna be enforced – and we all know that the City of Edinburgh Council never enforces anything.’

‘It might also be possible to introduce punitive sanctions, like in Ireland,’ Michael continues, smiling slightly after Harry’s intervention, ‘where they have fines for failing to maintain certain standards. This might be hard to enforce though as, much like with the Safe Deposits Scheme, a tenant would be able to take their landlord to court, but this itself is no easy task.’

‘Any legislation should regulate letting agents specifically,’ Harry adds, not quite engaging with Michael directly, ‘as they’re often the worst culprits for not paying attention to the law. Ultimately, private tenants should be treated the same as social
tenants, so perhaps the legislative solution would be to make buy-to-let less attractive to those who see it as a pure investment…’

‘Though not part of the Consultation proposals,’ Mark begins, ‘any suggestion of rent controls would have to be seen in the context of the proposed changes to tenancy proposed within the Consultation paper, in particular the abolition of the Short-Assured Tenancy.’

‘That’s the other thing,’ Michael chimes in. ‘When they were introduced in the 1980s, Short-Assured Tenancies were meant to be the exception, but they have ended up the default because landlords have wanted to be able to have the opportunity to terminate leases after a short time should they wish to do so. If new tenancies were not created every six months, when might rent increases be allowed? Perhaps once a year, but this might have the unintended consequence of encouraging landlords who were not inclined to increase the rent to do so.’

Emma brings the meeting to a close, and thanks us all for attending. Gradually, we stand up and make our way out of the office. I leave feeling uncertain as to precisely what the meeting has achieved, or even what it had been intended to achieve. Consensus? Concrete policy proposals? Not yet, at any rate.

Re-encountering the Private Rented Sector

In the introductory chapter, I stated that one of my principal aims was to unpack anthropologically the private rented sector as a locally-found concept in Edinburgh. The ethnographic material from the preceding four chapters all took place in the private rented sector, as Almond and Thompson employees would readily acknowledge, but this is the first time that we have encountered The Private Rented Sector discussed in quite such explicit terms. Given that the broader concept of the private rented sector tends to have greater salience for those engaged with it at a policy level, this is perhaps not surprising. Whilst the preceding four chapters have, in effect, been an ethnography of a letting agency, I shift focus in this chapter in order to recover the sector as an object of ethnographic study. To borrow, transpose and specialise the distinction advanced by Low (1999) between anthropology in the city and anthropology of the city, the aim, therefore, is not just anthropology in the private rented sector, but anthropology of the private rented sector.
Nonetheless, this and the following chapter may still appear to some as a rather jarring shift from the previous material, both spatially and temporally. It may be helpful to note that Tessa, the Director of Almond and Thompson’s Edinburgh office who left unexpectedly in early 2015, began working for Shelter Scotland in the spring of that year, and I re-encountered her there. People can and do move between spaces and roles within the broader ‘sector’, and I, in the course of my fieldwork, have similarly done so. Equally, Shelter provides a different vantage point not only of the private rented sector, but also of property management, and so this chapter should be understood as a development of the preceding material in that sense. Finally, as the opening vignette began about five months before the close of the previous chapter, and is thus not the next stage in a linear narrative, the material here should be seen as concurrent with the preceding material.

**Shelter Scotland**

On their website, Shelter Scotland (2017a) define themselves as ‘a charity that works to alleviate the distress caused by homelessness and bad housing’, that gives ‘advice, information and advocacy to people in housing need’, and that campaigns ‘for lasting political change to end the housing crisis for good’. They do not house people, but rather provide confidential help to people with housing problems. Alongside this service, they claim to tackle ‘the root causes of bad housing by lobbying government and local authorities for new laws and policies, and more investment, to improve the lives of homeless and badly-housed people’. Describing themselves as ‘a leading expert on housing in Britain’, they ‘develop practical solutions to the housing crisis’, and ‘work in conjunction with the housing sector to promote good practice, and deliver professional training’.

In more ethically loaded language, they claim to ‘strive every day to give people the help they need and campaign relentlessly to achieve [their] vision of a home for everyone’. Their strategy endeavours, amongst other things, to ‘[s]peak out with and on behalf of homeless and badly-housed people across Scotland by campaigning for housing justice’, and to ‘[i]nvolve and engage our service users in our campaigns and in shaping our services’. They claim that they are ‘not afraid to set the agenda or challenge the status
quo’, that they ‘choose [their] battles and […] fight them in public and behind the scenes’, and that they ‘bring expert knowledge and talent together to help […] achieve [their] goal’ (Shelter Scotland 2017b).

A useful emic overview of Shelter Scotland’s history is the booklet _Shelter Scotland: 40 years on_, written by Graeme Brown (2008). Shelter was originally founded in England in December 1966 by the Rev Bruce Kendrick, a social activist and minister in the United Reformed Church who had established the Notting Hill Housing Trust – a housing association – in his London parish three years earlier. This was spurred in part by the BBC television film _Cathy Come Home_ that had been aired and watched by over twelve million people in the UK earlier that year, drawing the attention of the wider public to the issues of homelessness and poor quality housing. Shelter Scotland as a distinct organisation was formed in 1968 and, alongside Shelter England, remains a separate operating division of Shelter. This is justified not only because housing policy has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament since 1999, but also because Scottish housing law was substantially different from English housing law even before devolution.

Shelter Scotland initially focused on the conditions in slums in Scottish towns and cities. They were instrumental to the founding of several housing associations during this era, and campaigned for homeless people to have the legal right to housing, which was eventually enshrined in law via the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. In 1971, Shelter Scotland opened their first ‘housing aid centre’ to provide one-to-one advice to people with housing needs – a service that expanded during subsequent decades, and is now delivered in partnership with Citizens’ Advice Scotland. In the 1980s, in the words of the report, ‘the campaigning climate grew more difficult, as the Conservative Government set out to reverse some of the assumptions about the role of the state in the provision of homes’ (Brown 2008: 9) – over half a million council homes were sold under the Right to Buy legislation, spending on new social housing was reduced significantly, and housing benefits to young people were reduced. Consequently, Shelter began to ‘measure [their] progress in positive outcomes from projects and services, rather than programmes and legislation’ (Brown 2008: 10). They are especially proud of their successful campaign for a ‘Rough Sleepers’ Initiative’ in Scotland, which ran from 1997 to 2003 and invested over £40 million in projects that reduced the number of people sleeping on the streets.
The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 provided new opportunities for Shelter Scotland. According to the report, the then Scottish Executive, apparently as a result of Shelter’s campaigning, created the Homelessness Task Force, which, in 2002, set out a legal commitment for all people assessed as unintentionally homeless to have the right to a home by 2012. This was enshrined in the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003. In their words, this ‘represents the high point of Shelter campaigning and is envied by progressive governments across the developed world’ (Brown 2008: 15).

Shelter Scotland’s current activities can be divided broadly between campaigning, policy and research, frontline services, training, and local projects. The Campaigning and Public Affairs Team engage in the lobbying of government as well as public campaigning that seeks to draw attention of issues around housing and homelessness to wider audiences (Shelter Scotland 2017c, 2017d). The Policy and Research Team seek to sustain Shelter as a ‘leading expert on housing’ by producing policy recommendations that are ‘backed-up by rock-solid research into the real state of Scotland’s housing system – and the people it affects’ (Shelter Scotland 2017e). A wide range of publications are retained by the Shelter Scotland’s policy library, and are available online.

Approximately half of Shelter Scotland’s income is sourced from the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, charitable funds and other organisations. Most of the other half comes from government grants and from Shelter’s high-street charity shops, in roughly equal proportions. Smaller though still significant sources of funding are Shelter’s legal services contracts, payment for training and publications, and funding via academic research grants. Face-to-face fundraisers, either door-to-door or on the street, most of whom are in-house employees of Shelter, have a significant role in soliciting donations from the wider public (Shelter Scotland 2017f). Equally, Shelter Scotland maintains partnerships with a number of businesses, including Barclays, British Gas, John Lewis, Marks & Spencer, Nationwide, Santander, Standard Life, and other major companies (Shelter Scotland 2017g). As far as expenditure is concerned, approximately half is spent on housing and legal services, with most of the rest spent on Shelter’s shops and on other fundraising activities, again in roughly equal proportions. Research, policy and campaigns constitute less than an eighth of Shelter Scotland’s overall budget (Shelter Scotland 2017h).
Shelter Scotland’s shift in focus since the early 1980s from housing programmes and legislation towards services and small-scale projects mirrors the wider societal shift in the provision of housing and related services from the public to the private and voluntary sectors. Indeed, much as Almond and Thompson, as a private letting agency, is used by government bodies for the provision of housing of those who in a previous era would overwhelmingly have been housed by the state, both via their Private Sector Leasing scheme and via their Tenancy Sustainment Advisor’s surgeries in public libraries, so too does Shelter Scotland intersect the public and the private, funded as it is by government grants, private companies and individuals, and its own business ventures. I am particularly struck by Shelter Scotland’s emphasis upon ‘engagement’, especially their stated aim to ‘engage [their] service users in [their] campaigns and in shaping [their] services’. Who are these ‘service users’ and in what sense does Shelter Scotland ‘engage’ them?

It has to be stressed that this brief overview of Shelter Scotland’s history and current activities is drawn from the organisation’s own documents that are in the public domain. There is not the scope here to consider critical histories of Shelter Scotland written by outsiders. This focus on emic representations is, however, deliberate. Throughout their public self-presentation is a strong ethical discourse, and it is with reference to this ethical discourse that I wish to proceed.

Make Renting Right

In November 2014, shortly after I began fieldwork, Shelter Scotland launched its ‘Make Renting Right’ campaign in response to the Scottish Government’s consultation paper. Shelter’s campaign sought to ‘work towards a modern and dynamic private rented sector which meets the needs of today’s renters and makes for a professional market where landlords can make reasonable returns on their investments’. The campaign called for ‘[s]tability for people wanting to make rented housing their home’, ‘[f]lexibility for people to stay in their home as long as they need’, a ‘modern tenancy that gives security and flexibility for tenants and landlords’, a ‘fair system for sorting out renting problems when they occur’, and ‘[p]redictable rents for tenants and landlords’ (Shelter Scotland
2014: 2). The campaign was endorsed by a wide range of charities and trade unions, by 75 of 128 MSPs, and by 18 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities, including the City of Edinburgh Council. Throughout the campaign, a strong emphasis was placed upon finding solutions that worked well for tenants and landlords, and indeed I frequently recall hearing Shelter Scotland employees emphasising to external agents, such as politicians and political researchers, that they were ‘not anti-landlord at all’.

The Scottish Government’s consultation paper set out a series of policy proposals for the reform of private tenancy legislation, beginning with security of tenure. The first of these was that the ‘no-fault’ ground for repossession, whereby landlords are able to reclaim their property under a Short-Assured Tenancy simply because the fixed term has ended, should be removed. The second was that tenancies should not be able to roll over for a duration less than the original tenancy agreement after the initial lease period had expired, instead of on a monthly basis. The third was that landlords should offer a minimum tenancy of six months as per the existing legislation, but that tenants should also be able to request a shorter tenancy agreement to meet their personal circumstances. The fourth was to replace the Notice to Quit periods of between twenty-eight and forty days with a period linked to the length of time that the tenant had lived in the property.

Further to this, the paper proposed a series of new ‘safeguards’ for landlords, lenders and investors. The first sought to reduce the grounds under which a landlord could repossess their property from seventeen down to eight, subject to a mandatory court order. The proposed new grounds included the landlord wanting to sell the property, the mortgage lender wanting to sell the property, the landlord wanting to move into the property, refurbishment, change of use to the property, the tenant failing to pay rent for three full months, antisocial behaviour on the part of the tenant, and the tenant otherwise breaching the tenancy agreement. The second allowed for a shorter Notice to Quit period of twenty-eight days if the tenant had failed to pay rent for three full months, was antisocial or had otherwise breached the tenancy agreement. Additionally, landlords would no longer be required to give advance notice to tenants if they intended to use any of the grounds for repossession, though a four-week notice period would be required before any legal proceedings could be raised. A further proposal concerned Notice to Quit periods, which again would be linked to the length of time that the tenant had occupied the property. Tenants would have to give landlords four weeks’ notice for six months or
less in the property, and eight weeks’ notice for over six months in the property. The final proposal was to introduce a model tenancy agreement containing all mandatory and discretionary clauses, complete with statutory guidance notes that would explain each clause in plain language. The consultation paper also sought views on rent levels in the private sector, and invited respondents to consider what if any action should be taken by the Scottish Government on that, though it did not set out any proposals in this regard.

When the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2016, Shelter Scotland hailed *Make Renting Right* as one of their most effective campaigns. All of the main proposals from the consultation paper were included in the new legislation, plus an additional provision to allow local authorities to apply to the Scottish Government for areas to be designated as ‘rent pressure zones’, capping the levels of rent increases for sitting tenants – a mild form of at least potential rent controls.

**Engaging with Tenants**

Throughout my interactions with Shelter Scotland, I frequently encountered the concept of ‘tenant engagement’. The best elucidation of this concept from Shelter’s perspective that I have stems from a ‘Breakout Session’ at the ‘Make Renting Right’ conference organised jointly by Shelter Scotland and the Scottish Association of Landlords in June 2015 in Edinburgh. British Gas, one of Shelter Scotland’s ‘partners’ as we saw above, provided funding for a number of tenants from Shelter Scotland’s Private Tenants Forum to attend the conference, myself included. This particular Breakout Session – one of a number of optional hour-long smaller meetings separate from the main conference – was entitled ‘Tenant Engagement in the Private Rented Sector’, and was convened by Fay Robinson, then Shelter Scotland’s new Private Renting Project Manager.

About thirty people enter a small room, which is just the right size for us, and we sit down around four tables. Sitting at a table at the front of the room are Fay and two other women. Fay is about thirty years old and, according to the conference programme, has ‘previously worked in engagement, community participation and feminist activism’. The other two women are Anita Moyne, Policy Officer for Housing Rights, Shelter’s
counterpart organisation in Northern Ireland, and Jane Huntingdon, Chair and co-founder of the newly-formed Living Rent Campaign.

