Chapter 15.

Things Will Be Different: A relational documentary of resistance in the shadow of displacement

Authors:

Chelsea Heart

No ORCID

Biography:

Chelsea Heart is a writer and worker living in Naarm/Melbourne. Her first book of poetry, Petal, was published in 2021 through Incendium Radical Library, and her chapbook, With Love, and Labour was published in 2023 through Rosa Press. Chelsea completed her Masters by Research in Marxist Feminist theory at the University of New South Wales in 2023. Recently, she co-edited an anthology of Sex Worker writing in so-called Australia entitled I Want It, I Need It, I Make It, which was published through the independent collective SW Narrative Salon.

Emmett LaGrutta

https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0002-2402

Biography:

Emmett Lagrutta is a moving image maker with over ten years of experience across the local professional industry and within the independent filmmaking scene of Naarm/Melbourne. Emmett has produced and directed music videos, fashion films, and shorts that have been screened internationally. In time, his work received support from VicScreen, Screen Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Currently, he holds a position at the University of Melbourne's School of Film and Television as a film educator, subject coordinator and researcher.

David Kelly

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0285-2739

Biography:

David Kelly is a human geographer whose research focuses on housing, urban governance, and displacement. His work explores the intersection of public policy, planning, and everyday urban life, with particular attention to housing insecurity, homelessness, and the role of the not-for-profit sector.

Lucie McMahon
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9896-5079

Biography:

Lucie McMahon is a film practitioner based in Naarm/Melbourne. Lucie is currently undertaking a PhD at RMIT University, where she also lectures and tutors in cinema and media studies. Lucie's creative practice research looks at queer documentary and queer history in Melbourne. Lucie also works as a freelance producer on a variety of film projects, notably, *Things Will Be Different* (2024), *Jeanette is the Dog* (2019) and *Mercury* (2019).

Abstract:

This chapter discusses the making of *Things Will Be Different* (2023), a documentary film that chronicles the displacement of two families from the Walker Street public housing estate in Melbourne, Australia, after it is sold for private redevelopment. The chapter situates the film and its production contexts in relation to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2016) concept of 'organised abandonment', a process in which the state divests from communities and leans instead upon carceral measures to manage social issues. In addition, the chapter discusses how communities of care form as political acts in the face of the state's divestment from social infrastructure.

<Chapter text starts here>

Things Will Be Different is a sixty-five-minute documentary directed by Lucie McMahon chronicling the experiences of two households forcibly displaced from the Walker Street public housing estate in Naarm/Melbourne, (Victoria, Australia). Set against the broader decline of public housing as the last non-commodified housing tenure, the film reveals the networks of care, community, and kinship that persist within conditions of what abolitionist scholar Ruth

Wilson Gilmore calls “organised abandonment” (Gilmore, 2022). Through the documentation of households in a small public housing estate, the documentary captures the managed decline of social infrastructure (in this case housing) followed by market-led “solutions” such as urban renewal, which reproduce carceral logics of containment and dispersal. Foregrounded is the human cost of forced displacement at a time when research on Victoria’s housing renewal programs consistently points to the social, economic, and health harms of these policies (Kelly & Porter, 2019).



<Figure 15.1. here>

Figure 15.1. Will at Walker Street. Photography by Celeste de Clario, 2022.

The Walker Street estate was constructed between 1958 and 1962 and consisted of a community of 86 households built as part of a broader national program of public housing supply. The estate community was located along the Merri Merri creek in the northern inner suburbs of Naarm/Melbourne. Prior to colonisation, the creek sustained the local Wurundjeri people with eel, fish, duck, and other resources, and served as a site for ceremony and gathering (Merri Creek Management Committee, 2023).

Displacement in this area is part of a much longer history. Next to the estate lies the likely site of the 1835 Batman "treaty," a fraudulent land grab in which John Batman, who 'was a bounty hunter and entrepreneurial colonialist who committed war crimes including but not limited to murder, enslavement and falsifying legal documents to proclaim ownership of the stolen lands of the Kulin nation, where Melbourne now stands' (History Skips, 2025). Batman claimed 200,000 hectares of land around Naarm /Melbourne in exchange for tools, blankets, and flour (Harcourt, 2001). Although the precise site remains debated (Blackburn et al., as cited in Harcourt, 2001), Wurundjeri Elder, Ian Hunter has oral history of the treaty signing taking place at a scar tree near Walker and McLachlan Streets (Romanov-Hughes, 2015), just some hundred meters away from the former Walker Street housing estate. The film takes place in this context of land justice and the technologies of dispossession that people living in structured dwellings experience. As writers of this chapter, we proceed from the understanding of First Nations sovereignty of Australia as fact, and acknowledge the recursive nature of dispossession that takes place on these lands today.

