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# Witnessing Loss in the Everyday: Community Buildings in Austerity Britain<sup>1</sup>

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**Katherine Robinson (Goldsmiths) and Ruth Sheldon (Birkbeck)**

## **Abstract**

This article is concerned with what happens to precarious community buildings in times of austerity. It responds to a landscape of capitalist realism, in which instrumental, economic forms of value are mobilised to justify the closure of ordinary buildings whose survival is not identified as a political priority. We focus on two London cases of a library and an elderly day centre under threat of closure, and trace how grammars of austerity rendered these buildings substitutable. Considering how abstract sociological conceptions of value/s can struggle to break into the embedded common sense of austerity, we explore how ethnographic practices of collaboration and attentiveness can help amplify alternative expressions of the meanings of these buildings for their communities. Enacting a form of ethnographic witnessing, which learns from Wittgenstein, we highlight the creative, vernacular registers and gestures of library users and day centre members, and we show how these were anchored in the buildings themselves. In this way, we supplement noisier, more hyperbolic accounts of the violence of austerity by amplifying quotidian responses, which express how ordinary buildings and the forms of life they sustain, matter.

Key words: buildings, ethnography, loss, ordinary language, value/s

## **Substitutable buildings? Grammars of austerity and the language of value**

In recent years, as public sector cutbacks and processes of commodification and privatisation associated with UK austerity policies have intensified, the closures of various kinds of community buildings have received growing public attention. While austerity regimes range across various national contexts, in the UK the consequent precarity of two particular institutions, libraries and elderly care, have become a symbolic focus for struggles over fiscal responsibility and public services. In 2016 the BBC compiled local authority data revealing the closure of 343 libraries.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the closure of adult day centres has been taken to exemplify a profound social crisis, not only in the provision of care for vulnerable people, but in the moral fabric of an increasingly atomised nation (Cosslett, 2015). Much of the political justification for the closures recognises the value of such services to their various users, couching 'regretful' and 'difficult choices' in the language and logics of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009).<sup>2</sup> However, while those implementing austerity policies notionally recognise the importance of services for communities that use them, the commonly proffered 'solution' of moving provision to alternative settings fails to acknowledge how particular buildings matter. In other words, the closure of libraries and day centres has not only eroded services, it has also mobilised a language of substitutability that disavows the nature of the loss imposed upon users.

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This article is oriented around two central claims: first, that the appeal to community buildings' substitutability is a key element of what we term 'grammars of austerity',<sup>3</sup> a shared frame which delineates the value and meaningfulness of threatened objects, practices and relationalities, both for those implementing austerity measures, and their opponents. Second, that 'ordinary' community buildings, such as libraries and day centres, are pivotal yet under-acknowledged participants in the maintenance of forms of life, which are both threatened by austerity and offer modes of responding to it. As such, we identify the 'failed witnessing' (Benjamin, 2018) of the loss of such buildings as a key problematic to be addressed. We begin from two threatened institutions, which are the focus of our respective ethnographies: the Carnegie Library in Lambeth, south London and the Brenner Jewish Community Centre in Hackney, north London.<sup>4</sup> While these two cases affect and engage distinct publics, they also draw activists, users and academics together around shared political and sociological questions: how do we understand what is at stake in the loss of community buildings under these conditions? And if grammars of austerity foreclose acknowledgement of what ordinary buildings mean to their communities, how can sociologists help to articulate their value differently?

In an important sociological intervention, Skeggs (2014) has both diagnosed the condition giving rise to such questions and raised concerns about existing theoretical responses. As Skeggs observes, we find ourselves within a political landscape in which the value of things, persons and interactions are increasingly subject to reductive logics of exchange and instrumental calculation. Yet, significantly, it seems that totalising theories of neoliberalism may also reproduce the very conditions they critique. More specifically, value is a 'slippery concept' that is both descriptive and prescriptive so that its analytic mobilisation can easily end up reproducing languages of equivalence and calculative processes of valuation. In Skeggs' terms this has contributed to a political and theoretical condition which has shrunk the domain of moral, complex, qualitative (plural) values to economic, quantifiable, substitutable (singular) *value*, subsuming moral claims to capital's logic and to languages of market equivalence. Addressing these issues from the field of planning, McClymont has claimed that: 'current planning practice does not offer a vocabulary to defend or promote places which hold no explicit instrumental value, or more precisely, it cannot articulate the value of the aspect of places which fall outside this sort of measurement' (2015: 542). On this basis, McClymont has argued that planning policymaking and research needs to develop new languages able to allow for the protection of such places.