Fay welcomes us to the event and produces four sheets of flip-chart paper, distributes them along with coloured pens to each of our tables, and asks us to discuss in our groups what we understand by ‘engagement’. Around our table are tenants, local government officers, letting agents, landlords, and Helena Oudenbosch from the Brussels office of the International Union of Tenants. Words and phrases like ‘having your voice heard’, ‘listening’, ‘community’ and ‘participation’ get mentioned and written down in brainstorm format on the paper. After about ten minutes, we feed our responses back to the rest of the room, and Fay writes down what we say in note form on the flipchart at the front.

Anita is then invited to speak. She gives a short presentation about her work with the Northern Ireland Private Tenants’ Forum, founded by Housing Rights. Anita explains that at first, people who came to the forum mainly wanted to vent their frustrations, but after about a year, they stopped thinking as individuals, came together as a group and have since been able to work on more directed projects. Anita stresses that at no time did they ever say that the forum represented all private tenants in Northern Ireland, but that they have been pleasantly surprised that they find themselves in agreement with landlord organisations about sixty percent of the time.

After this is Jane, who is also about thirty years old and, in her day job, works for an Edinburgh-based women’s welfare campaigning charity. Jane states, with a wry smile, that ‘that big... thing that happened last September has got a lot of people enthusiastic about campaigning’, and that ‘because housing is devolved anyway, it doesn't matter what side you were on’. She explains that the campaign emerged from the Edinburgh Private Tenants’ Action Group, itself formed largely to campaign against ‘criminal landlords and letting agents’, to organise responses to the Scottish Government’s consultation paper. The campaign, she says, gathered two thousand responses, largely from chatting to people on street stalls around Edinburgh and beyond. It has been a ‘shallow mobilisation of large numbers, supporting activism at different levels’. It is import to ‘support people to feel like they are making change, and that they see changes happen,’ she says, ‘otherwise they feel disappointed’.
What, then, is ‘tenant engagement’ for Shelter Scotland? I noted earlier that Shelter Scotland officially aim to ‘engage [their] service users in [their] campaigns and in shaping [their] services’. Against this background, are all private sector tenants potential ‘service users’ of Shelter Scotland? Is it only those tenants who may be construed as ‘service users’ with whom Shelter Scotland is to engage?

Further questions are raised as to the moral and ethical implications of ‘engagement’. Candea et al (2015: 1) argue that ‘[e]ngagement has, in a wide range of contexts, become a definitive and unquestionable social good, one that encompasses or abuts with a number of other seductive cultural tropes, such as participation, democracy, voice, equality, diversity and empowerment’. Many of these ‘seductive cultural tropes’, as they put it, are displayed within the ‘engagement’ endeavours of Shelter Scotland. Candea et al contrast engagement with ‘detachment’, which ‘has come to symbolise a range of social harms: authoritarianism and hierarchy, being out of touch, bureaucratic coldness and unresponsiveness, a lack of empathy, and passivity and inaction’, but argue that it is ‘still socially, ethically and politically valued’ in many settings. Might we also at least question whether ‘engagement’ is always inherently valued in this particular context?

**Doing Research at Shelter**

Towards the start of my fieldwork period, I had agreed to volunteer with Shelter Scotland. From the outset, I had few clear ideas about what this might entail, other than that it should relate to housing in Edinburgh, and contribute in some relevant way to my fieldwork experience. I suspect that my initial vagaries may have caused some minor frustrations amongst the staff responsible – ‘what can I do?’ turned out to be a somewhat uncommon question for a prospective volunteer, though unlike many other volunteers, I was neither a younger student seeking a specific career-focused placement, nor a retired something with a clearly defined set of interests and skills. In the end, it was agreed that I would work with the Policy and Campaigns Team to interview people signed up to their Private Tenants’ Forum, hence my presence at the meeting described at the start of this chapter.
After an initial meeting with Joanna, the Senior Policy Officer, in the same glass office, it was agreed that I would conduct a research project about tenants’ experiences of the Edinburgh private rented sector – or ‘PRS’ as it is more commonly known in Shelter circles. The core research questions, we decided, would focus on why tenants were living in the private rented sector, the extent to which the private rented sector could be a ‘positive choice’, and that factors that motivated tenants to choose particular properties, such as price, location, facilities, aesthetics, and reputation of the landlord or letting agency. From Joanna’s perspective, the research output would be useful for Shelter’s future campaigns, and would provide evidence of ‘tenant engagement’ on their part that would be useful in future funding applications. From my perspective, the project would not only allow me to gain access to a group of tenants to interview, but would also enable me to consider Shelter as an ethnographic actor within the private rented sector from the inside – in other words, social research itself as participant observation.

My original proposal was to conduct unstructured and semi-formal interviews with Edinburgh-based members of Shelter’s Private Tenants’ Forum, ideally in the interviewees own homes. I was, therefore, disappointed when Joanna made clear to me her concerns about this latter wish. According to Shelter Scotland policy, such an activity would require the accompaniment of a staff member, and would also require me to complete a detailed risk assessment at the start of the interview, including asking the interviewee up-front questions about their alcohol and illicit drug use. Joanna opined that such a procedure ‘would probably get an interview off to a bad start’, and I agreed that it was probably not worth it. Instead, interviews could be held in a café of the interviewee’s choice. At the time, I was worried that this would substantially reduce the ethnographic value of the interviews, but I have since come to appreciate the value of understanding Shelter’s research policies as part and parcel of their notion of ‘engagement’.

As should be clear, this subproject mobilised ‘engagement’ on multiple levels. In the first instance, it was an opportunity for me to engage directly with tenants in a project that had hitherto focused primarily on letting agency employees with tenants in the background, at least partly due to the ethical conditions of fieldwork required by the letting agency. What follows should be seen as an attempt to present property management ethnographically from the tenant’s vantage point. It is also, however, an opportunity to participate in Shelter Scotland’s practice of tenant engagement. Further to
this, it is hard to argue that this subproject does not, by accident as well as by design, constitute a form of what has come to be known as ‘engaged anthropology’, both in terms of the subject matter and in terms of the method – I am, by definition, ‘engaging’ with a campaigning charity as well as with the tenants with whom the charity engages.

How, then, might ‘engaged anthropology’ be understood here? Kubota (2011: 129) notes that ‘anthropologists often find themselves engaging with people’s needs as they are part of international discourses and are expected to interpret back to the people in the field’. Whilst the ‘international’ dimension of this project is limited, I cannot deny that most participants interpreted it as political in some sense, and would agree with the spirit of Kellett (2009: 29) that ‘the role of the anthropologist is to recognise and embrace our active role of agents of change [...] in what appear to be more positive directions, however modest and small scale, and despite the potential pitfalls’. What form might this engaged anthropology take? Low & Merry (2010: 204) outline six possibilities: ‘sharing and support’, ‘teaching and public education’, ‘collaboration’, ‘advocacy’ and ‘activism’. I contend that collaborative research in the form of what Low & Merry (2010: 209) identify as ‘participation in a research site’ – ‘a low-key form of collaboration in which the researcher works with local organizations or social movements in carrying out their missions but does not actively lead them’ – comes the closest to my own ‘engagement’.

That said, in what sense is this endeavour particularly ‘engaged’? Indeed, Mullins (2011: 236) asserts that ‘virtually all anthropology can claim some measure of practicing engagement somewhere along a continuum of political possibilities’, and argues that this ‘illuminates how contrived the division is between insulated academic scholarship and “real-world” politics of community constituencies and context’. Mullins asks, rhetorically, what an ‘unengaged or disengaged anthropology’ might be, which perhaps exemplifies the claim of Candea et al (2015: 7) that ‘a key trope of contemporary social theory, which has now passed into dogma, is that purported detachment can and ought to be revealed as really relational, engaged and entangled’. Clearly I do not purport that notion of detachment here, though the triple-bound nature of my engagement – engaging with tenants, engaging with Shelter Scotland and contributing to Shelter Scotland’s tenant engagement – does in my view call for what Candea et al (2015: 21-2), echoing Mattingly (2014), term ‘first-person detachment’, understood as ‘not simply a state of non-connection that any entity might be in, but a stance or a perspective on one’s own action’.

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In this sense, deploying the ‘[h]eightened reflexivity’ that Kellett (2009: 29) regards as a ‘precondition to using our insights, knowledge and skill in attempting to guide change’ does appear to demand a degree of detachment on the part of the anthropologist, who, in this instance, straddles the boundaries between observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer (cf. Gold 1958) amongst both the engagers and the engaged-with.

What I do contend, in full agreement with Kyriakides et al (2017: 5), is that ‘being engaged demands the politicisation of ethnographic practices and, to a large extent, the politicisation of the very discipline of anthropology itself’. I take this as less about the explicit pursuit of a political agenda, and more about a stated consciousness – or heightened reflexivity – of one’s own political positioning in the field, not just in relation to one’s own political leanings, but also in relation to the people, groups and organisations through which one conducts fieldwork and with which one conducts fieldwork – overlapping in this case as with Shelter Scotland. After all, Shelter Scotland’s notion of tenant engagement does entail an element of social research, conducted in this instance by an ‘engaged’ anthropologist, though I was far from unique in conducting such a project – on several occasions I lent my Dictaphone to a colleague who was interviewing Travellers at a site in East Lothian. However, in what ways are their engagement efforts politicised, given their broader social aims and their position within the wider political economy? Indeed, to what extent is their engagement simultaneously detached?

**Interviewing Tenants**

For the project, I emailed all Edinburgh-based members of Shelter’s Private Tenants Forum – perhaps thirty of them – explaining the research and inviting them for an interview. I received six responses, and managed to schedule interviews with five: Christine, Claire, Emily, James and Sammy. Though all had signed up to Shelter Scotland’s Private Tenants’ Forum email list, none had attended any meetings at the time of the interview. I introduce them briefly.

Christine is a qualified planner originally from Fife who has lived in a number of places, mostly in Scotland, over the past few decades. She was once the owner-occupier of a flat in Perth with her then husband, and had kept it on after her marriage ended. However,
due to ongoing mental illness, she found herself unable to work and thus unable to afford
the mortgage, so she sold it. She rented a flat in Fife for two years whilst she was looking
after her mother and completing her MSc. She then moved to Yorkshire for work and
rented there for two years before taking a job in a small community in the north of
Scotland, where she rented a small house in a rural area for five years. Christine chose to
move to Edinburgh last year because she felt that it was time to live in a more anonymous
environment.

Claire is in her early twenties and is originally from the North East of England, though
has lived in Edinburgh since she arrived as a student at the age of eighteen. She dropped
out of her original university course after two years and, following a period of
employment, has since begun a new degree course in music. Since moving out of student
halls, Claire has lived in four private rented flats in the Edinburgh area.

Emily has lived in private rented housing in Edinburgh with her partner for seven years.
They had met while studying at the University of St Andrews, where she completed both
her undergraduate and PhD in history. Though originally from Scotland, Emily and her
partner had lived in central England for a few years for work before moving to Edinburgh
in 2008. Emily had then commuted to St Andrews for a few years, but now works in an
administrative role for the University of Edinburgh. Her partner is self-employed and is
responsible for most of the care of their new baby.

James is in his late twenties, works as a researcher in the Scottish Parliament, and lives
with his girlfriend in an early twentieth-century tenement flat in Slateford. Although he
has rented six or seven flats in the private sector since moving to Edinburgh as a student
about ten years ago, his current flat is the first time that he has rented via a letting agency,
having previously negotiated directly with landlords. James feels that the worst aspect of
the process of moving to his current flat was the flat-hunting process itself. His previous
lease was ending on 10th December 2014 as his then landlady had sold the flat with that
completion date. He and his girlfriend starting looking for a new flat in late September,
but only found somewhere in the last week of November. ‘It wasn’t just like occasionally
having a browse on the internet,’ James tells me, ‘it was like intense every single day,
almost constant refreshing of Gumtree, signing up to every email update going.’ They
looked at between ten and fifteen flats in person, but each fell through for different
reasons.
Sammy is originally from Sheffield but has lived in Edinburgh since she came to the city as a student around seven years ago, and has, in her words, ‘zigzagged across the city’ ever since, moving between different private rented flats. Most recently, Sammy moved into a studio flat in a traditional tenement block in Abbeyhill with her fiancée about a year and a half ago. She works in policy for a major charity and has been involved in political activism for her entire adult life, including the Yes campaign in the Scottish independence referendum, and more recently – following our interview – the Living Rent Campaign.

Asking why they had chosen to ‘engage’ with Shelter Scotland by signing up to their Private Tenants’ Forum, all the interviewees highlighted their experience as a tenant, but most were unable to provide a precise explanation. Claire could not even remember signing up, but highlighted that she ‘suffer[s] from grasping landlords’ and has sent email contributions to some of Shelter’s surveys. Emily had emailed Shelter for advice when she found out that she was pregnant, asking whether she needed to tell the letting agent. Her email had been added to Shelter’s database, and she was later emailed asking if she would sign up, to which she agreed. She admits that she cares about the issue ‘primarily for selfish reasons’, being in her mid-thirties and still living in a private rented flat. Sammy said that it was partly her experience of being a tenant and ‘how fucking angry’ it has made her, but also as a ‘kind of networky move’ stemming from her interest in housing as a policy area.

It should be noted that, whilst the interviewees are of a range of ages from early twenties to fifties, women outnumber men by four to one, and they are all university-educated. On that last point, they contrast with most, though by no means all, of the tenants and prospective tenants of Almond and Thompson encountered in the previous chapters. If Almond and Thompson’s tenants are predominantly people who in a previous era would likely have lived in council housing, and who in many cases are trying to obtain council housing, it might be said that interviewees are people who in a previous era would either have been owner-occupiers or at least more optimistic about becoming owner-occupiers than they are today. Indeed, this contrast with the past proved to be a recurrent theme.