Walker Street was one of eleven inner-city public housing sites selected for sale and redevelopment under the Victorian Labor Government's Public Housing Renewal Program in 2016. The program displaced over 1,200 households, replacing them with a mix of higher-income tenures. As Kelly and Porter (2019) argue, the renewal models eliminate public housing from each site through tenure conversion and ownership of public land transferred to community housing providers. The result of programs such as this, is a diminished capacity to house those in

need, higher rents and increasing tenure instability that will likely produce adverse health and economic outcomes.

The history of public housing in so-called Australia traces shifting state responsibilities and the evolving function of housing under capitalism. Emerging during post-depression “New Deal”-style reforms in the 1930s and 1940s, public housing was initially conceived as essential infrastructure for the working class and unemployed (Dalton, 1988). Influenced by Keynesian thought, particularly the idea that the state should intervene in and strengthen the economy through welfare, state governments in Australia aimed to stabilise economic growth and industrial productivity by addressing urban poverty and slum conditions. In Victoria, the 1938 establishment of the State Housing Commission marked a formal response to these concerns. Public housing also functioned to contain the bourgeois-perceived moral threat of the urban working class by relocating slum dwelling populations into regulated, state-managed housing environments (Howe, 1988).

Since the 1970s, Australian governments have actively dismantled the welfare state. Public housing, once seen as an auxiliary to industrial labour, has been reframed as an unnecessary expense. The Keynesian approach to economic management, which relied on public spending to stabilise growth and employment, ultimately faltered in the face of recurring economic crises. As Melinda Cooper (2024, p. X) has explained, “the fiscal expansionism of Keynesianism is necessarily limited because it can never go so far as to endanger profits.” Austerity became the policy response to the global economic crisis from the 1970s onwards, and housing responsibility shifted to the market. Gilmore (2016, p.156) describes this process as organised abandonment: “a regime that, veiled by the rhetoric of ‘less government,’ specifically prevents the hands of the vulnerable from extracting the social wage.” Alongside healthcare, education, and income supports, public housing has been systematically targeted by neo-liberal governments in a broad rollback of public institutions which together form part of the social wage: the necessary infrastructure needed for the survival and wellbeing of working class people.

Cuts to public housing and related welfare services introduced by both Labor and Liberal governments in the 1980s and 1990s shifted responsibility for housing from the state to the

individual, replacing public provision with the individualisation of risk, debt, and housing insecurity. Ideological rebranding of public housing accelerated in the 2000s, particularly under federal and state-level housing reforms, when the term "social housing" was introduced to consolidate government-owned housing with NGO-managed stock, blurring the lines between public and market-aligned models of housing support. In 2009, then Federal Housing Minister Tanya Plibersek characterised public housing as a site of "drug dealing, antisocial behaviour, lack of mutual support and trust, joblessness, dislocation, [and] isolation" (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2016, p. 320), reinforcing an image of public tenants as socially dysfunctional, and legitimating the replacement of public housing with market-based solutions.

Since the 1970s, precarity has become a permanent feature of capitalism, with cycles of economic crisis disproportionately burdening low-income communities, and the expansion of what Marx termed the surplus population: those rendered unemployed, underemployed or intermittently employed. The worker of our time is no longer the industrial labourer, but someone juggling multiple low paid jobs, raising children, and struggling to keep afloat. This is a state that economic historian Michael Denning (2010) describes as a 'wageless life', a condition defined not by a stable wage but by persistent insecurity and propertylessness. Public housing residents are often service workers, carers, health workers, parents and others who support the infrastructure of everyday life. Yet, the system that houses them is widely framed by policymakers as "failed," and its privatisation is justified through narratives of social degeneracy (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2016).

Increasingly, the working condition of our time extends beyond the factory floor or the office into the broader social realm of everyday life. Capital requires a population that is constantly available for work, while increasingly offloading responsibility for what was once considered essential public infrastructure, such as housing, healthcare, and education, onto individuals and families. In public housing survival often takes on a collective dimension: residents check in on elders, share food and childcare, and build social life through their shared needs. These everyday practices of mutual care are foundational to how people live and endure amid the state's retreat from its responsibilities to provide adequate social support.

The film, Things Will Be Different captures this contradiction. On one hand, public housing remains one of the few spaces where low-income communities experience relative housing stability and solidarity. On the other, the very existence of such collectivity is under threat, as the state advances policies of displacement that seek to disperse, atomise, and individualise. Yet from this destruction, new forms of kinship emerge. The documentary does not simply record loss. It documents how people make life in the ruins of empire, refusing the erasure of their communities with acts of care, resistance, and continuity.