The question of how to respond to threatened community places has long preoccupied social scientists, who have traced the historical transformations of urban (de)industrialisation in post-war Britain, generating rich insights into the interrelations of community, place and loss (Lewis, 2016). While theorists of globalization have framed the destruction of community in terms of processes of individualization and privatization, burgeoning ethnographic work has focused on the creative affordances of places in strengthening social ties (Degnen, 2016; Koch, 2017; Lewis, 2016). Here, a key debate has focused on the capacity of communities to survive and regenerate under conditions of deindustrialisation, ruination and the erosion of the welfare state (Koch, 2017; Lewis, 2016; Mah 2012; McKenzie, 2015). However, although recent sociological and anthropological work has understandably focused on the devastating violence of austerity (e.g. Cooper and Whyte, 2017) this has perhaps drawn attention from its more mundane iterations in places which are less markedly deprived.

In this article, we therefore supplement existing work on austerity by practicing a mode of ethnographic witnessing that explores its everyday formations. We do so by deliberately focusing on

the case of community buildings that do not stand out politically and sociologically in various senses; because they are purpose built, aesthetically mundane, or house unprestigious institutions and forms of culture, and because they are inconspicuously located within communities that are not designated as high status or needy. In doing so, we also situate our work in response to a wider disparagement of such ordinary forms of material and linguistic culture, within the contemporary political-economic and theoretical landscape. Such an account of the denigration of the ordinary is implied in Skeggs' (2014) historical analysis of European capitalism; classical sociological conceptions of disenchanted modernity emerged concurrently with imperialist discourses that differentiated the 'civilized' European bourgeois emphasis on exchange value from the 'sentimental' attachments 'primitives' held for concrete objects. Here, 'modern' relations of exchange depend on processes of abstraction, in order to assign monetary equivalence to objects, which are, as Fisher (2009: 4) evocatively describes, 'torn from their lifeworlds'. Building on Skeggs' analysis then, it is apparent how the normalisation of capitalist relations of abstraction degrades the non-instrumental vernacular meanings of places, people and things. At the same time, sociology as a discipline of Enlightenment modernity has often treated everyday life as the site of the routine reproduction of, or resistance to, social structures and symbolic values, which stand apart from or transcend it (Berlant, 2011; Das, 2010). In contrast, within anthropology, attentiveness to the crises and ethical potentiality of the ordinary has been informed by scholarship, emphasising how, within postcolonial and neoliberal contexts, ethnographers have a responsibility to attend to the work of those for whom maintaining everyday meanings and relationships cannot be taken for granted (Das 2015; Han 2012). As the experience of economic insecurity spreads across the 'global North', it seems that sociological investigations of lived responses to austerity have much to learn from this work.

Such approaches help us to ask how we might draw attention to what is lost, and not substitutable, when an ordinary community building is closed. Here, we want to raise an epistemological problem: it seems that the logics of abstraction normalised by 'austerity' are not only an object of sociological critique but also permeate our own knowledge practices. For example, as Skeggs herself demonstrates, the sociological injunction to theorise non-economic 'values' gives rise to a presumed requirement upon sociologists to translate indeterminate meanings, and the registers and gestures through which they are expressed, into abstract symbolic concepts of value/s. In other words, it is presumed that sociologists, like activists, must move beyond vernacular descriptions of the 'lay normativity' (Skeggs, 2014: 14) or 'ordinary ethics' (Das et al, 2015) of marginalised subjects to analyse how these are 'underpinned' by non-economic values, such as 'care', 'love' and 'generosity'. As Das has observed, this desire to separate out and categorise what matters in the flux and flow of everyday life, to create boundaries around it, arrogates to the sociological community the right to judge what is of 'value'. It can also, as we will go on to discuss, inhibit an ethical mode of sociological writing as, 'an attunement, a response, a vigilant protection of a worlding' (Stewart, 2012: 518).

### **Witnessing community buildings**

While not far from her home, the first time Katherine visited the Carnegie Library was the night of its closing party. On hearing by chance that it was to close, Ruth returned to the Brenner Jewish Community Centre, a place she had previously left to focus on other fieldwork sites.<sup>5</sup> These moments of return and discovery were marked by our realisation of the vulnerability of these buildings, which assumed a significance that we had not previously perceived. As we each drew

close to these threatened buildings, we discovered connections in our respective ethnographic locations; in both cases, political languages of 'realism' and substitutability dominated the voices of the people using these buildings. We also shared a sense of temporal belatedness and a related sense of urgency, to capture before it was too late. As such we were called into the work of ethnographic witnessing, with all the ensuing epistemological, ethical and political questions that this implied (Angel-Ajani, 2004).