Further to the above, it would be remiss not to include some personal reflections upon my relationship to the interviewees in comparison to others encountered in the field here. In the broadest possible terms, all the interviewees might reasonably be described as
‘similar’ to me in a way that most of Almond and Thompson’s tenants could not. By
coincidence, even with the limited number of Edinburgh-based people signed up to
Shelter Scotland’s Private Tenants’ Forum mailing list, and the even more limited
response rate, both James and Sammy turned out to be friends of friends of mine, and I
had actually met them both before. Sammy is even an anthropology graduate. It is very
easy to imagine a slightly different set of circumstances in which I had been interviewed
as part of a similar project. I could even have answered my own interview questions and
added them to the data without substantially altering any conclusions that might be drawn.
Likewise, working in the Shelter Scotland office contrasted with shadowing in the
Almond and Thompson office, and I cannot deny that I felt substantially more ‘at home’
in the former than in the latter, not least because my colleagues there tended to have
similar educational and often political backgrounds to myself, and I could imagine myself
doing one of their jobs quite easily. Consequently, I have found it hard to avoid the
conclusion that, in doing tenant engagement at Shelter Scotland, we were, in this instance,
in a sense engaging with ‘ourselves’.

Indeed, this issue was at least implicitly acknowledged within Shelter Scotland. My
original plan had been to write a report for Shelter drawing broad conclusions from the
data collected. After transcribing the interviews, I met with Mark in one of the glass
offices to discuss the next steps. He expressed concern that the interviewees were ‘too
middle-class’; they perhaps reflected the experiences of Edinburgh-based subscribers of
Shelter’s Private Tenants’ Forum mailing list – which is, after all, what they were – but
were not ‘representative’ of private rented sector tenants in Edinburgh more broadly.
Mark felt that such a report would produce potentially ‘misleading’ conclusions and
should therefore not be written. Instead, we agreed that I would summarise the interviews
into easily digestible ‘case studies’ that Shelter could use for future campaigns.

Although a separate report was not written for Shelter Scotland, it is worth at least
addressing the questions that the project originally set out to answer: Why do private
tenants choose the properties that they rent, and to what extent can the private rented
sector itself be a positive choice? In one sense, this can be seen as an attempt to add ‘the
voice of the tenant’, however partial, to what endeavours to be a wider ethnography of
the Edinburgh private rented sector. It is, however, also reflective of the kind of data that
Shelter Scotland’s practice of ‘tenant engagement’ can produce.
Common Issues

All interviewees, perhaps unsurprisingly, highlighted affordability, and most noted certain practical considerations in terms of their initial selection of rental property – including bike racks, gas hobs, safety for toddlers – though this never turned out to be the main focus of discussion upon reflection of the relative merits of their current and former homes. In all cases, of far more interest was their relationships with their landlords and, where applicable, letting agents. Indeed, one debate that repeatedly resurfaced was whether it was preferable to rent via a letting agency or directly from a landlord.

James, who had always rented directly from private landlords until his recent debacle, concedes that he has been ‘very lucky’ with them. ‘They’ve normally been people who became accidental landlords rather than by-to-invest people,’ he explains. ‘And the reason I always try to get private landlords is that if you find a nice one and you can establish a reasonable relationship, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t work.’ In particular, his previous landlady was ‘quite up for bargaining’. She was selling the flat because she needed the money, and as she wanted to redecorate it, she gave James a reduced rent in return for doing some decorating. With letting agents, James believes that ‘the balance of power is definitely on the letting agent’s side, and the tenant feels they’ve got very little in the way of bargaining chips’.

This is a rather different take on the letting agent compared to that encountered in previous chapters: the ‘meat in the sandwich’ between the landlord and tenant, seeking to ensure the best possible outcomes for both parties. Indeed, Sammy rents her flat via a letting agent, but has managed to build a relationship with her landlady, even though she lives in Australia. Sammy feels that she knows more about her landlady’s sense of style than anything else, though has been copying her into every email that she has sent to the letting agent ‘in order to hopefully give them a bit of a kick’, such as when they failed to provide an inventory for over a year, and speaks of her as being on their side. ‘It’s almost like the letting agent is a bit of a barrier to getting things done,’ she says. This was not the first time that Sammy had encountered problems negotiating with letting agents, either. On two previous occasions, she had rented flats that required substantial building repairs, one due to a flood in the flat above causing her ceiling to cave in, and the other due to rapidly spreading damp and mould. On both occasions, ‘it was difficult to get the letting
agents to admit liability,’ she says, ‘because it’s a building repair, and they didn’t feel like it was their problem.’ Part of the issue with tenements is that building repairs are the joint responsibility of the owners of all affected flats, and it can be hard to get all involved on board. The landlords were not directly visible to Sammy in either case. Were the letting agents apparently reluctant to admit liability because the landlords were reluctant to admit liability, or were the letting agents themselves stalling the process, deliberately or otherwise?

Talking about a flat in Leith that she shared with her then partner a few years ago, Claire feels that the landlords were ‘using the letting agency as a very expensive answering machine’:

*When we moved in, we found the boiler wasn’t working properly. So, we reported this to the letting agency and they said, ‘Oh, we’ll have to check with the landlord if it’s okay to fix this’. Well that seems a bit bad, you should just fix this. So rather than sending up someone who was gas-certified, some handyman friend of the landlord’s turned up and he basically just said, ‘This is a waste of time me being here because I’m not touching that, I’m not gas-certified or anything,’ and went away again. So we went back to the agent and they were like, ‘Well, the landlord’s not going to pay for it to be fixed,’ and I was like, well they should. So basically, whenever we put a request for anything with the agents, their response was always, ‘But we’ll have to check with the landlord’ [mocking tone].* 

Claire surmises that the landlords probably realised that using the letting agents was a waste of money, as a few months later, they decided to take it back from the letting agents and rent it to her and her partner directly. That said, Claire suspects that the letting agents would have been ‘quite glad to be shot of the landlord as she was a thoroughly unpleasant woman and penny-pinching in the extreme’. Part of the problem, in her view, was that they were not technically doing anything illegal, which meant that they did not feel able to report them. If nothing else, stories such as this corroborate the extent to which the perceived success or otherwise of a tenancy is highly dependent upon the idiosyncratic relationships between the parties involved.

Indeed, sometimes these idiosyncrasies can manifest themselves in unexpected ways. When Emily and her partner rented a house in the Stockbridge Colonies, which they did for six years immediately prior to moving into their current more modern flat, some
difficulties arose due to the unconventional relationship between the letting agent and landlord. ‘It was slightly problematic in that our lease with the letting agents was with a deceased person,’ she explains, ‘and I think the flat may have been inherited by two people. It meant that with any maintenance issues, it took a ridiculously long time to sort out because they had to go to two different people at any decision.’ The lease included the name of the landlord followed by ‘(deceased)’. Although they consequently did not have any direct personal interaction with their landlord, he had left quite a lot of ornaments in the flat, as well as shoes and clothes. The ornaments had not been on display when they had viewed the house, but when they moved in, they found large china objects in every room, including the garden shed, which they had had to box up to avoid breaking them. This might be read as an unintentionally ironic take of the ‘absentee landlord’, but the deceased’s personality not only lives on in their formerly occupied property; they can continue to play a part in the property relations of the tenancy.

Building a positive personal relationship with one’s landlord is no guarantee of a successful tenancy, however. Christine had rented a flat in Morningside directly from a private landlord for over a year, and had built what she termed a ‘great relationship’ with him. There had been numerous problems with the maintenance of the building itself, which were seen to, but the big problem started – or rather finished – just after she asked her landlord for permission to have a cat:

I had heard nothing, but two weeks later, there was this sheriff officer at the door saying, ‘Here’s the notice to leave’. And I thought what?! The lease was fairly permissive about pets, I just had to ask, requests wouldn’t necessarily be refused... and in fact it wasn’t refused, it wasn’t even responded to, I was just told to go. I don’t know for definite that that’s what it was, I’m assuming that’s what it was, but they never told me.

The notice period for eviction was forty days. Christine then went to the Council’s Housing Options Team, who confirmed that it was legal, and then put her down as homeless, though she was able to find a new flat within the notice period. Particularly shocking for her was that this was the first time that she had ever had a negative experience of renting – she had never missed any rent payments, and landlords had previously told her that she had improved the condition of the property.
To the extent that any broader conclusions can be drawn from this data, participants report that the process of securing a tenancy is inconsistent, that they are limited by what they can find, that it is sometimes difficult to ensure that repairs are adequately carried out, and that there are constant anxieties over the prospect of rent increases and eviction. Perhaps none of this should be particularly surprising. Especially intriguing is the extent to which tenants find themselves having to negotiate the relationships between landlords and letting agents. Indeed, the idea that letting agents can be an obstacle to suitable property management, and that negotiating directly with private landlords is preferable, turned out to be a recurrent theme – especially if the landlord takes a personal interest in the property, and is willing to be flexible.

Evaluating the Private Rented Sector

None of the interviewees felt that staying in the private rented sector would be ideal in the long run, and all expressed a desire to be owner occupiers, but none believed that that would be a realistic option for the foreseeable future. Only Claire was slightly more optimistic, though admitted that she is ‘not really a grown-up yet’ and that a mortgage would be unobtainable for the next five years at least. She dislikes having landlords tell her that she cannot decorate her flat or have a pet, and having the constant possibility of eviction if they decide to sell the property, and thinks that she would ultimately prefer the security of owning her own house.

Before he moved into his current flat, James had looked into the possibility of buying a flat, but found that at most he would only be able to afford ‘the smallest flat in the worst part of town’.

*I’m almost thirty, I’ve got a secure job, an income and some savings, and in any former decade that would have been quite enough to get somewhere. I don’t particularly like that this country is one where you feel that a judge or a measure of success is whether you own property, and that you’re not really successful if you’re still renting. I don’t think it’s a good way to think about things, but from a financial point of view, you could be paying a lot less per month in a reasonable...*
mortgage than you are in rent, and at least at the end of it, you’d have an asset. But with house prices going up again, it keeps edging away from what is affordable.

For James, one of the biggest drawbacks of living in private rented housing is that there is ‘always an element of insecurity’. At the time of interview, he and his girlfriend had moved into their flat only three months ago, but were still buying furniture and sorting things out.

We’ve put all this effort in making somewhere nice and then the landlord might suddenly decide they want to sell it. Or they might think, ‘Next year, we’ll really put the rent up because there’s so much demand, and it went so quickly last time, so it’s going to go just as quickly again and we could get more’. And I know that because it’s so difficult to find a flat, a lot of people would just lump it, but that forces the rent up everywhere.

Emily agrees, and cannot see her partner and herself saving a deposit that they would need to buy somewhere. ‘Not unless we have some distant wealthy relative that we really didn’t know we had,’ she laughs. She does, however, find it slightly easier to imagine now that she and her partner have a child, because it gives them a lot less control over where they can live and how long they can live there for. Consequently, when they were looking for places to move to, they tried to make sure as far as possible that there was no imminent plan of selling the property. Whilst they do not find it to be such an issue at their current stage, they would be very keen to avoid unexpected eviction once the child has started school.

Sammy would also prefer to move into ‘that desirable category of the owner occupier’, but does not believe that that will happen any time soon:

I think that for a lot of people of my generation, our position as economic beings has been somewhat stunted as a result of the recession. That said, I’ve been thinking recently about whether being an owner occupier is necessarily so desirable. Would I actually want to have a property on my hands that I would have to maintain, and the costs associated with that? Maybe? But if it was a tenement flat, they’re crumbling in Edinburgh, and I think it’s hard to find one that doesn’t have some kind of problem. But I quite like tenements. I like the buildings, I like the high ceilings. And I despise new builds. I think it’s because I grew up in old houses, the kind of Victorian redbrick houses, and I feel like new-builds have no character.
Christine is the only interviewee who has previously been a homeowner, but says that she cannot afford to get back on the property ladder. She would like to get into social rented housing, but feels that this is not possible in Edinburgh, partly because she finds the system overly complicated.

I asked all the other participants if they had ever considered social rented housing, be it council housing or housing associations, and they all admitted that they had not, or at least had not very seriously. Certain responses stand out. James says that he does not think that people his age really think about social housing very much, ‘as if it was an option from a previous era or for different people’, and believes that he probably earns too much to fit the criteria. Likewise, Sammy confesses that she was not really aware of social housing as an option until she encountered it as part of her job, and has never considered it for herself. ‘I think that’s maybe a socioeconomic background thing,’ she says. ‘For lack of a better word, I think it’s a bit of a class thing. Some people know of it as an option, and for others, it just doesn’t really get on your radar.’

Class, then, remains the elephant in the room. Sammy was the only interviewee who mentioned ‘class’ directly. Indeed, she is one of very few people encountered in this entire thesis who ever explicitly mentioned the subject to me. Property Managers at Almond and Thompson, for instance, frequently spoke of ‘the nature of our clientele’, of ‘people who claim benefits’, and of ‘dodgy’ areas such as Pilton that the city council may appear to neglect, but this was not overtly couched in the specific idiom of ‘class’, even though the class implications were not hard for me to understand. I mentioned above that Mark at Shelter had regarded the interviewees as too middle-class to be sufficiently ‘representative’ of private sector tenants, which may give some indication as to the aims if not the reality of Shelter Scotland’s tenant engagement. It should be noted here that ‘class’ has been interpreted in educational and occupational terms here; in traditional Marxian terms, none of the interviewees are property owners, and all live in relative insecurity, paying rent to a landlord who, at the time of interviewing, could evict them for no particular reason at short notice. Has the expansion of the private rented sector challenged traditional notions of ‘class’, then? In some respects, yes, given that the private rented sector appears to gather increasing numbers of people from a range of different social, educational and occupational backgrounds into a particular set of property relations, due in no small part to the extent to which both former council and owner-
occupied properties are now rented out privately. But in other respects, no; other class indicators and markers remain clear enough to Shelter Scotland, and I hope should also be visible to the reader. It is notable, for instance, that only Christine expressed any desire to live in social rented housing, and even she admitted that she had not investigated the system very seriously – and, of course, she had previously been an owner occupier herself. More crucially for this chapter, class appears as a key indicator of those most likely to ‘engage’, while notions of class enter into Shelter Scotland’s ideas about whom should be ‘engaged’ or ‘engaged with’ – and in this instance, the two do not appear to overlap very greatly.

