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“For those who are unfamiliar, scope is how we address the boundaries the project falls within; scale describes the project’s size, particularly the amount of money it will require and the number of people it will affect; and purpose will describe the group of people it’s meant to serve and how the project hopes to benefit them.”

Untitled Writing Sample, March 2022

NOR RESEARCH STUDIO

2,195 words

- Have I spoken to anybody in this piece? If I haven’t, would I be willing to? (CONSIDERING STAKEHOLDERS)
- What is the core theme or experience this piece attempts to represent? (RELATING TO THESIS)
- Are there sections of this piece where I can slow down and incorporate more detail or narrative? (CONCRETE DETAIL LEADS TO MEMORABLE PROSE)

DISREPAIR ← working title

AN ESSAY ← discipline, medium, form, format, etc.

DISREPAIR is a book-length essay that recounts the two years (2018-2020) I spent managing a 20-unit apartment complex in Pico Union, Los Angeles.

During this time, I began to recognize I was exhibiting symptoms of undiagnosed autism. Dependent on temporary gigs like property management and online freelancing to afford the cost of living, and similarly caught in the gentrification-inflected Los Angeles housing crisis, I came to understand myself as disabled worker whose ability to earn income was hampered by physical and mental impairments. But, perversely, many aspects of my disability were also manifest in the interactions I had between the landlords and tenants, and through these often unsettling situations I came to understand my disorder within a broad social phenomenon.

INTRO

When the pandemic began, I was living in a 500-square-foot studio apartment near the 110 freeway in Pico Union, Los Angeles. Someone I briefly dated had passed me his gig managing the property and, in exchange for me acting as the on-site manager, the two brothers who owned the building reduced my monthly rent from \$1,300 to \$600, subsidized a portion of my internet bill, and gave me a Xerox printer-scanner, which I put to immediate personal use.

Because I was exclusively freelancing at the time, I was grateful to have a cheap place to live. The meager \$600 rent — equivalent to what I had paid in Chicago for a single room in a spacious three-bedroom apartment — allowed me to live slightly out of my means. While living so close to downtown was miserable and I didn't have a car or any savings, I was suddenly able to work at cafes and afford groceries from Whole Foods without intense budgeting. Laughable as it sounds, I was living comfortably between paychecks, but I was also working nonstop and without an idea of how it was affecting me.

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Managing the building quickly demystified aspects of property ownership that stood in direct contrast to tenancy and not always in the ways I, the mixed-race child of a white landlord, expected. Whatever assumptions I had from watching my father that led me to believe owning property involved intensive labor were quickly dispelled.

My father is a lone proprietor. He owns a handful of small duplexes in the college town where he lives to supplement his income. He also mows his own lawns, conducts many of his own repairs, and rents primarily to tenants who depend on subsidizing housing. His neighborly approach to property management left me unprepared to manage a slum or to think of property ownership as particularly lucrative. And though I understand some Spanish and grew up in parts of Southern California where the income discrepancy between households was writ large, I was still unprepared to see how undocumented tenants were expected to live in visibly dire conditions. Because I had not seen the full extent of the deterioration in which some of these units were kept, I moved from shock to feeling powerless without much time or perspective to comprehend how I figured in the broader scheme.

This is perhaps why during this season of my life I first saw in irrevocable terms that, despite what I had taught myself to believe, work is something that only a portion of the population does. For the rest, there is ownership paired with delegation, an occasional task or responsibility shunted to someone else, but nothing so inconveniencing as work. I'm still unsure how large the non-working population is, but I'm convinced that they are more numerous than I had been led to believe, and that our society is shaped to their benefit. I am also more and more unsure about my own proximity to the non-working class, especially because my own disability — I am autistic — means that I have found it easier (and sometimes necessary) to pursue contracts and project-based clients instead of seeking employment. I write here to confront my role in the reproduction of property as a concept and assess, too, how my own background — my race, my class, my disability — figured in that role.

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In cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, where landlords can purchase multi-unit complexes on the verge of disrepair and slowly flip the individual units, typically pushing out long-term tenants and bringing in young, transient, and wealthy renters in the process, there is a unique possibility that parts of the building will be entirely renovated while older units remain untouched. It may be true that the size of the cities and their overburdened municipal governments factor heavily in this trend, but this truth does little to illuminate the actual experience of living inside one of these buildings, where the substance of the political economy is laid bare.

In the complex I managed, which the landlords had acquired only a few years before I started working and living there, such a swap-out was occurring. From what I could tell, the other tenants seemed aware that gentrification was actively happening in the building, but they kept to themselves, rarely engaging me in conversations about their livelihood there.

Meanwhile, if and when the landlords were concerned, it was because the tenants were a threat to their investment. If the tenant was a physical threat to their property and was causing tension among other tenants, even more so. But, as I discovered, the landlords were placed in a uniquely advantageous dilemma: the city expected them to bear the cost of certain repairing necessities such as plumbing and gas fixtures but could not force them to make structural changes to a

building that had, say, functional but antiquated plumbing. So long as appliances and fixtures the city deemed necessary worked, the units were considered rentable.

The city housing workers, by bringing landlords like mine into compliance, freed the city of any obligation to improve the apartments and, in turn, eased the landlords of any worry that they might have to make foreseen but expensive repairs to their investment properties. Materially speaking, this meant that so long as the unit met the city's flexible standards and the tenant willingly occupied it, the floors and walls and windows could be covered with decades worth of dirt and grease and stains that caused the apartment to develop a putrid stench.