Our use of 'witnessing' to describe our relation speaks to long-standing anthropological concerns with establishing ethnographic authority. As Angel-Ajani (2004) has argued, the valorisation of 'being-there' in the field has at times obscured how fieldwork experience is located and produced. This includes the ways in which opaque desires to know, document and name can block attentiveness to threatened and vulnerable subjects (Benson and O'Neill, 2007). Our methodological practice of ethnographic witnessing does not, therefore, seek to develop an alternative language of 'values', as this would perpetuate an association between analytic abstraction and epistemic authority. Here, Wittgenstein's method of tracking what we say, and when, has been an important resource for us as we seek to resist the impulse to categorise, to avoid 'riding a great rush of signs to a satisfying end' (Stewart, 2007: 5) and to work within both the confines of descriptive language and the possibilities it affords. In his insistence on the mutual absorption of language and life, Wittgenstein stays with the complexity and incommensurability of ordinary language. Our commitment to this form of witnessing thus gives rise to a methodological question: how to cultivate receptivity towards vulnerable forms of life and meaning, and to our unacknowledged yet intense relationships with them?

Our response in this article speaks across two distinct research sites in order to develop a collaborative method for practicing attentiveness in our research and writing. In a process similar to that of Degnen and Tyler, early on in our collaboration, we each wrote a reflexive piece on our buildings and then sought 'to bring these [...] together into conversation' (2017: 43). The dialogue between these two sites was built on hours of reflexive conversation, during which we worked at articulating what was emerging through the library and community centre. This dialogical practice of witnessing became 'the third space' (Benjamin 2018), a way of keeping in touch with our lost buildings as we resisted the pull of abstract concepts, which somehow evacuated them of meaning. Through the intersubjective work of speaking and writing together, we sought to attend to the singularity of these buildings, and the ordinary socialities they afforded.

Reflecting on her route to an ethical form of research and writing, Gunaratnam describes this as 'working with the undecidable' (2015: 160). For Gunaratnam, 'the indeterminacy of life and meaning' (2015: 160) exceeds methodological tools of seeing and knowing. In 'working with the undecidable', we tried to resist our inherited sociological ways of identifying value. We reached to examples of the embodied work of ethnographic listening (Back, 2007) that to us demonstrated an ethics of care. This was effortful work; we each brought ambivalent feelings of sadness, anger and frustration. Yet we learnt to invite each other to stay with these feelings, and so with the task of describing how the buildings mattered. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the vitality of words, objects and gestures as integral to everyday life resonated with us both, as we attended to the anchoring presence of the library and community centre in their localities. If we think of a meaningful form of life as requiring continuous maintenance (Lear 2006), the loss of the building that housed it is deeply destabilising. Resisting the rush to name, or to diagnose, we now turn to our buildings, and the people attached to them, to attend to alternative registers and gestures that might articulate this loss.

## The Carnegie Library

Standing at the top of Herne Hill in the London borough of Lambeth, Carnegie Library is one of hundreds of public libraries throughout the UK which were endowed by the industrialist-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Lying amidst streets of suburban housing, the squat Edwardian red brick and purple stone building combines solid purposefulness with ornate flourishes. Bell cupolas poke out of the roof, its heavily mullioned windows are swagged with engraved ribbons, and the words 'Carnegie Library' are laid out in golden twirls of wrought iron above its double doors. According to the detailed history carefully documented on the Friends of Carnegie Library's website, the library opened in 1906 and originally included a wealth of rooms dedicated to different activities, including newspaper reading rooms, a children's library, an art gallery, an upstairs lecture hall for public meetings, workrooms for the librarians and storage areas, as well as a librarian's residence. Uniquely for its time, the library was built as open access; its book collections kept out on bespoke shelves arranged in a sun ray pattern, introducing library patrons to the serendipitous pleasures of browsing.

The first time I (Katherine) visited the Carnegie Library was on the night it closed at the end of March 2016. My belatedness in coming there, despite living for many years in another part of the borough, speaks to the intensely local delineations of public libraries. However, in October 2015, I learned that 'Culture 2020', Lambeth Council's new austerity-inflected cultural policy, had outlined plans to divest itself of half of the borough's ten libraries, selling some, and making others, including the Carnegie Library, into self-service 'neighbourhood libraries', and 'healthy living centres', incorporating gym facilities run by the council's leisure provider, GLL. Over subsequent months, I gradually become involved in 'Defend the Ten', a local libraries campaign established to resist the council's plans.

Participating in this library activism marked a significant shift for me. Throughout my doctoral research on public libraries, I had expressly avoided making library closures my focus, feeling that, given the sociological neglect of these institutions, an ethnographic discussion of public libraries in their 'ordinary' condition was important. Recalling the opening of a newly-built library in her borough when she was a child, Sarah Wood acutely evokes how the subtle, and easily overlooked practices routinely invited by library spaces open up quiet forms of democratic connectedness, which are deeply significant: 'Inside the children's library there was a sunken reading space that went down into the floor, a small-scale amphitheatre where we sat, citizens of thought, books open on our knees' (in Smith, 2015: 20). As ordinary as bin collections, public libraries simultaneously offer an expansive openness, a horizon of possibility, anchored within a local, often-unassuming, building. However, even several years ago, when describing my research to people, they frequently dismissed this vitality by responding in the terms of capitalist realism, commenting 'everything's online now', or, 'aren't libraries all closing, anyway?' Frustrated by this resignation, I was repeatedly drawn into mounting a principled defence of the very existence of libraries. Yet, my idealism about their ordinary necessity seemed to have no traction in the face of this embedded common sense.