Conclusion

In presenting the above material, my intention was not only to provide further ethnographic description of the locally-found private rented sector from the vantage point of the tenant, but also to consider how the gathering of material of this type constitutes ‘tenant engagement’ from the perspective of Shelter Scotland. The above material, gleaned from interviews, can be seen in part as a particular ethnographic snapshot of life in the private rented sector from the vantage point of a set of tenants. It is not, however, based upon a random sample or an arbitrary selection of personal contacts. Rather, it is the result of employing some of Shelter Scotland’s own channels for tenant engagement. Thus, the data produced reflects those private sector tenants in Edinburgh who have chosen to engage with Shelter Scotland. The contrast with the tenants encountered indirectly in the previous chapters should be evident from ethnographic description if inherently hard to substantiate or quantify. Equally, this should be understood in the context of Shelter Scotland as an actor within the housing sector more broadly, and within the private rented sector specifically. Given Shelter’s apparent ability to influence the shaping of government policy – at least by their own definition – it is worth reflecting upon the kinds of data that their ‘engagement’ with their ‘service users’ might produce.

Taking together the Private Tenants’ Forum meeting in the opening vignette, the Tenant Engagement breakout session at the Make Renting Right conference, and the material from the interviews, certain key questions continue to stand out for me. Who has
been engaged with? How did we engage, and to what end? Indeed, is engagement an end in and of itself? Those ‘engaged’ or ‘engaged with’ may well not be in any sense ‘representative’ of private sector tenants in general – if this would even be possible – but they may in certain respects be construed as ‘service users’ of Shelter, even if the ‘service’ in this instance is primarily to give private sector tenants a forum to express their views to an agency that intersects the public and private sectors, and exists in part to influence government policy. As Brown et al (2017: 25) argue, ‘[m]eetings are spaces where practices are formalised and forms are practiced, through performances that participate in, even as they reconfigure and extend organisational imaginations’. The meetings of the Private Tenants’ Forum are, in this sense, a formal exercise in ‘engagement’, as were my interviews insofar as they were conducted on behalf of Shelter, and subject to Shelter’s requirements and regulations.

To return specifically to property management, whilst widening its scope, in what ways do Shelter Scotland’s ‘engagement’ practices contribute to the broader management of the private rented sector at a political level? The following chapter begins with an attempt to address this question.
Chapter 6: Making Renting Right?

Creating Consensus in the Private Rented Sector

It is about eight o’clock in the morning on Wednesday 24th June 2015. While getting ready to head out from the flat, I overhear my resident landlady, Yasmine, speaking to Fumiaki, our flatmate, at his bedroom door.

‘I’m going to give you two months’ notice to leave,’ Yasmine tells him.

‘Leave?’ He responds.

‘Yes. I know you’re working very hard on your PhD, but I think you’d be better off somewhere with a living room, maybe with other Japanese people, so that you can be more sociable.’

‘But it might be quite hard to find somewhere else,’ Fumiaki says.

‘I just don’t think this is the best place for you, and I feel responsible, so I’m going to give you two months to find another place.’

About half an hour later, I am sitting on one of Edinburgh’s controversial new trams, contemplating what had just happened on the way to ‘Make Renting Right’, Shelter Scotland’s private rented sector conference, organised in conjunction with the Scottish Association of Landlords. Hopefully I will not find myself in a comparable situation to that of Fumiaki during the final stages of writing my PhD thesis, though I know full well that the present tenancy regulations cannot prevent such an eventuality.

From Consensus to the Commons

The conference, although constituting a miniscule proportion of the Scottish private rented sector’s output, turns out, as we will see in this chapter, to be a comparatively rare occasion on which a particular microcosm of the sector – landlords, letting agents, tenants, politicians, campaigners, administrators – gathers together in a single venue. Part of my motivation in beginning this final ethnographic chapter with a depiction of the conference, then, is to reconvene the private rented sector both as a locally-found concept and as an
object of ethnographic description. In one sense, it draws together many of the actors and themes encountered in previous chapters, both literally and metaphorically, and sees ‘the sector’ perform itself in an observable time-limited space.

Throughout the conference, the Chair repeatedly emphasised the need for delegates to ‘reach consensus’. Whilst it is important not to exaggerate the personal influence of the Chair or any one person here, I contend that his rhetoric of ‘consensus’ – detailed below – gives some indication of how particular moral and ethical virtues are disseminated (though not necessarily adopted) throughout the sector (and indeed beyond). It would only be through the further tracing of associations that the greater extent of their influence, modified and negotiated or otherwise, may be known, and there is not the scope for such an undertaking here. Drawing from both linguistic anthropology and ritual theory, however, I consider the ways in which the performance of consensus contributes to the social production of ethics in spaces such as the conference and, by extension, perhaps more broadly within the private rented sector.

Does the continued reproduction of the private rented sector depend upon consensus? It would not be difficult to present ethnographic examples from my own fieldwork to illustrate the lack of ‘consensus’ amongst those involved with the Edinburgh private rented sector, and in one sense, this chapter seeks to deconstruct the rhetoric of consensus by doing precisely that. Despite this apparent lack of consensus, however, I do contend that there is an element of the commons – a notion strongly associated with The Tragedy of the Commons by Hardin (1968), largely from an ecological perspective, and which has more recently and partly from the vantage point of anthropology been explored in Releasing the Commons, edited by Amin & Howell (2016). Although there has been a shift in terms of the proportion of housing ownership from the public to the private in recent decades, individual private property rights are not absolute; they remain conferred and regulated by the state – a principle contested openly by nobody at the Make Renting Right conference, as we will see. Thus, there appears to be consensus around at least the right of government, legitimised through democratic elections and formalised public consultations, to regulate the sector according to perceived common benefit. Equally, beyond the purely legal and political, the built form that hosts the bulk of private rented housing in Edinburgh – the tenement, at least as defined by the Tenement (Scotland) Act 2004 – engenders an element of communal living, or at least of shared physical space.
Beyond the conference rhetoric, what, then, are the relations between the consensus and the commons within the private rented sector, and how do they contribute to its creation and constitution? I return to these questions later.

**Make Renting Right**

I leave the tram at Haymarket and head over to the Hilton Hotel. Upon entry, seeing large numbers of men in suits and ties, including the usually casually-attired Shelter staff, it occurs to me that I might be slightly underdressed. ‘Here’s your name badge, sign up to a Breakout Session, coffee and bacon rolls are over there,’ I am told as I sign in. I mill around drinking coffee for a while before deciding to take my seat in the main conference room.

The main conference room is square with no windows. At the other end of the room, opposite the main doors, is a stage and projector screen. On the right-hand side of the stage, in front of the screen, is a podium. The floor space in the room is set out with oval-shaped tables surrounded by chairs all facing the stage. Choosing an empty chair, I find resting on it a Shelter Scotland cloth bag complete with a conference pack – a printed agenda, list of delegates, speaker biographies, red Shelter-branded pen, Scottish Gas (the conference sponsors) promotional material and even a bag of blue and white Scottish Gas jelly beans. I realise that one of the women sitting at the next table is Christine, one of my interviewees from Shelter’s Edinburgh Private Tenants’ Forum. Saying that she was pleased to see someone she recognised, she comes over to sit beside me and we chat for a while about my research, her holiday, and the problems she is having persuading her tenement block’s other occupants – and their landlords – to agree to the installation of a bicycle rack in the stairwell. The hundred or so conference delegates continue to trickle in.

After about fifteen minutes, Richard Forrester, Chief Executive of the Scottish Association of Landlords, and our Chair for today, enters the stage to welcome us to the conference. According to the piece of paper in front of me, he is ‘widely recognised as one of the foremost experts on all aspects of the Scottish private rented sector’. He represents the Scottish Association of Landlords on a number of Scottish Government
committees, is Managing Director of Asquith’s Property Investment Managers, is Chairman of Landlord Accreditation Scotland, and holds public appointments as a member of both the Private Rented Housing Panel and the Home Owners Housing Panel. An immaculately presented and confidently spoken man of about fifty years of age, he proclaims to us that ‘the aim of the day is to create consensus – to be achieved by lunchtime’. He tells us that we must ‘recognise landlords as investors while ensuring that tenants have a place that they can call home’.

Swiftly, Andrew White, Director of Shelter Scotland is invited on stage to give the Opening Address. He has been in his current post since 2008, having previously worked in other roles within Shelter England, and as an independent consultant with various bodies including the Home Office, the Rough Sleepers Unit at the Department of the Environment, the Social Exclusion Unit in the Cabinet Office in the UK government, and a number of NGOs. He begins by asking us whether ‘expansion of the private rented sector by default’ is ‘sustainable’. He asserts that the time has come to ‘rethink’ the policies that were designed in the 1980s, thanks Scottish Gas for paying for ten private sector tenants to attend the conference, and calls for a ‘new deal’ for tenants and landlords in which being a letting agent is a ‘vocation’, in which investors can expect ‘a good return’, and in which tenants – again – have ‘a place to call home’.

Mr White proceeds by outlining his four-fold vision: ‘strong consumers, effective resolution of disputes, intelligent regulation, and tenancy reform’. He assures us that ‘as long as the terms are right, regulation is not the bogeyman it is made out to be’. Tenancy reform should produce ‘good consumers, with tenants at its heart’. It should ensure ‘predictability and stability for private renters, and a commitment to security of tenure’. The ‘balance between landlords and tenants is currently wrong’ as the current system ‘only offers disruption and dislocation for a large number of families in Scotland’. The speech continues for about fifteen minutes. ‘It is essential we bring private landlords with us – and I repeat with us – on this journey,’ he concludes. ‘The prize could be more long-term investment, improved reputation, and better energy efficiency.’

Mr Forrester thanks Mr White and introduces Kate Milne, a research fellow in housing and urban affairs at the London School of Economics, to deliver the Keynote Speech. She has, according to the biography sheet, ‘written extensively about the housing systems and the financing of both private and social housing in the UK and across Europe’. She is
likely in her forties, sounds to be from North America, and has ‘just got off the plane from London’. Aided by the projector, for about the next three quarters of an hour, we are treated to a plethora of comparative statistics about private rented housing from across the Western world, combined with snippets about how specific policies have worked in practice in different places. In particular, we hear that Scotland is unusual: the private rented sector is growing here, unlike in most of the other countries studied.

Following applause, Mr Forrester thanks Dr Milne and informs us that we now have a fifteen-minute break before going to our Breakout Sessions. The purpose of the Breakout Sessions, he reminds us, is to ‘reach consensus’. This is when I attended the session on ‘Tenant Engagement’ detailed in the previous chapter.

After lunch, we hear from more speakers in the main conference room. First up is Helena Oudenbosch from the International Union of Tenants, whom I had met at the breakout session. Next is Susan Wenham, Founding Director of Homes for Good, Scotland’s first ‘social enterprise letting agency’ and first ‘dedicated private sector social landlord’. The aim of Homes for Good, Ms Wenham explains is to ‘provide housing for social good’. Based in Glasgow, they have apparently made dilapidated houses usable in order to provide housing to those ‘with housing need’. Showing us photographs of bathrooms, Ms Wenham stresses that ‘everything has to match and be beautiful’, which apparently ‘drives [her] team up the wall’, but a house or flat ‘needs to look like a home’. They try to ensure that rent is no more than 30-35% of a tenant’s take-home pay. We learn that they have invested £6 million, purchased and developed 120 properties over the past three years, and supported over five hundred tenants during the past eight years. The practices of Homes for Good, she argues, lead to a substantial improvement in living standards, improved physical and mental health, and progress towards economic activity through training and increased employment. Throughout her presentation, I mentally compare the business model presented – and the language used – with Almond and Thompson.

And now for what we have apparently all been looking forward to: Mr Forrester thanks Ms Wenham and introduces Margaret Burgess MSP, Minister for Housing and Welfare. She is not here to give a speech, but to be interviewed by Mr Forrester. Ms Burgess and Mr Forrester sit together on two comfortable chairs that have been set up on the far left-hand side of the stage, facing half towards us and half towards each-other in the manner
of a television talk show, microphones in hand. The Minister – a small but authoritatively-spoken woman with a peroxide perm – has held her current portfolio since 2012, but will be retiring from Parliament completely in 2016.

Mr Forrester asks Ms Burgess how she will manage ‘diverse stakeholders in the private rented sector’. She responds that it is ‘important to listen to people and not mislead people’. The new bill, she tells us, is trying to achieve both security for tenants and safeguards for landlords and investors in the sector. ‘I do believe,’ she continues, ‘that tenants should have the right to stay in a property for as long as they like if they want to, but I also believe that landlords should have the right to get tenants out if they have a good reason’.

Mr Forrester asks whether we should be looking at rent levels. The Minister indicates that this is not currently on the agenda, but that they want to ensure ‘predictability for tenants’ and to prevent ‘rent hikes’. This question is doubtless in response to the mention, though not proposal, of the idea of rent controls in the Scottish Government’s consultation paper, and the way in which groups such as the Living Rent Campaign have explicitly agitated for such controls as a result, which the Scottish Association of Landlords strongly oppose. But we do not linger on it. ‘I very much hope,’ she continues, ‘that the legislation will professionalise the sector. I think it will boost consumer confidence. The private rented sector has not got the reputation it should have. I meet wonderful landlords, but I know as an MSP that there are many landlords and letting agents who are letting the sector down, though it is not always their fault.’

The questions are then opened to the floor. One letting agent expresses concern that the legislation will effectively ban short-term tenancies, creating problems for Edinburgh Festival lets and undermining ‘predictability’ for students. Another letting agent warns of the ‘danger of unintended consequences’, suggesting that the removal of the ‘no fault’ ground for eviction would make landlords more risk averse. ‘I get it's important for tenants to have security of tenure,’ he says, ‘but landlords will inevitably exercise a degree of self-interest’.