Even if the apartment had long been trending toward disrepair, the landlords avoided intervention: fixing the apartment meant losing money, especially because rent could not be raised to cover the costs, and the eviction process in California is even more expensive. So, instead, in these homes subject to years of unchecked deterioration, both the tenants and the previous and current landlords did their best to avoid confronting each other. This meant that much happened on the property that violated the leasing terms but had essentially been grandfathered in because the behavior had been tolerated for so long.

In California, when conditions inside an apartment become questionable or unsafe, landlords may either let the tenant stay while making updates, and therefore provide them alternative lodging if they are displaced, or cut them a check to move out. In many instances, the tenants in my building did take sizable checks; a few even returned to their home countries where the money would go even farther. But as I later learned, this was just a small piece of a larger, ongoing trend. Most tenants didn't realize they could ask for more money and were seduced by a low five-figure sum. The landlords were strategic about when and to whom they offered move-out checks.

At the same time, like many living in Los Angeles apartment buildings, some of the families had smartly rented adjoining units to house their children or relatives next door. For this reason, nearly all of the decaying units housed more occupants than the lease permitted. But it also meant that the shared apartments were in worse condition, since they hadn't been deeply cleaned or remodeled for at least 10 to 15 years.

When city housing inspectors came during my first year and required some modest upgrades, these over-occupied units occasionally received new paint, new windscreens, and an additional layer of glaze in the bathtub. Yes, there were some larger, expensive structural issues that were addressed but none of these changes involved making the apartment anything more than legally occupiable. (For instance, the city required the landlords to replace the building's antiquated plumbing fixtures. This invasive surgery was not cheap.) Nothing was done to bring these neglected units into accordance with the commercial market, so when I was asked to show remodeled apartments, usually to self-identified young professionals hoping to live near downtown, that sat beside or between the units stuck in disrepair, I hoped that the potential renters caught a glimpse of what life in the building was truly like without me having to explain. I surprised one woman when she asked if there were roaches in the building. Yes, I told her, like any building in this area or surrounding downtown for that matter, our building has roaches. She thanked me and said she was testing to see if I would tell her the truth. She had already assumed we had roaches, but at an earlier showing she had gone to around the corner the lessors had been less forthright. She was testing me, seeing if I was playing the game.

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Over the course of my stay, my responsibilities at the building frequently changed. Mostly I collected rent checks, issued various legally required notices, watered a few plants, and was generally available to receive requests from tenants. But sometimes I took out the trash, or received deliveries. Once, I attended a hearing to demonstrate that the landlords were compliant with city code. Another time, I called the fire department because of a supposed gas leak.

But the primary difficulty of managing the property was simply living there and assuming the role of problem-solver. Things invariably went wrong. When tenants had a grievance, they came to me first, typically without reading their leases — in many cases because they had lost or could not read the lease. Some tenants were overly friendly, especially to compensate in situations where they were at fault for, say, minor damage to their front door. Others were clearly afraid of me.

Other times, on behalf of the landlords, I met with potential renters, city officials, repairmen, and the tenants themselves. Through these interactions, I came to understand how liability was shunted between these groups, with tenants living out the conditions that the city officials and

landlords deemed adequate and the repair quantifying those conditions in their invoices. I also learned that repairmen who could be trusted were in high demand. The landlords preferred to use specific contractors that they had established relationships with over wildcards who, in my experience, could be drunk, unskilled, and exploitative. As recently as a few months ago, a plumber from whom the landlords requested an estimate called me once again about \$1,500 in water heater repairs he and his crew did not conduct. The landlords rightfully disputed the charge when he first invoiced, and because the plumber knew he had no case, he threatened to sue me, assuming that I would be frightened into paying at least some of the charge. During our early conversations, I provided him with the landlord's contact information, reminding him that I was only the person instructed to request a quote. But once I caught onto his scheme and started receiving infrequent calls from his wife, I invited him to take me to small claims court so we could settle the matter. I haven't heard from them since.

Either way, it became undeniable that my job was to prevent all of these people from having direct access to the landlords, who only wanted to be kept abreast of information that could affect their investment. They were particularly eager to hear news about the empty building across the street, which they had been told would be turned into a hotel, and so they believed that upon its completion the value of their own property would increase. (I passed the building earlier today and saw it is still decked out in the same for-lease signage that it sported when I moved in.) Occasionally, the landlords would ask about the homeless encampment around the corner. Around the time the encampment was broken up, several people left the building because their leases expired, and the landlords saw it as an opportune time to raise the rent and remodel. Then the pandemic struck.

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There were also a number of people in the building for whom English was a second language, and it became apparent this had been strategically used against them in the past. This was clearly the case with an older, Spanish-speaking couple downstairs.

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continue after they ceased taking out the trash, presumably because they had been performing this chore for a number of years before the landlords bought the building.

When the couple complained, saying they had agreed to a steeper discount, the landlords sent me a photocopy of a note the couple had originally written in which they had offered the exchange and even proposed a rate. The landlords said they had merely agreed to the proposal, and had no need to extend the previous discount if they didn't want to. The wife of the couple resumed taking out the trash a week later, with a noticeable look of resentment on her face. Between the two of them, the job had been passed to her.

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