In late March 2016, I was helping at a children's event organised by Defend the Ten when I was discretely told of the plans to occupy Carnegie Library. A week later, uncertain and nervous at my shifting role, I arrived at the Carnegie to see the entire length of the iron railings in front of the building draped in banners and heartfelt messages of support. The timing of the closure had not

been lost on protestors, 'April fool? No joke!' read one banner, while the odd coupling of books with gym equipment provided comic material for other signs. People stood on the steps, where a man wearing a library campaign t-shirt had set up a PA system and between blasts of loud music, was passing the microphone around, encouraging contributions from the crowd.

Inside, the library was full of people, massed around the issue desk, talking to the librarians and queuing to borrow armloads of books. Others chatted in small groups or roamed around, taking photos. In one corner was a large display board, titled 'Memories of Carnegie', covered with photos of events, library users and librarians, punctuated with red hearts. The door to the library garden was open and the central library space was flooded with the bright evening light of early spring. This high-ceilinged room was punctuated with colourful furniture and bright modern shelving with displays of new books. Standing behind tables laden with cakes and drinks was Julie, who had for years provided the refreshments at meetings of the Friends of Carnegie Library. A woman I recognized from Defend the Ten meetings was selling campaign t-shirts from a rucksack, and I asked her for a blue one. Putting it on, I experienced a shift from the distancing, somehow secure perspective of ethnographic observer, into a closer and more uncertain relationship with my research.

At the time of the Carnegie's closure, Lambeth's library service was one of the best-performing in the country, despite having one of the lowest budgets.<sup>7</sup> The council's plans dismantled the purpose-built building, which was pioneering for its time, and downgraded the library into an add-on to a fee-paying gym. The published designs for the building showed only the space previously occupied by the children's library labelled as 'library', with the rest of the ground floor earmarked as 'flexible space', sweeping away the library's separate rooms intentionally dedicated to different uses and users. The uneasy combination of library and gym, pulled together in an austerity grammar which produced this substitutability, left no space to recognise that the plans represented a substantive loss of a service, divorcing 'the building' from its use. The plans also threatened the history of reciprocity inscribed in the building. Signs of the philanthropic origins of the Carnegie Library were proudly displayed in the entrance lobby; a plaque inscribed, 'This building is the gift of Andrew Carnegie', and a case containing Carnegie's typewritten letter confirming and celebrating the award of the requested money. Carnegie guaranteed the cost of the building with the proviso that its upkeep would be the responsibility of the local authority. The legacy of the library as a gift to the community resonated in the continued strength of feeling towards the building; people emphasised that the library was 'held in trust', arguing that the council was temporary custodian of the library and not its arbiter. 'Whose library? *Our* library!!' we shouted, standing on the library steps in front of the chained-shut gates.

The campaigners also linked their collective ownership of the library to the financial contribution made by local people through council tax. During a discussion about the prospect of raising funds to buy the Carnegie, which is registered as an Asset of Community Value, were it to come up for sale, Pete exclaimed, 'I *already own* the Carnegie, and I *pay* Lambeth council to look after it for me. I already own it, so I don't need to buy it!' Pete's intervention spoke to the indubitable core principle of universal municipal service provision. Yet in re-asserting this principle in the face of its almost wholesale erasure by contemporary economic rationales, Pete struggled to cut through the embedded common sense on which austerity is geared. In a context in which need for services must be demonstrated along ever more stringent indices, the notion of being universally entitled to a statutory service became increasingly difficult to articulate. The perception of Herne Hill, with its weekly farmers market, semi-detached houses, and proximity to 'good schools', as an

unexceptional area, not in need of limited public resources, was also mobilised by local councillors. For them, the library campaign was expressive of 'middle class' socialities, presumed to be self-sufficient, and so as unworthy in comparison to what they claimed as more pressing local needs.

In August 2017, the local ward Labour party announced, 'Carnegie to re-open after push by Labour Councillors' and stated that works 'to bring the building back to life' (the excavation of the building's basement for the gym) would start in late summer.<sup>8</sup> The campaigners decried this distortion of the rationale for the building's transformation, denouncing it as 'Orwellian doublespeak'. The council's language of rehabilitation left no space to recognise that the library was thriving before it closed, and Defend the Ten insisted that some bookshelves in the corner of an unstaffed building could not adequately replace what had been lost. As well as the gym development, the council went ahead with the asset transfer of the Carnegie Library to a trust, which had no connection to the library's long-established Friend's group, glossing this as transferring 'ownership of the building to the community'. This rhetoric of *becoming* a community-owned building failed to acknowledge that the library was *already* a community-owned building, thus eliding the fundamental contract between a community and its buildings and services.