The Minister does not directly respond to these points, but assures us that ‘others will have opportunities to propose amendments to the legislation at the committee stage’. She then states her ‘ideal vision’ for the private rented sector: ‘A place to stay, a place to call home, good quality housing and consumer confidence. In five years’ time, I'd want to
look back and say I played a wee bit in making the private rented sector a sector of choice. Housing is not about buildings, it’s about people and communities, so we should talk to the stakeholders.’ The session concludes.

And now for a brief interlude: ‘How Scottish Gas and Shelter can help’. John Noon, a qualified Gas Service Engineer and now Head of Business Development at Scottish Gas, talks to us for fifteen minutes about gas and electrical safety, stressing that ‘one cannot be too vigilant’. This, I suppose, is the commercial break.

Following this, we hear from Aiden Walker, formerly principal solicitor of the Housing Law Service for Shelter Scotland. Mr Walker talks us through, with the aid of the projector, what the new private sector housing bill is likely to involve according to the proposals from the most recent consultation paper. This leads into the final session of the day: the panel discussion entitled ‘The new private sector tenancy – are we making the right reforms?’ During the break, an oblong table has been set up on the stage, with a series of chairs on one side facing the audience.

The panel, from left to right, is as follows: Jane Huntingdon, Chair of the Living Rent Campaign; Brian Arnott, Head of Communications and Policy at Shelter Scotland; Katherine Britten, Policy Manager at the Scottish Association of Landlords; Susan Wenham from Homes for Good, and Aiden Walker. Mr Forrester asks each panel member to make a statement in response to the title question.

Jane states that we are ‘moving in the right direction’, but that she thinks that all the grounds for eviction should be discretionary rather than mandatory, and reminds delegates that rent controls are something that her campaign is looking for in the future. She concludes by reiterating that it should be about ‘homes first and foremost, at the forefront of all legislation’.

Brian Arnott, a man perhaps in his thirties, welcomes the general direction, indicating that ‘far too many people don’t have a sense of place to call “home”’. Apparently, he tells us, there are now 350,000 households in the private rented sector, of which 80,000 are families with children. 46% of calls to the Shelter Scotland helpline last year were people from the private rented sector. Mr Lang expresses hope that Shelter can work ‘constructively with colleagues in the landlord sector for a good deal of landlords and tenants’.
Katherine Britten, admittedly much younger person than I had expected for the Policy Manager at the Scottish Association of Landlords, states forcefully that ‘the Scottish Association of Landlords does not agree with the proposals contained within Shelter Scotland’s Make Renting Right campaign’ and goes on to tell us that ‘aspects of what is being proposed do not deliver for landlords and will have unintended consequences for tenants’. Apparently, 92% of her organisation’s members are concerned that they will not be able to deal with antisocial behaviour, and 31% are likely to remove some or all of their property from the sector if the ‘no fault’ grounds for eviction are removed. There is concern that student rents would, under the new proposals, produce either periods of voids or longer leases than what students would like. She warned that landlords who pride themselves on offering a good service will stop investing, reducing housing supply.

Finally, Susan Wenham stresses that she is not going to give the letting agent’s view, but notes that the vast majority of tenancies are ended by the tenant. ‘If relationships are effective, landlords and letting agents should not have to apply the grounds for eviction very often at all – but they definitely should not all be discretionary’.

Members of the audience then pose a number of questions. ‘How can landlords dodge the system?’ ‘Should we not ensure that the current legislation is enforced before we bring in new legislation?’ ‘Is Katherine Britten scaremongering?’ It is this third question that attracts the most interest. Mr Arnott argues that the new legislation would ‘give a long-term guarantee and yield for landlords’. Ms Wenham interjects: ‘Perhaps the 31% figure shows a lack of understanding amongst landlords. Should landlords have a social conscience? Everyone has invested in property for different reasons, but what the sector needs is good quality properties and to provide people a home.’

Mr Forrester returns to the podium to draw both the current session and the conference to a close. ‘I think that the consensus that has been achieved today is that the private rented sector is essential to provide much-needed housing in Scotland. Tenants need to have a place they can call home. Landlords and investors need to provide this.’
Performing Consensus

Sitting on the tram back home, I contemplate the ‘consensus’ that we have reached today. What was it again? Have we not just heard a series of rather lively disagreements, complete with accusations of scaremongering? Indeed, Katherine Britten forcefully pronounced that she, or perhaps rather the collective body for which she works – let’s not elide the personal into the corporate here just yet – does not agree with Shelter Scotland’s proposals. Was the ‘consensus’ simply an uncontroversial platitude, or a lowest common denominator to which all present could easily subscribe? No, some present, including at least one member of the panel discussion, would not have accepted that the private rented sector is ‘essential’ to provide much-needed housing in Scotland. So, what is the consensus here, whose consensus is it, and how is it produced – if, indeed, it even is produced?

The theme of consensus as an ethnographic category invites reflection upon the notion of the ‘social consensus’, developed by Rapport (1986, 1997, 2001), that allows meaningful if ambiguous and often discordant interaction within commonly-held conceptual parameters that are created and constituted in social discourse. To paraphrase and transpose Rapport (1986: 49) to the series of interactions above, participants in the panel discussion accept the reality of the Scottish private rented sector as something that they can discuss together, even though their premises and ideas are not similar to each other. This has echoes of what Wittgenstein (1974 [1953]: 5) describes as the ‘language game’, whereby interaction is composed of an aggregation of diverse language-games connected by family resemblances. ‘Language-games’, in this context, refer to activities interwoven with language, such as asking questions, giving orders or guessing riddles – activities that we constantly recreate and modify as we learn them and take part in them. Learning and deploying the rules of interaction may indeed give rise to the perception of a social or communicative order. This social consensus, at least, provides the basis upon which claims to consensus itself can be made.

Beyond this purely theoretical notion of consensus is the (at least proclaimed) practice of consensus during formal meetings, and we may see here some echoes from the existing literature. For instance, Bailey (1965: 11) argues that consensus-based decision-making is more popular amongst groups that ‘set a high value on rationality and behave as if there
is a correct solution to every problem’ – such as faculty meetings of heads of department in a university – because ‘they have as an article of faith the belief that if they argue constructively they will eventually agree upon the correct course of action’. More recently, in the public meetings of the Occupy movement in Madrid, as portrayed by Jiménez & Estalella (2017: 115), achieving consensus ‘became the raison d’être of assembling, the mechanism for its perpetual motion’. In that context, the meeting’s facilitators ‘aimed to work as the assembly’s sensorium, making sure that the method of consensus would do double duty as a device for political reasoning and bargaining, at the same time as it assured the assembly’s singular expression as a knowing and caring body’. The stress should, however, be on some echoes. As conference chair, Mr Forrester deploys no methods of consensus analogous to those in an Occupy assembly (e.g. sitting in circles, using hand signals, and a team of facilitators whose job it is to ensure that everybody present can at least tolerate the decision that is made). It is not even clear that any decision was reached by consensus at the Make Renting Right conference; the idea that a consensus had been achieved was simply declared by the person who was ritually positioned to do so at the close of the event.

Thus, ‘consensus’ is neither merely an analytical tool nor just a method of decision-making; it is actively and explicitly deployed as a moral category. ‘The aim of today is to create consensus,’ Mr Forrester informs us in his welcoming speech, emphasis mine. And apparently, so positive is consensus that its achievement may be proclaimed not in the absence of disagreement, but in spite of disagreement. We might, then, view the claim of consensus as an example of what Rapport (1994: 89) terms as ‘the situated use of conciliar rhetoric’, that allows the conference delegates to ‘become a group with both a public and private face, while succeeding in remaining, as individuals, differently motivated, attached and satisfied’. Distinctions may, in the vein of Devereux (1978), be made between the motivations of individual participants and the formalised motivation of the collective – the latter of which is, in this instance, controlled by the performance of the conference chair.

It is worth returning here to the argument advanced by Macpherson (1978: 4) that property is both a ‘political relation between persons’ and an ‘enforceable claim’. Although ‘this enforceability is what makes it a legal right’, Macpherson (1978: 11) argues, ‘the enforceability itself depends on society’s belief that it is a moral right’ and
thus requires a ‘justifying theory’ or legitimising narrative. Is there a moral consensus around property rights? Evidently not in this instance, or at least not as far as specific rights or regulations are concerned. At most, there is a social consensus around the idea that property, is, in some sense, a moral right, and around the premises of the debate more broadly. Or at least, there is sufficient consensus here that meaningful discourse on the subject is possible.

If there is no underlying moral consensus that structures property relations, how are justifying theories or legitimising narratives of property produced, and how do they contribute to the enforceability of property rights? In arguing that ethics stems from speech and human action, Lambek (2010: 62) indirectly offers some possible answers. According to Lambek, ethical criteria are ‘embedded in our use of language or established by means of the relatively formal orders of acts and utterances that anthropologists describe as ritual and that have as their core the illocutionary function of speech acts’, shaping but never determining how we act. He goes on to argue that it is in ‘the definitive acts and utterances we refer to as ritual that particular criteria are simultaneously established, acknowledged in principle, and rendered applicable in practice’. Through acts of performance, such as Mr Forrester’s speeches at the opening and close of the conference, particular moral or ethical criteria pertaining both to the private rented sector and to the virtue of consensus may be produced. In the vein of Bourdieu (1977), the aim here is not to uncover a hidden belief system, but to show how particular virtues are created in practice. There is, à la Derrida (1976), no outside-text for at least the purposes of my analysis. I contend that the discourse itself is part of the creation and constitution of such ethical criteria.

Might, then, Mr Forrester’s closing speech be understood as a ritualised performance of consensus? Bell (1992) rejects the idea that ritual merely symbolises commonly-held pre-existing beliefs or unites beliefs and bodies into a community of practice, and instead argues that ritual creates a momentary illusion of consensus that, for participants, temporarily masks some of the diversity. Did we, the conference delegates, momentarily imagine that we had reached a consensus? Personally, I did not believe that any consensus had been reached, and nor did Jane Huntingdon from the Living Rent Campaign when I spoke to her about it afterwards. Nonetheless, had the idea of consensus at least been ritually planted? Ritual, according to Bell, does not serve to homogenise belief, but rather
makes itself available for negotiated appropriation. Participants reflect upon it, utilise it, modify it, debate it or even reject it – as Jane and I did – but its traces remain present. In making a ritualised or semi-ritualised claim to consensus – performing consensus, one might say – a particular moral judgment is added to the discourse of, in this instance, the private rented sector. Such judgments are forever ripe for re-evaluation – as, indeed, they are being re-evaluated right now in this text – but, as part of particular chains of discourse, their influence may continue.

Earlier in this chapter, I asked about the relations between consensus and the commons within the private rented sector, and how they contribute to its creation and constitution. If the performance of consensus does not, in and of itself, imply an actual consensus of belief, or even the belief in the existence of a consensus, does it at least contribute to the production of a common space in which objectives aimed at promoting (perceived) common interests are created and advanced? In answering these questions, I turn first to the Living Rent Campaign as an organisation that is actively seeking specified changes to tenancy legislation – changes, I contend, that would signify a shift towards the commons if enacted.

The Living Rent Campaign

It is one o’clock in the afternoon on a weekday and we are assembled outside a letting agency’s office in Stockbridge, an affluent and fashionable area immediately to the north of Edinburgh’s even more salubrious eighteenth-century New Town in the city centre. We set up a wallpaper-pasting table and attach the green plastic Living Rent Campaign banner to the front of it. Badges and postcards are brought out. A cardboard model of a tenement building, into which signatories can post their completed postcards, is set up on the table. We stand with our backs to the letting agency office, who have apparently closed for the afternoon due to our presence. This specific location was chosen because the letting agency in question has allegedly been charging illegal fees and failing to comply with the legal requirement to put tenants’ deposits into a ‘Safe Deposits’ scheme – the scheme, introduced in 2013, that requires that tenants’ deposits be held securely by
a third party who can also act as an independent adjudicator in the event of any disputes over the deposit at the end of a tenancy.

There are seven of us here in total. I position myself by the stall, while most of the others approach passers-by with the petition postcards. Ross is clearly a seasoned campaigner, is unfazed by this, and will confidently approach anyone. The message is straightforward: ‘Is your rent too high?’

To which the answer, for most of those who stop, is a clear ‘yes’. Perhaps a quarter of passers-by stop to sign the petition. Conversations are rarely long, but many are tenants who have at least a brief story to tell: sudden rent increases, repairs not carried out, unexpected evictions. Others complain more generally about rent levels in Edinburgh, or about the state of the housing market – stuck in the private rented sector, impossible to buy anywhere now, not enough social housing.

This is one of the Living Rent Campaign’s principal activities. The campaign itself was initiated in October 2014 by members of the Edinburgh Private Tenants Action Group in response to the Scottish Government’s Consultation on a New Tenancy for the Private Sector. The founders were aware of Shelter’s Making Renting Right campaign, but felt variously that it did not go far enough, or that it was too landlord-friendly, or that it was insufficiently ‘engaged’ with tenants. Many had also been actively involved in campaigning for a Yes vote in the independence referendum and were looking for a new project. Originally, the Edinburgh Private Tenants’ Action Group had been established as a ‘grassroots’ organisation to represent what they perceived to be the interests of private tenants in Edinburgh and had previously campaigned against unlawful tenancy fees, often by running street stalls and by staging small demonstrations outside the offices of letting agencies, similar to this one.