Things Will Be Different provides a visual record of the physical destruction of the Walker Street buildings and the emotional limits people are pushed to in the uncertainty and disappointment of having to uproot from the place they have made their lives. However, the images in the film are only one part of the much larger picture; they are publicly visible but they do not address the relations that make it possible. This is to say, the images are not just the story contained within the film. The images point to relations between viewers and the filmmakers that form the basis of connection and bonds, which are in themselves part of the creative practice and the political act. In the face of a "political economy that wants you dead or worked to death, or alive but not really there" (Olufemi, 2021, p.141), the black feminist writer, researcher and organiser Olufemi positions any materials that emerge from struggle as art, and the art of relation as "the only creative practice worth saving" (Olufemi, 2021, p.14). Whether it was helping one another move house, driving interstate together, or calling for advice about an assignment or breakup, the filmmaker/participant relations that emerged throughout the making of the film(though largely relegated to the private experiences of those involved in making the film), are also palpable within the narrative of the film.

In an interview at the time of the release of Things Will Be Different, McMahon (the filmmaker and one of the authors of this chapter) acknowledged that her intention was always to deliver an "intimate slice-of-life documentary, rather than something more academic, to prompt viewers to consider the renewal's impact on real people" (Au-Nhien Nguyen, 2024). This positioning was a deliberate and responsive act as much of the discourse about public housing in Melbourne is relegated to bureaucratic analysis of the state of public housing (Victorian Government, 2017; Victoria Parliament, 2018). These artefacts of policy do not consider the community who call

public housing home now, but rather imagine a future community of residents who have not yet arrived.

In Things Will Be Different, the people most affected by the shifting responsibilities of the state to provide basic subsistence to its population.are not simply subjects of the film but active participants in the making of the documentary. Their lives are collaboratively woven into the filmmaking process, and their relationships with the filmmakers (Lucie McMahon and Celeste de Clario) are central to the film's method and meaning. Early in the documentary, Celeste's voice is heard from behind the camera asking, "What were you doing?" The question is directed at Will, the lead participant in the film and resident of Walker Street, as he records his view of the Merri Merri Creek. "Trying to remember for the future," he replies. Will's presence grounds the film in the slow labour of memory and care, and his role becomes increasingly central as the story unfolds. This moment of reciprocal interaction exemplifies the film's central production methodology, what Olúfémi (2021, p.14) describes as the 'art of relation', a mode of creative practice in which the formation of relationships is not peripheral to the work, but foundational to both its process and political force. This interactivity shapes the film formally and produces a rare aesthetic intimacy.

Documentary filmmaking encompasses a diverse range of participatory methodologies, yet the one-on-one interview remains a dominant mode through which lived experience is solicited and made legible. Documentary maker Kim Munro has problematised this form, observing that "the pressure to provide convincing evidence through affective and persuasive means from testimony can burden the participant and the participatory relationship" (2017, p.1). In Things Will Be Different, William confronts this burden not as a passive subject but as an agentic resident who refuses the subjugated position of the lived experience participant. He meets the moment with a critique of euphemistic renewal programs, of policymakers, and of the broader social order that erodes collective life. Although his contribution takes the form of testimony, the relational conditions under which it is produced disrupt the asymmetries that typically structure such exchanges. William is encountered in his own space, doing what he wants to be doing, and it is this mutual framing that softens the hierarchy between the filmmakers and the participant, allowing his voice to emerge not as evidence, but as refusal.

In this instance, we hear the delicate clinking of crystals underscoring the finicky and intricate task at hand. William is dismantling glass pendants from a chandelier with a pair of pliers. The fragility of the materials contrasts with the frustration and firmness in which he speaks. Having recently experienced forced relocation, William looks tired and stretched, and the impacts of the process are palpable. The scene begins with William outlining the loss of meaning that has occurred for him since the estate's community was fractured. Here, an arm of the chandelier is dislodged. Continuing to unscrew the rattling chandelier William contemplates the larger social implications of the Victorian State Government's Public Housing Renewal Program and how it threatens, if not assures, homelessness and untimely deaths, asking, in what could be argued as one of the most powerful moments in the documentary:

> Why would anyone want to go to work… and part of going to work involves stepping over people who are sleeping on the footpath and are obviously really really sick… How can there be meaning in your job as a lawyer, doctor, shop assistant – whatever you're doing in this society where you think, 'I'm doing a good thing – but on the way to work, I step over people that are exactly the same as me in all meaningful senses, and they're dying in front of me (McMahon, 2024).

Documentary researcher and practitioner Munro reminds us that this kind of verbal testimony is just one aspect of the complex performance of self, which often heavily relies on the participant's ability "to convincingly articulate what is felt and often beyond linguistic conceptualisation" (Munro, 2017, p.3). For instance, the disarray of William's yard and the exasperation in his expressions signposts how affected he has been by this recent upheaval and yet, he remains an effective and persuasive participant of the film. This distinguished articulation of the self, in part, is owed to the dispersion of activities underway in the interview and the collaborative relations formed by the documentary team. William was not set up by the filmmakers to deliver a traditional talking-head interview. Instead, he is interviewed on his terms, continuing with his project of dismantling the chandelier.