By now my deep involvement in the campaign meant that the grammars of protest so familiar to my fellow campaigners had become a reflex for me too, and I found myself stuck in angry loops of recounting this increasingly complicated story of injustice that could not gain analytical purchase. I explored with Ruth how engaging more ethnographically might involve attending to the subtler registers of library protest, focused on continuing the ordinary relationships and routines that had formed around the Carnegie. I developed a renewed appreciation of the creative practices of the Friends of Carnegie Library, who worked to retain their long-established calendar of library events. This included the annual bat walk in Ruskin Park opposite the library, which the Friends had initiated seven years previously. On a Saturday in late August 2017, a large crowd met on the library steps at dusk before we walked together to the park to listen to the local bat expert introduce the evening's bat spotting. Julie stood on the street corner counting us as we streamed past, and later reported that the walk had attracted its largest ever number of attendees. However, despite this appearance of success, the Friends deliberately presented this bat walk as a shadow of previous years, when it had been preceded by a bat fun day in the library and its garden. Their refusal to represent the current event as successful enabled them to show how Carnegie Library was essential to the activity. The bat walk marked the fragile maintenance of sociality made through and around the library, but for the Friends, it also bore witness to the texture of what had been lost.

In February 2018, I revisited the re-opened Carnegie Library. Surrounded by hoardings, the library was in a denuded state while construction work continued throughout the building. Slowly walking around, watched by two bored security guards, I took in how the entire library stock and all the computers were crowded into the Carnegie's central room. The issue desk had been removed and a notice stuck to a pillar advised library users to phone Brixton Tate Library for help outside of the two hours each day when librarians were present. It was hard to stay - the building was cold and no longer felt inviting and later, it felt painful to try to write about. Outside, the library protest continued to resist the narrative of successful substitution. Posters tied to the library's railings articulated a counter-rhetoric in the face of council spin that the new arrangement was a success: 'Lambeth Council Stole Our Library', 'Libraries for the Many, not Gyms for the Few', 'Carnegie Library for Ever'. The posters accumulated, became ragged in the rain and were cleared away by the council, but they were repeatedly refreshed and updated. In this way, as time passes, it is these louder, reactive registers of protest that continue while more subtle forms of witnessing seem harder to



sustain. And yet, through my participation, I have learned from the Friends of Carnegie Library that to endure the painful practice of repeating established events while articulating how these cannot substitute for what was there before, can create an opening. In a grammatical field dominated by the platitudes of austerity and the hyperbolic slogans of protest, this attentive work can allow for subtler registers and gestures of meaning. It is by describing these that I, as an ethnographer, can help to bear witness, not only to a building endowed to its local community, but also to the anchoring routines and the everyday textures of life it housed.

### **The Brenner Centre**

Prominently located on Stamford Hill's busy main road, the Brenner Centre, a Jewish Care day centre for the elderly was, until May 2017, housed in a flat-roofed purpose-built 1950s building, named Raine House.<sup>9</sup> According to its members, the building first opened at a time when Stamford Hill was becoming a key destination for upwardly mobile Jews, who moved to its more spacious residential streets from the Jewish working-class area of London's East End (Laguerre, 2008). This post-war period saw a burgeoning of local institutions catering for this community, including a thriving modern orthodox synagogue, Jewish shops, bakeries and cafes. However, in more recent decades the character of Stamford Hill has dramatically shifted. The children of this declining generation of 'East End' Jewish residents have migrated to more affluent suburbs while the Haredi (strictly orthodox) Jewish population has grown rapidly (Laguerre, 2008). As a consequence, over the past twenty years, many shops, businesses and synagogues have been taken over by Haredi organisations, whose visibly pious form of Judaism now dominates this neighbourhood.

Arriving at the Brenner Centre for the first time to attend their Chanukah party, and entering the pastel-hued basement 'hub', I (Ruth) found myself amidst a rather raucous gathering of elderly women and men, only one of whom was wearing a Kippah (Jewish male head covering), smiling as they irreverently interrupted the Rabbi's Chanukah talk. Over the following months, on my weekly visits, I would descend to the basement in order to join the topical discussion group in the 'music room', a small box-like space whose bookcases featured biographies of Alan Sugar, Shimon Peres, guides to the Holy Land and murder mysteries, and an aged piano tucked in the corner. The conversations ranged between global politics and everyday minutiae with bewildering pace, from lack of local affordable housing to the gender politics of the Wailing Wall in Israel, to the difference between homemade and shop-bought Lokshen noodles. Yet amidst this, one theme remained constant: the story of the changing character of the neighbourhood: the growth of the 'frummers' (the colloquial expression for strictly observant Jews) at the expense of *this* Jewish community. And gradually I learned that this process was not only happening 'out there' but rather was materialising within this very building. The members were constantly anxious about the centre's shrinking membership. As one ninety-four-year-old woman explained, 'we used to have the whole of this building, all three floors were Jewish Care, there used to be two lunch sittings in the dining room, literally hundreds of people'. And then referring to the Haredi organisations renting the upper floors, 'well you know if you're interested in the future - the frummers - they have taken over, they have taken over this whole building and you know they won't even use the same lift as us, they have a separate lift.' Chipping in, her friend explicitly appealed for someone to witness the transformation of this building and consequent displacement of this distinctive community, 'you're a sociologist - well, it is a sociological explosion waiting to happen here'.