Ostensibly, the Living Rent Campaign as of 2015 has three political aims. The first is for the introduction of legal limits to the rent levels charged by landlords. The second is to abolish the no-fault grounds for repossession at the end of a fixed-term tenancy, and to give tenants the right to appeal all evictions. The third is to provide a combination of flexibility and security for tenants by ensuring that they know that they will have accommodation in the short-term without having to lock themselves into long-term contracts. The campaign organised a petition, both postcard-based and online, supporting these three aims in response to the Scottish Government’s consultation. Activists, mostly
aged under thirty, have engaged in door-to-door canvassing and set up street stalls to collect signatories. Whilst the campaign began in Edinburgh, groups elsewhere in Scotland, most notably Glasgow and Aberdeen, have also emerged, largely as a result of activists’ existing personal networks. Through these activities, the campaign was able to deliver over two thousand template responses to the Scottish Government by the close of the consultation in December 2014. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the Scottish Government decided to launch a second consultation on substantially the same topic in April 2015. Consequently, the Living Rent Campaign repeated their efforts, on this occasion collecting around five thousand responses. This is where we are now.

‘I'm surprised we're doing so well here,’ Ross says to me during a lull. ‘Stockbridge is seen as an affluent area, and I thought it would be mostly owner occupiers and landlords here, but it's not. Or there's just a lot of middle-class do-gooders.’

A smartly-dressed woman comes to the stall and asks what it is all about. Joe, another activist, outlines the aims of the campaign. She thanks him, takes a postcard without signing it, and walks off.

‘Landlord,’ Joe says. ‘If they want information but don’t sign up, then they’re landlords trying to keep tabs on what's going on.’

Jane and Joe go back to engaging passers-by, and Erdrun comes to join me at the stall. She is in her early twenties, and is originally from the United States, though her father now lives in East Lothian. She has lived in Edinburgh since coming to Scotland as a student, and she came in contact with the Living Rent Campaign via Ross, whom she knew from student politics. I ask her what she makes of the campaign:

I think this is a great campaign as it’s very sort of grassroots and community based. I think we need to do politics that connect to real working-class communities and I find Living Rent does this very effectively. Being on these stalls, I’ve had some of the most positive contact I’ve had in the Edinburgh community my entire time here. I’ve just been really surprised by how positive people are in many different communities. Last week, I did a stall in Leith, and now this one in quite a posh area. But reactions are actually much the same. And if you engage people in conversation, people who are obviously from very different class backgrounds and different life stages are all very receptive. And it’s encouraging as an activist as well – sometimes you forget in this bubble that it's important to talk to real people.
After a while, another woman, younger and more casually dressed than the first, comes to the stall.

‘I am a landlord,’ she says slightly apologetically, ‘but I support you. I try to do my best for my tenants, but I think there are so many landlords out there who don’t, and they need to be brought up to standard. I also know how hard it is for many tenants.’

‘We’re not anti-landlord,’ Joe says in response, ‘we just think that there needs to be rent controls and security of tenure for tenants. It’s great to have the support of someone like you.’

The woman signs the postcard, drops it into the cardboard tenement post-box, thanks us, and walks off.

‘There does seem to be a bit of landlord guilt going on,’ Joe comments. ‘Especially the accidental landlords who feel a bit embarrassed about what they’re doing. They come to us quite apologetic, almost like they’re trying to make amends.’

‘I don’t like the term “accidental landlords”,’ Jane interjects. “Oh dear, I’ve accidentally ended up owning and renting out an extra property and getting an income on it!” None of us even own one property, so I don’t think we should feel sorry for them. They might have inherited it, but they still have a choice whether or not to keep it.’

A man drives up in a dark Volkswagen 4x4 and winds down the front window. He is aged about forty and has his young son, perhaps aged around eleven, with him.

‘Good on you,’ he calls out. ‘I’m a landlord and I let my property out through them, and Christ, they are awful. Always bagging money, charging illegal fees, not responding to the tenants or to me. Charlie, the owner of that agency is lounging about in Tenerife as we speak. I’m always emailing him complaining, but he does nothing.’ The man parks his car, gets out and signs a petition postcard. His young son signs one too. ‘I’ll be emailing Charlie to tell him I’ve signed in support of the campaign,’ he calls out to us as gets back into his car to drive off. The rest of us laugh and wave.

**Commoning the Private Rented Sector**

If there was little in the way of political agreement at the *Make Renting Right* conference despite the rhetoric of consensus, it might be easier to argue that a consensus of sorts had
emerged around the Living Rent Campaign stall that afternoon in Stockbridge – at least regarding the disagreeableness of the letting agency in question. The statement that they are ‘not anti-landlord’ – echoing that encountered frequently within Shelter Scotland – combined with their actions on the stall certainly indicate a willingness to find common ground with potential adversaries. More significant in my view, however, is the campaign’s public aims, and the way in which the campaign itself requires consensus amongst its participants with regards to these aims.

On one level, the stated aims of the Living Rent Campaign seek to utilise the democratic process in order to augment the relative property rights of private sector tenants over their rented housing whilst necessarily limiting those of landlords with regards to rent levels and evictions. If enacted, such a process would, I argue, constitute a minor and partial transfer of property rights from the private to the commons, albeit without transforming private property into public property. We might, then, regard such a process – which partially came into force via the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 – as example of what Harvey (2012: 73) terms the ‘social practice of commoning’ in which ‘[t]he common is not to be construed [...] as a particular kind of thing, asset or even social process, but as an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its livelihood’. Central to this practice, Harvey argues, is that ‘the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being created as common shall be both collective and non-commodified—off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations’. Activists may be ‘not anti-landlord’ in principle, at least insofar as their public statements are concerned, but this is not to say that they accept the ‘logic of market exchange and market valuations’ as a moral basis for the management of the private rented sector – indeed, two activists explicitly rejected such a notion later on that afternoon when faced with a passer-by seemingly aghast at the prospect of ‘rent controls’.

On another level, however, the practice of commoning undertaken by Living Rent Campaign activists does not merely concern policy outcomes. As seen above, Erdrun emphasised the need to ‘do politics that connect to real working-class communities’ and to ‘engage people in conversation’ – language that has clear echoes of Shelter Scotland’s emphasis upon ’engagement’. In seeking to build a movement that connects and engages,
Living Rent Campaign activists do, in this other sense, partake in commoning to the extent that they aim to foster participation in issue-based political activism around a common concern. And indeed, much as, according to Reed (2016: 54), the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 ‘introduced common rights to enjoy privately owned countryside, but it also, from an animal welfare perspective, introduced a common opportunity and common obligation to carrying out monitoring on behalf of wild creatures’, so too did the Scottish Government’s consultation on private sector tenancies introduce a common opportunity to ‘engage’ and ‘connect’, not only for the activists who formed the Living Rent Campaign, but also for other interest groups within the private rented sector, as we saw during the Make Renting Right conference.

If activists and interest groups may be engaging in the commoning of the private rented sector in a number of different ways, to what extent may private rented housing in Edinburgh be conceived as part of the ‘urban commons’, or at least potential commons? Despite shared physical space, it is, after all, a site of private property, at least as far as legal rights are concerned – and there is little in the way of active resistance to this in urban Scotland, where squatting is illegal and comparatively rare. It is useful here to turn to Amin & Howell (2016: 14), who argue that the commons might best be conceived as an ‘enrolement’ rather than a resource, as this may allow us to avoid ‘easy but misleadingly straightforward dichotomies, between public-facing altruism, between private right and common right, or even perhaps between the commons and the world of property’. The lines, therefore, may be blurred in practice if not necessarily in theory. Does, for instance, living in an Edinburgh tenement block with flats of mixed tenure entail living in a common space? To address these issues, I return to ‘property management’ by introducing an additional and potentially surprising actor in the process: the lone owner-occupier in a tenement block of privately rented flats who finds herself trying to ‘manage’ the different letting agencies responsible for the properties in the building. Whilst events such as Shelter Scotland’s Make Renting Right conference can bring representatives of ‘the sector’ together spatially at a macro level, the tenement block finds itself the site of interconnection – and conflict – at a micro level.
The Unpaid Factor

At the Living Rent Campaign stall in Stockbridge, a woman with cropped grey hair comes over to speak to me. She expresses support for the campaign’s aims and speaks of how her daughter's experience of renting in Edinburgh today is substantially worse than her own experiences in London in the 1960s. After talking with her for a few minutes, partly about my research, I ask if she would be willing to meet me again later to talk about her views and experiences in more detail. She agrees, introducing herself as Sue.

The next time I meet Sue is in her flat in Stockbridge, just around the corner from where the stall had been. Her flat is on the second floor in a traditional four-storey sandstone tenement building. After ringing the bell, Sue buzzes me into the stairwell and I proceed up the steep and narrow spiral staircase. It is not the most ornate of stairs, nor the best kept, and more enclosed than others, but is free from clutter or rubbish.

Sue greets me from the landing as I approach the front door of her flat, leads me through the hall and into the living room, and invites me to ‘take a pew’. The living room is a small square room that looks out to the front of the building onto the street. It is tidy, plainly decorated in off-white, and minimally furnished with a few antique objects, including three small landscape paintings and a modest bookcase. A wooden antique clock sits atop the mantelpiece above the cast-iron fireplace. Though built in the late nineteenth century, this tenement block does not have the high ceilings and wall-length sash windows found in many other older Edinburgh tenements. My ‘pew’ is a dark mahogany French-style Empire chair with a green-striped silk cushion cover. Sue, wearing a white blouse, plain dark cardigan, casual trousers and silver-rimmed glasses, sits down on an identical chair opposite me at a small square dining table made from matching wood, positioned against the wall.

As we sit down, I tell Sue that I could not help but admire the spinning wheel in the hall as I came in. Inevitably, this leads to a discussion about my interest in knitting and the days that I spent in the Shetland Textile Working Museum a few years ago. Sue had grown up in London and had worked in advertising as a young woman there in the 1960s, renting a flat in Kensington and attending house parties with diverse crowds. But in the 1970s, she moved with her then husband to a cottage in a sparsely populated area of the
Scottish Highlands near Inverness, where she worked as a self-employed knitwear designer, and later as a therapist.

‘We were hippies, let’s not beat around the bush,’ she says. Shortly afterwards, she and her husband had a daughter, Nina. Sue and her husband have long since separated, though she remained in the area for thirty-five years. ‘When you’re living in a place where all you can see is a mountain and sheep, you don’t really expect to be very interested in politics,’ she says. ‘Which in some ways makes the hassle we’ve had with the private rented sector since moving to Edinburgh all the more extreme.’

Sue bought the flat in 2011 when she moved down to Edinburgh to look after her daughter Nina, now aged thirty-nine, who rents a ground-floor tenement flat on the same street. Nina had been working in Edinburgh, but became disabled in her early thirties. Nina rarely leaves her flat, cannot easily manage stairs and requires regular care, which Sue provides.

Directly next-door to Sue is a flat owned by Nina’s former letting agent – Sarah – that is currently let out to ‘Italians’. Like all the tenement blocks on this row, it is a listed building, which means, amongst a great many other things, that it is forbidden to ‘drill holes through the outside front wall to install a boiler’. Sue recalls how she was ‘nearly killed by Sarah’ when her builders drilled through the front wall from the inside:

A great lump of rock fell onto the little bridge where you stand to go through our main door, so if I’d been a foot further forward, I wouldn’t be with you today. So I stormed round there, and the builders had rung her up, and she’d said, ‘Just do it!’ So I told the Council, and they can’t be bothered. And once one does it, the others do it, so the whole of that wall is now covered with pipes sticking out and God knows what. It just looks a dog’s biscuit all in a few months from one person being selfish and pushy. But I found her on the internet! Ha!

Apparently, Sarah is neither registered as a landlord nor established as a formal letting agency company. She claims to be acting on behalf of a friend, who, according to Sue, is in reality her father. Sue has met Sarah recently because some people in the block next-door are trying to hassle Sue’s block into paying off an old statutory notice and she turned up at the meeting. Sue recalls that she was rather rude about her suggestion to apply to Historic Scotland for a grant to do the building up and repair the chimney stack. The
chimney stack specifically is at risk of falling over, but Sarah was not interested, even if it falls through the ceiling.

‘I’m only on the second floor, it doesn’t matter if it goes through,’ Sue recalls Sarah’s response in a mocking tone. ‘The people on the third floor can die, but the people on the second floor will probably be fine. It doesn’t matter. She’s very very hard.’

‘You might,’ I comment, ‘have thought that the whole building needs to retain a degree of…’

‘Integrity,’ she finishes my sentence. Sue feels that letting agents do as little as possible. Last week, the men who live up on the third floor had a problem with their doorbell. One of them went to the letting agent to ask if they could change the labels in the bell buttons. Sue explains what happened:

As the men did not have a printer, I printed out new labels for everyone in the tenement block and put them into an envelope, along with a note explaining the order, just in case they were that daft that they couldn’t put one, two and three in the right slots. The letting agent then returned the envelope with the labels inside, having kept only the instructions. The men upstairs got back to the letting agents, who have still not replied. And that’s just a small incident. These letting agents obviously employed a complete idiot who was there probably five minutes.

Sue knows the owners of the third-floor flat, who contribute to paying for stair cleaning in the block. She contacted them about stair cleaning in October; the letting agents finally signed for it in April. From October to April, the letting agents had lost the form three times.

‘What are they taking money for?’ Sue asks rhetorically. ‘It’s very weird. I do think that the letting agents... well, they’re in it for the money, they’re obviously not in it for helping Edinburgh stay together, it’s just that the whole place is crumbling.’ Sue talks of how she went to an Edinburgh Solicitors Property Centre (ESPC) event about looking after tenement buildings in the New Town and Stockbridge, where she was told that 70% need work and 35% are dangerous:

Much of this is the Georgian bit, so you’d think that they would be owned by people who would care to keep their investment. But I don’t think that they even know because they’re not there. So the letting agents aren’t caring, all they’re going to be bothered about is if there’s a leak or something... They’re not particularly
bothered about that! You can’t have a leak at the weekend now. There’s no repair service at the weekend. That’s in their contract now, if they call the plumber, the tenants above me on the third-floor have to pay for it themselves at the weekend.

On one occasion last year, the third-floor flat had become flooded and there was a leak pouring through Sue’s ceiling, so she turned the water for the whole tenement building off. The tenant at the time was a middle-aged woman who had her grandchild staying with her. The tenant did not know what to do – the letting agents would not answer as they were not in the office until Monday. Sue recalls what happened:

So I said right, you’ll have to get an emergency plumber. You can’t live here with no toilet over the weekend, you’ll have to be in a hotel if not. So I rang the owner and he was livid: ‘What am I paying those idiots for? Why are they not dealing with it?’ So the letting agents then sent her a bill back saying you have to pay for this, but because we’d already gone to the owner, he said, ‘No, I’ll pay for it.’ I was then told by the letting agents that I would have to claim for the ceiling on my own insurance on the grounds that it was nothing to do with them, which seems rather hard, as it means that my own excess will go up next year.

On another occasion, there had been a leak in the flat below Sue’s. The letting agent had tried to get her to pay for the repairs on the grounds that she had helped the tenants find a plumber. Sue explains what she feels has become her role within the tenement block as a consequence:

So I’m like... the unpaid ‘factor’ of the building now. And actually I’ve had enough because nobody does anything. But nobody else in the building knows how to turn the water off. They just panic, or they just step over the water and go, ‘Oh look, there’s a puddle on the floor! Oh dear, there’s shit running down the hall walls. Oh dear! Oh! Look, oh it’s getting bigger every day!’ And you go yeah, you better do something. But they don’t. So I get somebody, I’ve got a good plumber, and he comes round and fixes it. ‘I don’t have to pay for this,’ go the letting agents from the first floor. Yes you do, it’s a leak in your flat. So there’s a lot of... disruption, and you can get people being against each other. When I arrived here, the owners wouldn’t speak to each other. But it’s actually the letting agents. The third- and first-floor owners didn’t want to communicate to do repairs because the letting agents had stirred something up. I’ve now got them working well together. But
unless somebody bothered to do that, the situation would stay in that unresolved state where nobody does anything about repairing a roof until there’s a leak pouring through on one of the floors. When it’s absolutely apparent. Or the chimney stack actually does kill a few people. So there’s no maintenance.

The second-floor flat in the next-door tenement block is owned and occupied by a man, a woman and a child. Sue describes them as a ‘nice couple of old hippies’. They have had water running down their wall for ten years and the ceiling has now fallen down. They have MDF boards nailed to the floor to cover holes, and have bricked up one of the windows so that they can put a bed against it, as it is in a corner room with windows on three sides. The glass has slowly fallen out into the street, and the fire brigade had to remove the window. But suddenly, the owners are interested in selling the flat and are trying to persuade everybody in the block to pay for its repair on the grounds that it is an outdoor feature, and have issued statutory notices to this end. Meanwhile, a man has bought the basement in Sue’s block, transformed it into a home without obtaining planning permission, knocked down a structural wall also without permission, and is now threatening to change the locks of the main entrance to the stairwell.

‘It’s all becoming a bit much,’ Sue admits. ‘It’s quite scary actually. And tenants dropping old potatoes, beer cans, fag ends, lighters and tennis balls out their window into the back garden, which muggins here has to clear up.’

‘Does it feel like home?’ I ask.

‘It did and now it doesn’t,’ she replies. ‘It did when I arrived. I thought I’d spend the rest of my life here, and we’d find somewhere for Nina to get close by and it would be reasonably okay. But something’s going on that’s made it more noisy, more violent in a funny kind of way, or people are more selfish. But although I’ve been terrified of the tenants, I don’t find the tenants the problem. The tenants are usually really nice people.’

The tenant in the flat directly above Sue’s used to pay £800 a month in rent. She left because the letting agent wanted to increase the rent to £875, even though they were ‘rude’ and were not carrying out repairs. After she moved out, Sue looked online and found the flat advertised for £1,200 a month. It was empty for three months, reduced to £1,100, and let out to three unrelated young Spanish men, which means that it should have an HMO licence. Sue continues:
Unless the guys are gay, which I don’t think they are… I heard them going down the stairs when they looked at the flat, and the guy from the letting agent said, ‘It’s not HMO, oh we’ll get around that. You’re going to use the three rooms as bedrooms are you?’ ‘Yes we are.’ So the letting agent should be aware of that, but when I spoke to them, they said, ‘No, no, they’re a couple, that’s fine.’ And actually, the guys are nice people. Provided they stay nice, I have no problem with that. But I have a problem with the letting agent, who’s basically corrupt, and is also putting the owner, who I keep seeing, in a very tricky position if that actually did come out. I’d guess they’d be responsible.

There is a communal garden at the back of Sue’s block, but ‘nobody is interested in it’. There are new people round the corner throwing food waste into the garden, and the rats are back. Sue tries to keep the garden tidy, as well as cleaning litter out of the basement:

It’s like being... they have them in France, don’t they? People who live on the ground floor and rush around like the lodge keeper, but in tenements. I’m beginning to feel a bit like that. If there’s a problem, go to Sue, she’ll know who the owner is or where the turn-off for the water is or what to do. But it wasn’t really a role I’d expected to take on, and it does take a hell of a lot of time arranging builders and roof quotes and phoning the council about the bins and blah blah blah.

Sue believes that the ‘ruthless exploitation’ of tenants needs to be challenged, but is convinced that those in power would be unwilling to make adequate changes as they themselves often own rental properties. In tenement blocks such as hers, where owners have to agree to shared repairs, Sue would like to see a fund set up for each building that would pay for repairs to the infrastructure, perhaps based on a percentage of rental income.

I leave the reader with these final thoughts from Sue:

God knows where this is going to end up though. You know, the long term of this whole generation of people who are finding it very difficult to get on the housing ladder, how their lives are going to be, what they’re going to think about this, because it’s not like any of these rented properties are homes. It’s not like Germany, where I have friends who have rented properties, and as far as they’re concerned, they’re going to stay there for the rest of their life. It’s their home, they have rights to stay there. And they don’t pay everything to be in a really beautiful flat either.
Conclusion

Sue’s story is of the property relations in and around just one tenement block in Edinburgh, and her inclusion in this chapter stemmed from a chance encounter. I would not wish to argue that her experience either is or is not ‘typical’, though, taking into account both my interviews conducted with tenants via Shelter Scotland and the rest of my fieldwork, none of her recounted tales strike me as particularly surprising or uncommon either. The surprise, perhaps, is the extent to which an owner-occupier of a tenement flat, who is not also a landlord or a letting agent, comes to take on such a significant role in the process of property management at the micro level – as an ‘unpaid factor’, as she put it. In presenting her story here, we encounter yet another actor within and vantage point on the private rented sector, albeit one without a formalised role, who might not intuitively be recognised as a key contributor, and whose actions may not even be regarded as strictly necessary in a functional sense. There was, after all, no voice analogous to Sue’s at the Making Renting Right conference. If the conference drew together, in a broader sense, the private rented sector at its Hilton Hotel venue, then Sue, as unpaid factor, and her tenement block gather the private rented sector in a more local sense. Sue’s story is, however, a far cry from the performed ‘consensus’ of Mr Forrester in the conference hall. By all accounts, her experience should strike the reader as chaotic. Far from engendering consensus, the unpaid factor finds herself alienated by the complex web of tenures contained within her building, and by the diverse array of frequently uncooperative persons and agencies responsible in different ways. That said, as noted above, the unpaid factor was not even included in the performance of consensus at the Make Renting Right conference, aptly symbolising the role’s apparent detachment from formal conceptions of the sector, despite the instrumental part it can informally play in its management. Further to this, we might also see Sue’s stories as illustrative of the fact that the sector is not always interconnected in reality. Indeed, those who could not reach political consensus at the conference were not even representative of all the actors who might be relevant to private rented housing.

Is the private rented sector landscape – the tenement blocks and other buildings, along with the property relations therein – a ‘common’ space and place, then? Strathern (2016: 172) reminds us, albeit in the context of a subject (organ donation) rather different from...
our own, that ‘[k]inship and friendship do not of themselves need to appeal to common humanity or to the politics of community solidarities’, at least ‘insofar as kin and friends alike are indifferent to the antithesis of self-interest and other interest’. Clearly, an appeal to ‘community solidarities’, or something to that effect, is needed to produce a sense of the commons here, and Mr Forrester’s proclamation of a ‘consensus’ that ‘the private rented sector is essential to provide much-needed housing in Scotland’ could perhaps be understood as an attempt in that direction, if a highly performative one. For Sue, however, the dramatic expansion of the private rented sector appears to have led to a de-commoning of her living space; one where she and the fellow residents of her tenement building have fewer opportunities to foster both shared responsibilities and shared control, and where she in particular finds herself accruing greater personal responsibilities for the building whilst losing control to the actions and inactions of letting agencies.

It remains to be seen at the time of writing if the new Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 will successfully mitigate some of these issues in practice. Looking further forward, it also remains to be seen the extent to which more established campaigning charities like Shelter Scotland, or smaller grassroots activist groups like Living Rent, will be able to transform their attempts, however modest and however partial, at commoning the private rented sector into the kind of practical results that might be felt by somebody like Sue. What is clear, however, is that the management of the private rented sector entails, at least in practice, actors far beyond what might traditionally be understood as ‘property management’, i.e. letting agencies. The process of property management is ‘complex’, to repeat a cliché of both social science and economics. Rhetoric and performance may help to engender notions of consensus or commonality at sector-wide levels, but at micro levels, management may be enacted by those who are not formally deemed part of ‘the sector’, who find themselves alienated from the commons, and are not drawn into the attempted performance of consensus at all.
Conclusion

The immediate aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum, during which I conducted the fieldwork for this project, turned out to be an eventful time for housing politics in Scotland. Since then, the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2016, has come into force, meaning that the particular legal context in which fieldwork was carried out no longer exists. Landlords are no longer legally able to evict tenants simply because their tenancy period has ended. Christine’s unexpected and unexplained eviction detailed in Chapter 5, for instance, could not happen as of December 2017. The passing and implementation of the Act has not signalled an end to the political debates surrounding the future of private rented housing in Scotland, however. Since the end of my fieldwork, Living Rent, for instance, have reinvented themselves as ‘Scotland’s tenants union’, with membership fees and paid staff, and have continued to agitate for wider-reaching rent controls than those allowed by the Act. Doubtless the debates will continue for at least the foreseeable future.

Through a series of strategically selected ethnographic vignettes, interspersed with my own reflexive analysis, I hope to have provided an evocative life-like sense of the private rented sector that I encountered in Edinburgh during 2014 and 2015. Due to the methodology employed, the emphasis must necessarily be upon that which I as ethnographer encountered, though by emphasising the ‘sector’ as a locally-found concept, I have endeavoured not only to incorporate but also to foreground the wider social, political and economic environment. In so doing, my aim has been to try to bring an anthropological approach to a field hitherto dominated by the more quantitative social sciences, such as human geography, and thereby produce new kinds of data on the subject that could complement the predominantly statistical analysis that finds a prominent place in publications such as the Scottish Government’s annual Scottish Household Survey, to name one example. In presenting the preceding material, I have therefore aimed to produce – to borrow the concept from Gurvitch (1939) or Firth (1944) – a microsociology of the Edinburgh private rented sector.
Fundamental to understanding the current private rented sector in Edinburgh, and by extension Scotland, is the ongoing shift in the provision of both housing and housing-related services from the public to the private sectors following the Right to Buy legislation introduced by the British Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. Whilst this initially led primarily to increased levels of owner occupancy, the expansion of the proportion of houses and flats in Scotland that are rented privately – and, indeed, the proportion of people in Scotland who are private sector tenants – has been striking over the past decade in particular. As the role of the private rented sector in housing provision has increased, government policy has focused less upon direct housing provision, and more upon the management of private rented housing via regulation, and the active usage of the private rented sector to fill gaps that were once filled by the public sector. Turning to Almond and Thompson, I cannot escape the irony in the fact that they primarily rent out former council properties, bought by their former tenants under the Right to Buy, to tenants who, in many cases, are not only simultaneously seeking council housing, but also have at least part of their rent subsidised by the council through housing benefit, adding additional layers of both profit and management.

The first part of the title of this thesis – ‘Making Renting Right’ – is deliberately derived from Shelter Scotland’s Make Renting Right campaign, which was also the name of the conference that they organised jointly with the Scottish Association of Landlords. It is also, however, intended to be evocative of the ethical judgments and deliberations made by actors within the private rented sector as encountered throughout the ethnography. How, then, have tenants, landlords, letting agents, activists, neighbours and others sought to ‘make renting right’?

Towards an Ethnography of the Sector

To answer that question, I have sought to do ethnography not just in the Edinburgh private rented sector, but also of the Edinburgh private rented sector. As I stated in the Introduction, the ethnography, including the processes of both fieldwork and writing, has been experimental to this end. How might an ethnography of a ‘field’ such as the private rented sector in Edinburgh be produced? I hope that the preceding material has at least
been suggestive. If it has, at times, appeared as a diverse and fragmented aggregation of subject positions, then this should serve to highlight the social realities within the ‘sector’; the people by whom it is created and constituted do not, by and large, do the same things or occupy the same spaces. The notion of the ‘sector’, then, has turned out to be the central thread that ties these diverse vantage points together. To borrow from Amit (2002) in her analysis of the Armenian diaspora in London, (some of) those in the private rented sector in Edinburgh come to inhabit a shared space of dialogue despite their diverse vantage points because they at least share the premises of the debates that obtain therein. Or at least, a sufficient consensus of those engaged do; my data has, as ever, been inherently biased towards willing participants and, as I indicated in Chapter 5, class bias turns out to be a significant factor here, albeit almost certainly not the only one.

In my endeavour to produce an ethnography of the private rented sector in a specified locality, I tried to occupy a range of different vantage points by following the connections and tracing the associations encountered in the field. Some of these connections produced themselves as a result of chance encounters. On other occasions, I had begun fieldwork in ostensibly separate spaces, and yet personal connections between them emerged afterwards. Sometimes, these connections were made as a result of persons themselves moving between different vantage points within the sector – an aspect that I tried to replicate methodologically by shifting between different vantage points myself. It is these connections that render the sector a traceable network for the purposes of ethnographic fieldwork. This network should, however, be understood as situated within, and in part produced by, a particular set of political and economic discourses. That ‘the private rented sector’ exists as a concept-metaphor that may be followed in the field stems ultimately from its linguistic usage by governmental and other agencies.