However, despite this woman's call, my inherited sociological grammars seemed to block me from attending to this process of decline and erasure. In the autumn of 2016, I paused my visits to the Brenner Centre, assuming that my study of local Jewish life should prioritise 'religious' spaces, and particularly the Haredi community, whose expressive piety made them a source of public fascination. In contrast, the more indeterminate, Jewishly 'mainstream' Brenner community did not meet the matrix of value that had shaped me as a sociologist of religion. Nor could its apparent parochialism and conservatism compete with more radical and politically vocal Jewish diasporic and left-wing movements (Gidley, 2013).

It was six months later when upon learning that Jewish Care had announced that the centre would close, I pushed myself to return. Hearing of Brenner's closure, I felt drawn by my relationships with the elderly women I had grown close to there. I sensed that I needed to stay with them through this anticipated yet painful ending, perhaps as an ethnographer, or perhaps as a younger generation Jew with something to learn. Now, the time allocated for topical discussion was given over to weekly updates from the staff members. They would repeat the senior management's statements, which drew on the austerity grammars of 'difficult choices' and calculative logics, emphasising the need to prioritise areas of greater demand for their services, and to focus resources on residential care provision. The members seemed to inhabit the script that Brenner, with its shrinking membership, was no longer 'financially viable' in times of increasingly limited resources, with one elderly volunteer publically stating that, 'the dramatic decline in membership necessitated the closure of this site because of changing demographics'.<sup>10</sup> The centre staff, themselves clearly distraught, insisted that an alternative local venue would be found for weekly activities, most likely in a residential care unit half a mile away on a side street that contrasted with Brenner's prime location. They emphasised that on other days members could be minibussed to the Jewish Care centre in Stepney, to which the name 'Brenner Centre at Raine House' would be transferred. Yet, as the members commented, the more well-known, and highly valued, East End history of Stepney Jews was not *their* history. As such the proposed dismemberment of this proper name from this building somehow epitomised the management's difficulty in acknowledging the impending loss.

In early May 2017, we were told that the centre would close for good in two weeks. Talking with greater urgency to members who were keen to reminisce, I learned about the creative life of Brenner: a literary magazine, a knitting circle, a craft workshop. I began to follow the members to the music room after lunch, to participate in the singing group. There, the piano came to life and I heard the operatic voices of members who confidently took the spotlight for their solo moments. And on the final day of the centre, I experienced the tenderness with which the group said goodbye to this room, 'our home for so many years', the musicians playing sentimental requests such as 'Memories from *Cats*', allowing for a shared sense of sadness.

These events were still fresh when, upon sharing my fieldnotes with Katherine, I confessed concern at my overly sentimental account, which provoked my own tears even as the members resolutely refused to cry. My selective focus was shaped by my sociological impulse to identify the presence of an underlying category of 'care' in the centre. This expressed something of my experience of being-there yet it also brushed over the, at times, claustrophobic effects of seemingly banal ways of talking, the unthinking reproduction of conservative tropes, the vapidness of repeated stories about the everyday trials of distant relatives, or endless practical quandaries: plumbing issues, medical prescriptions, the quality of ready-meals, which somehow complemented the neutralising décor and to my tastes bland food. And it was in this somehow concrete register that the members themselves responded to the announcements around the Brenner Centre's closure;

for their verbalised concerns were not with the loss of a diasporic Jewish culture, but with the practical specificities of what this change would mean: an extra bus journey, the precise distance of a ten-minute walk to the weekly venue. What choice of food would be available, still soup and a roll? Would there be room to play bowls? How would space for a discussion group be negotiated? Where would the minibus park? Such mundane preoccupations were difficult to attend to. Yet, sharing this with Katherine, I began to consider how, despite the values I brought, the sharing of these ordinary concerns was foundational to Brenner's distinctive form of life.

In the weeks following the Brenner Centre's closure, I visited a long-serving elderly volunteer who expressed his disappointment with the management's struggle to acknowledge the loss. Describing the leaving party that we had both attended, he expressed his regret that the management were not able to 'hold' the sense of sadness, to generate registers of remembrance that could 'celebrate the past of those who are not with us, those who have contributed and those who have become part of the family.' I told him how, belatedly searching amidst the wealth of Jewish heritage websites, I found no online record of Brenner's history. Sharing his own memories, he described how 'we had three floors at Brenner and from the top to the bottom was like ants milling around with people... every room, every floor had activities... everything was bubbling you know'. He then produced a collection of magazines, carefully ring-bound, recording the hive of activities housed in the centre over the past two decades. Turning the pages, I stopped at a tabloid-style photo-strip story entitled, 'The mystery of Jewish optimism' which recounted a well-known Jewish joke. The joke went that Hymie, a 'young Yiddisher chap', encountered a friend on the tube reading a neo-Nazi newspaper. His friend, Moshe, explained that he used to read a Jewish newspaper, 'But what did I find? "Anti-Semitism in Europe, terrorism in Israel, Jews disappearing through assimilation, Jews living in poverty."' So he switched to a Nazi newspaper and then, 'what did I find? "Jews own all the banks; Jews control the media; Jews are all rich and powerful; Jews rule the world!" The news is so much better!!' The strip followed the telling of the joke by various Brenner members, each contributing the next line from a different room. From the foyer to the captive audience sitting under hooded dryers in the hair salon, to the 'Top Shop', where Gerald was buying pickled gherkins, to the dining room where members waited impatiently for their soup, to 'the hub' for cards, dancing, tea and cake. And then finally back to the foyer, where in a familiar Jewish gesture, the joke was recycled from the beginning. Tucked away in this decades-old magazine, was an irreverent riff on the very question of Jewish survival which contrasted hyperbolic rhetoric with the banal work of maintaining ordinary Jewish culture. Their humorous register had been inscribed by members into the Brenner's intentional rooms and routine uses, in a creative witnessing of the ordinary spaces and languages sustaining Brenner life.

In July 2017, I met up with a musician, a generation younger than the members, who gave me a folder and CD documenting a musical produced with the centre over a decade ago. Inscribed in its pages was the Brenner's pride in its nondescript locality, 'What are the landmarks of a place that seems to have nothing to distinguish it? Stamford Hill has had no Battle of Cable Street!<sup>11</sup> Yet, much of the Jewish East End was transplanted there...' and a call for attentiveness to ordinary singularity, 'Every place has its landmarks. Each landmark has a name... The act of naming serves as a springboard into the fabric of people's lives'. Overleaf, there were photos of the dining room, with its familiar institutional décor, the dark herringbone parquet floor, the pine and red-cushioned dining chairs organised around tables arranged cabaret style for the occasion. The stage curtains had been drawn back, to reveal a group of members performing to the large audience. Ringing out from the recording, amidst the distinctive sound of intermingled Yiddish classics, popular show-tunes and

personal reminiscences, were the names of local institutions, ‘Mother Levy’s, New Synagogue Egerton Road, Springfield Park, Egg Stores, Losner’s, Carmel Restaurant, E and A Salt Beef’. This was followed by a proud evocation of the central location of the Brenner Centre building, rooting *this* Jewish community in the heart of Stamford Hill, ‘We can still appreciate the magnificent avenue on which the Brenner Centre and other Jewish landmarks have stood and still stand today: the main road we know as Stamford Hill – the A10’. And marked in the script, the names of people who mattered: the manager who nurtured the centre in its prime, past members and volunteers, and those who had recently died.

Returning to Stamford Hill in October 2017, I found a sign cable-tied to the Brenner Centre railings, ‘institutional building with development / investment potential’. As my heart sank at the sight of this public assertion of the Brenner Centre’s substitutability, I found myself recalling the alternative responses emerging from my ethnography. For in the record of a decades-old musical production, and an irreverent cartoon-strip, the Brenner members had creatively inscribed their community in their building. Faced with powerful claims for the building’s substitutability, my inherited judgements and intense sadness had shaped an ethnographic response that struggled to be attentive to the seeming banality and ambiguity of this centre. Yet in returning to this elderly generation who lived in close, regular proximity to loss, I learned how their harmonics of naming and light-touch humour opened up alternative possibilities. They knew ways of expressing sadness and anxiety that were not overwhelming, and which enacted and stayed in touch with the distinctive registers and gestures cultivated in this building. As their musical eloquently expressed, ‘here, in the streets and places of Stamford Hill, we discover yet another distinctive and unique interface of Anglo-Jewish experience’. In this way, the closure of *this* Brenner building threatened the foundations of a unique, intensely local form of Jewish life. And my task as an ethnographic witness? Not only to feel the sadness repressed by grammars invoking Brenner’s substitutability but to amplify the responses of members who evocatively expressed how this loss matters.