The other side of the methodological coin has been the process of writing the ‘sector’. I have tried, under the influence of Latour (2005), to allow the actors encountered in the field to perform the social by tracing their associations – and mine – through my ethnographic text. In producing the ethnographic text, I have sought, in the vein of Tyler (1986), to employ a considerable degree of both reflexivity and literary evocation. Together, I hope that these methodologies will have created sufficient connectedness in an otherwise diverse and fragmented field to allow the Edinburgh private rented sector to come to life, as it were. I will let the reader be the judge as to the overall effectiveness of
this, which has certainly not been without methodological challenges. At times, one may have been left wondering how much connectedness there really was at all beyond a shared political and, to an extent, geographical framework, though this is perhaps part of the point: there is little consensus in the sector, despite, as we have seen, performed claims to the contrary, though performances such as the Make Renting Right conference do at least partially succeed in drawing representatives of the ‘sector’ together.

Might, then, this ethnographic methodology be adapted by economic anthropology for other ‘sectors’? There is certainly the potential to try. Of course, this methodology was produced not only for the private rented sector, but also within the specific context of Edinburgh. As a city, it retains a certain focus and containment that might not be applicable to a more porous rural region. Equally, with roughly half a million people, depending on how precisely one determines the boundaries – the council region and the urban area are not entirely coterminous – Edinburgh is not a particularly large city. It is not simply a coincidence that many of the key actors encountered within this ethnography, despite occupying disparate spaces, either know each other or at least know of each other. This certainly made the tracing of associations across apparently diverse sites in the field more manageable, though I suspect that the geography of Edinburgh contributed to this; a larger urban area may well have posed additional challenges. It is also the case that Edinburgh’s status as the Scottish capital makes it the preferred location for head offices of organisations such as Shelter Scotland, and that the presence of the Scottish Parliament and the majority of the Scottish Government’s offices in this city makes for a more intimate level of political discourse than might be the case in cities without this kind of institutional role – another factor that likely made the ‘sector’ appear closer to home.

Consequently, I do not propose a methodological recipe for the ethnographic study of the economic sector in general, though I do at least suggest that following the concept-metaphor of the sector in conjunction with tracing the associations as encountered in the field can at least be employed as useful starting point, even if what follows will always be experimental in a sense.
Unpacking the Private Rented Sector

In the introductory chapter, I stated my intention to unpack anthropologically the private rented sector as a locally-found concept in Edinburgh primarily through the medium of ‘property management’, and I hope that, through the above methodology, the preceding ethnography has at least gone some way towards this end. Given the diversity of the ‘sector’, which the ethnographic material will hopefully have evoked, it would be difficult to provide a summary of this unpacking. There are, however, a select few themes that have been present throughout, and to which I wish to draw attention.

One such theme concerns the role of landscape, understood à la Hirsch (1995: 22-3) as not merely a backdrop, but as a relationship between ‘everyday social life’ and ‘potential social existence’. Buildings themselves frequently become the primary objects of care for landlords, tenants, letting agents and neighbours, in varying ways, not least because ensuring proper care for the building tends to make for a successful relationship between them and, by extension, a successful tenancy. Buildings are also readable in a sense: to cite one example, the Property Manager, when conducting inspections and visits, is able to read for signs via a formalised process, and thereby construct narratives of owners and inhabitants, present and past. Current and prospective tenants, when encountered in person, are also readable in this sense; biographies are constructed based upon their apparent situation in the environing world that draw upon prior knowledge of the sector, broadly defined. To return to Tilley & Cameron-Daum (2017), the built landscape gathers a particular range of social, economic and political relations, those of landlords, tenants and letting agents, and indeed beyond to the political sphere.

Also gathered by the landscape are the bureaucratic practices that facilitate these relations. Indeed, it might be said that the documents produced as part of these practices constitute part of the landscape itself in a sense. For Almond and Thompson at least, each property, tenant and landlord has its own documented history that may be retrieved throughout the process of property management. Stories of houses and flats, their owners and their inhabitants, may be reconstructed from this material. Concerning prospective tenants in particular, characters or biographies are reconstructed and judgments made as to their suitability based upon the readings of both quantitative and qualitative data, though always with reference to existing knowledge of the sector. Suspicions are raised
as to the veracity of particular information based upon perceived likelihood that draws upon past experience. If one accepts Hirsch’s argument, then this ‘everyday social life’ that is gathered by the ‘potential social existence’ of the environment, both physical and political, is ultimately part and parcel of the landscape itself. If this appears obtuse, then replace ‘landscape’ with ‘sector’ here, and I contend that the resulting argument would be similar, as the sector, like landscape, similarly combines the built environment – the ‘potential’ and its limits – with the social, political and economic relations through which it is managed and, perhaps ultimately, created and constituted.

A related theme, then, concerns management. Much of this thesis has dealt with the process of property management at a micro level in the context of the letting agency, alluded to above. As we have seen, however, the ‘management’ of the private rented sector in practice extends beyond the role of the Property Manager (or equivalent) and his or her colleagues. The ‘unpaid factor’ encountered in the previous chapter, for instance, finds herself trying, with varying degrees of success, to manage the relations between different letting agencies and, by extension, their landlords and tenants, in order to ensure the proper maintenance of the building in which she lives. Questions could be raised over how necessary her role actually is in practical terms, though she, like the Property Manager, finds herself occupying a liminal space, in this instance between letting agencies and the building. Further to this, I contend that the theme of management may also be extended to the political sphere, including but not limited to government interventions.

Of course, the social realities of any macro-level management of the private rented sector has to be understood in the context of the sector’s expansion and the concomitant reduction of direct state involvement in housing provision. The state actively promotes and utilises the private rented sector as a solution to housing need. Homeless persons, once likely to remain within the care of council-run services, may now find themselves referred by the City of Edinburgh Council to a surgery held by an ex-council Tenancy Sustainment Advisor employed by a for-profit private letting agency. Given the transfer of responsibilities regarding housing from state to non-state agencies, might the ‘tenant engagement’ conducted by Shelter Scotland and supported by a combination of public and private funding also be understood as part of the management, in a broad sense, of the private rented sector? Might events such as their joint conference with the Scottish
Association of Landlords, with its rhetoric though not reality of ‘consensus’, and by performatively bringing together a range of implicated public, private and third-sector bodies, be regarded as an attempt to manage the private rented sector at a macro level?

It is hard to predict where precisely the private rented sector in Edinburgh, and indeed Scotland, is going. The Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016, largely opposed in substance by the Scottish Association of Landlords, will, as I see it, shift the balance of agency slightly from the landlord to the tenant. The Act does, however, appear to take for granted that the private rented sector will and should continue to be a major provider of housing in Scotland. The Scottish Government has not, for instance, shown any indication that it would be willing to consider substantial measures beyond simply improving the management of the private rented sector, such as trying to reverse the shift that has taken place in recent decades by bringing private rented housing back into the public domain. It may be fair to say that such an endeavour would be impracticable, at least politically, regardless of whether or not it might be desired. What can be said, however, is that the present situation is created and constituted by a diverse range of apparently contradictory interests; its future would appear unstable.

**Ethics of Economy**

My engagement with the anthropology of ethics originally stemmed from the notions and practices of care encountered in the field, specifically in relation to tenants and buildings on the part of Almond and Thompson employees. At the same time, I was struck by the argument, after Macpherson (1978: 4), that the enforceability of property rights stems from the social belief that property is a ‘moral right’. Ethics, in a broad sense, is integral to property relations, and thus to the private rented sector, as it is through the practice of ethics that property relations are upheld and reproduced.

As we have seen, ethical deliberation and judgment directly enters the practice of property management, particularly in relation to balancing the interests of landlords and tenants. The shift of responsibilities from the public to the private sectors may not have produced new forms of care *per se*, but it has produced new caring roles – the private-sector Tenancy Sustainment Advisor being one such example – as well as a new set of
property relations that provide the context in which care takes place. In particular, the need for the Property Manager or letting agency to balance landlord-tenant relations, whilst not a new activity in and of itself, now takes place in the context of a dramatically expanded private rented sector, and one which now accommodates many tenants who would previously have lived in council housing – a fact to which expressions such as ‘the nature of our clientele’ from Almond and Thompson employees euphemistically allude. It would not be possible to conduct a comparative study about the ethics of property management in Edinburgh during, say, the 1970s versus the present, but it does at least seem clear to me that the current economic and political context engenders a particular state of affairs for the private rented sector in which the lines between business and social care are blurred.

Does this new social, political and economic reality itself engender particular types of ethical relations? Whilst I do not seek to speculate as to possible alternatives, it does occur to me that the politically fragmented nature of rented housing in Scotland today, with competing and perhaps contradictory interests at its core, lends itself well to an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics, or at least in the sense of ‘ordinary ethics’ in the vein of Lambek (2010) – an ethics that is grounded in everyday practice. The process of property management in the private rented sector is not merely a matter of following procedures; there is a constant need to balance potentially competing interests. Returning once again to Mattingly (2014: xvi), I have found that taking ‘people’s moral projects and their beliefs about the good seriously’ – what she terms ‘first person virtue ethics’ – can shed light on how the process of property management is played out in practice, which itself is integral to an ethnographic understanding of the private rented sector.

In the introductory chapter, I drew a mildly mischievous comparison between ‘economy’ in the conventional sense and ‘eco-nomy’ in the etymological sense of ‘house(hold) management’ in order to justify positioning private rented sector property management within the field of economic anthropology. One of my key aims throughout this thesis has been to bring the anthropology of ethics to economic anthropology, and I hope that I have at least demonstrated the relevance of the former to the latter through ethnographic description of the Edinburgh private rented sector. Processes that might conventionally be deemed ‘economic’ such as property management, I contend, rest ultimately upon practices of ethics that take place at the ‘ordinary’ or ‘first person’ level.
Might, then, we understand ‘the economy’ as predicated, at least to some extent, upon the continuing practice of ‘ordinary ethics’? This, I contend, offers some development or at least refinement of Wilk’s notion of the ‘moral economy’, in which ‘behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right, and these moral values flow ultimately from a cosmology—a culturally patterned view of the universe and the human place within it’ (Wilk 1996: 38). Rather than looking to uncover the culturally patterned cosmology from which moral values flow, I argue that it is more fruitful to focus upon how the practice of ethics at the vernacular level contributes, in their own, first-person ways, to the production of economic relations; in this instance, the property relations that obtain between tenants, landlords, letting agents, buildings, governmental and non-governmental bodies and others within the private rented sector.

**Releasing the Private Rented Sector? Future Potentialities**

In the preceding chapter, I introduced Amin & Howell’s edited volume *Releasing the Commons* (2016), and considered, after Harvey (2012), whether and how actors might be engaged in a practice of ‘commoning’ the private rented sector – that is, to bring private rented housing into the commons through social practice. As it turns out, this issue has been far from alien to Scotland in recent decades, as debates around land reform have persisted. The primary emphasis of land reform debates has been upon the fact that a large majority of land in rural Scotland is owned by a relatively small number of landowners. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, for instance, introduced the ‘community right to buy’, which gave rural ‘communities’ with populations up to 10,000 the first right of refusal if the landowner were to put the land on the market, as long as a ‘representative community body’ could be formed to facilitate the purchase. The most famous ‘community buyout’ in Scotland probably remains the Isle of Eigg, which actually took place in 1997 following enduring negotiations with their absentee landowner; the 2003 Act sought to give communities specific legal rights to the process. More recently, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 extended the community right to buy to communities of any size, including those in urban areas. It might be said, then, that certain legal opportunities for the commoning of the private rented sector now exist in Scotland.
at least in theory, and it is not hard to imagine, at least in principle, that tenement blocks could be purchased by their tenants and transformed into resident-run housing cooperatives. In practice, however, a major obstacle to such an endeavour at present would be the fact that the 2015 Act only applies to property that has already come up for sale. In Chapter 6, we encountered some of the problems that can apparently stem from the fragmented nature of tenure within a single tenement block, whereby individual flats are typically owned by different people, some owner occupied and others rented out. This fragmentation presents an additional obstacle to any ‘community buyout’ of tenement blocks as things currently stand, as it would require all properties within a single tenement block to be simultaneously up for sale – surely a rare occurrence. There was, for instance, an attempted movement towards a community buyout of around 120 tenement flats on Lorne Street in Leith in 2015 and 2016 by tenants, but these flats were all owned by a housing association that was intending to sell, rather than by private landlords, and eventually, the properties were acquired by another housing association anyway.

From a certain point of view, however, the private rented sector is already ultimately if paradoxically part of the commons. Andy Wightman, a major contributor to the land reform debates in the Scottish political sphere, and author of *Who Owns Scotland* (1996) and *The Poor Had No Lawyers* (2013), argues in his latter book that property rights are not sacred; they are ‘defined by Parliament and they can be amended, adapted and reformed as society sees fit’ as long as ‘human rights are respected’ (Wightman 2013: 608). The social is, in a sense, able to trump existing private property rights, and Scotland’s democratic political structures are at least sites of potential to this end. Might the Scottish Parliament one day be willing to ‘release’ the private rented sector into the commons?

It is not my intention here either to predict the future or to make specific policy proposals for tenancy reform or urban land reform, but I do wish to end on this note of potentiality. Once again, I return to Hirsch’s conceptualisation of landscape as a relationship between ‘everyday social life’ and ‘potential social existence’ (Hirsch 1995: 22-3). Edinburgh’s potential social existence extends to the potentialities afforded by the political landscape that is gathered by the built landscape; existing property relations are available for transformation. Indeed, it is precisely due to these potentialities that an
analysis of the (ordinary) ethics of economy is so relevant, as it is through ethical deliberation that such potentialities may be realised.


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