## **Conclusion**

This article identifies a political problem arising out of the languages through which austerity is justified and contested in Britain: the production of noisy, hyperbolic accounts of substitutability and loss that fail to acknowledge how ordinary community buildings matter. This disavowal occurs against the wider background of capitalist modernity in which relations of exchange, abstraction and substitutability devalue ordinary places, people and things. At the same time, sociological and anthropological work on austerity, aimed at generating an alternative conception of value/s, has abstracted from its everyday iterations and meanings, arrogating the right to judge what merits political and sociological attention. Developing an alternative approach to this work, we have traced how ethnographers, activists and community members alike, can get stuck when faced with austerity’s embedded ‘common sense’. Drawing on practices of ordinary ethics and ethnographic listening, we have sought to attend to the quieter and more subtle responses to austerity inhering in everyday forms of life. Our method learns from Wittgenstein’s emphasis on staying with the registers and gestures of ordinary language as a method for pushing back against abstraction, and from collaborative processes of speaking and writing together. This, we claim, has enabled us to challenge what we recognise as sociologically important. It has also helped us to resist the pull of abstract concepts of value, enabling us to attend to losses that are painful to witness. Furthermore, by inviting each other to stay with the seemingly banal forms of witnessing that were already

present in each of our fieldsites, we have explored how they opened out alternative possibilities for responding to loss.

Our engagement with these political, epistemological and ethical concerns has focused on two distinct cases. First, that of the Carnegie Library, directly under threat from local authority policy, which presented ordinary entitlements to universal services as unjustifiable under conditions of austerity. In this specific case, the perception that the Carnegie served a suburban community unworthy of limited public resources was used to degrade and hollow out the library, with the local authority claiming its successful substitution. Our second case was that of the Brenner Jewish Community Centre, whose closure in light of limited resources was justified by calculative and substitutive scripts that were internalized by its members. Within a political landscape that devalues ordinariness, attempts to render Brenner's specific value, as a demographically declining community, with a relatively mundane history and parochial culture, were thereby blocked.

Writing across these two contexts, we have traced our related struggles to stay present as ethnographic witnesses. We showed how Katherine absorbed the angry grammars of protest and felt compelled to repeat counter-arguments, and how Ruth brought inherited judgements about non-exceptional culture, and felt blocked by sadness from attending to the ambiguity of Brenner life. Yet, our claim is also that the third space of our collaboration enabled us to listen to quieter registers and subtler gestures of response: the continued rhythm of events, which were simultaneously a way of memorialising and protesting erasure; the humorous tone and musical registers, which were able to hold painful experiences of loss, and the harmonics of naming which maintained contact with the singularities of languages, places and histories under threat.

Highlighting how these alternatives registers of witnessing were grounded in the Carnegie Library and the Brenner Centre, we have shown how deeply communities of users depended on their buildings, and the socialities, practices and relationships that they anchored. And by attending to the creative expressions housed within these places, we have shown how they contain significant ethical and political possibilities. In this way, we have responded to noisy, hyperbolic political and theoretical grammars by amplifying quotidian responses, which express how ordinary buildings and the forms of life they sustain, matter.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35707956](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35707956)

<sup>2</sup> See for example: <http://www.itv.com/news/tyne-tees/story/2016-01-13/durham-county-council-to-close-twelve-adult-day-care-centres/>; <https://www.sunderlandecho.com/our-region/sunderland/closure-date-set-for-sunderland-s-city-library-1-8190155>.

<sup>3</sup> Here we are following Das' (1998) reading of Wittgenstein's notion of philosophical (as opposed to linguistic) grammar.

<sup>4</sup> For almost three years, Katherine has been involved as an activist-researcher with a campaign to save Lambeth's ten public libraries, participating in regular campaign meetings and actions, and interviewing campaigners. Ruth's fieldwork at the Brenner Centre was part of an ethnographic study of Jewish life in Hackney and included eighteen months of participant observation and interviews with members and staff.

<sup>5</sup> Our use of the proper names of the Carnegie Library and the Brenner Centre reflects our claim that naming can be an ethical practice of recognising singular value and resisting substitutability. We have however adopted pseudonyms for those individuals who preferred not to be identified.

<sup>6</sup> Carnegie sponsored 19 libraries in London alone, and 127 in other major cities and towns in England, 46 across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> Lambeth Libraries and Archives, 'Staff and Community Mutual Proposal', 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Herne Hill Labour News, Summer Edition 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Jewish Care is a charity, providing health and social welfare support services for the Jewish community. The Brenner Centre at Raine House was named for two benefactors.

<sup>10</sup> Austerity policies clearly play out differently in relation to voluntary sector services, such as those provided by Jewish Care, as compared with public libraries. Analysis of the role of the wider political-economic landscape in Jewish Care's decision to close the Brenner Centre is beyond the scope of my research. Ruth's more modest claim is that the calculative and substitutive grammars of austerity provided a language through which the Brenner's closure was justified.

<sup>11</sup> The 1936 'Battle of Cable Street' is a key event in the mythology of Jewish anti-Fascist resistance in Britain.