Choosing to meet William on his terms creates a sense of ease and intimacy to the scene as it mitigates the expectation of definitive right and wrong answers. William, as the participant, is freed from the pressure of providing a singular, conclusive narrative and can instead explore the complexities and ambiguities of his experiences. It pushes the exchange between the documentarian and participant toward a dialogue, as the question and answer format is ruptured by the other activity (in this case, the destruction of the chandelier). The primacy of the filming that is taking place becomes subordinate to the explorative creative act the participant has agency over. As the scene comes to its conclusion, William reflects:

> All the amazing bits that have come off his thing… I mean, you'd really have to lack creativity or inspiration not to be able to think of something to do with that in your own house (McMahon, 2024).

The chandelier was eventually refashioned by Will into a jewellery stand that was gifted to Lucie (director of the film and an author of this chapter). While this detail is not known to viewers of the film, it represents the myriad ways in which objects and people come into relation to one another in impermeable ways throughout the processes of creative collaboration. The documentary is a venture that demands interdependency and forges belonging in otherwise precarious and fleeting conditions. The project of Things Will Be Different exists as evidence of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "subjects who refuse – who refuse to bear the weight of late capitalism's stark utopia, the abstraction of abandonment, the violence of abstraction" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 375). The film and the relations formed through its process create a record of resistance and connection as a means of doing political organising and reckoning with state-sanctioned disposability.

In 2023, six months before the release of Things Will Be Different, the Premier of Victoria at the time, Daniel Andrews announced that all public housing high-rise estates across Melbourne would be demolished under the Victorian Government's High-Rise Redevelopment Program. The government's claim that some public housing buildings are "not fit for purpose" recycles the same rationale used to justify the demolition of Walker Street and the eleven other estates targeted under an earlier Public Housing Renewal Program. As with the Walker Street estate, no

public feasibility studies were released to support the demolition approach. In response, the architectural firm Office developed a third iteration of their Retain, Repair, Reinvest (RRR) model, producing independent feasibility reports for public housing sites under threat of demolition. These reports demonstrated that refurbishment combined with infill development could deliver social housing at significantly lower cost than demolition while keeping communities intact and dramatically reducing environmental harm. Yet these findings were ignored by the Victorian State Government, which pressed forward with a plan for mass displacement and privatisation of public housing.

In April 2025, the Victorian Supreme Court dismissed a human rights class action led by Barry Berih, a public housing resident of the North Melbourne public housing estate. The class action argued that the Victorian State Government had violated their rights under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities by failing to consult tenants before deciding to demolish their homes. The court ruled that the government was under no legal obligation to consult residents and found the limitations on their rights to be reasonable and justified. The decision affirms the state's power to proceed with the demolition of all 44 public housing towers across Melbourne, displacing more than 10,000 people without procedural safeguards or community consent. This outcome underscores the impossibility of realising housing rights within existing legal frameworks and consolidates the state's project of public housing erasure (Kelly et al., 2025). *Things Will Be Different* offers a vital counter to the dominant narratives of this imposed precarity and of an individual life lived under constraint. Despite conditions of organised abandonment, we offer a narrative grounded in shared life, with its modes of belonging, refusal and solidarity that foreground the necessary and inevitable imagination of dwelling-otherwise.



<Figure 15.2. here>

Figure 15.2. Emmett Filming. Photography by Celeste de Clario, 2022.

This chapter was written with the assistance of William Gwynne and Celeste de Clario.

Reference list

Arthurson, K. (2008). Australian public housing and the diverse histories of social mix. *Journal of Urban History*, *34*(3), 484-501. https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144207311192

Au-Nhien Nguyen, G. (2024, May 12). 'I just can't move again': The Melbourne public housing residents fighting to save their community. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/may/13/things-will-be-different-documentary-melbourne-public-housing-northcote

Bailey, I. (2024, May 17). Review: 'Things Will Be Different' is a melodic documentary about the importance of public housing. *Rough Cut Online Film Publication*. https://roughcutfilm.com/2024/05/17/review-things-will-be-different-is-a-melodic-documentary-about-the-importance-of-public-housing/

Cooper, M. (2024, May 13). Extravagances of neoliberalism [Interview by B. Kunkel]. *The Baffler*. https://thebaffler.com/latest/extravagances-of-neoliberalism-kunkel

Dalton, T. (1988). Architects, engineers and rent collectors: An organisational history of the Commission. In R. Howe (Ed.), *New houses for old: Fifty years of public housing in Victoria* (pp. 51-74). Ministry of Housing and Construction.

Denning, M. (2010). *Wageless life. New Left Review*, 66, 79-97.

Gilmore, R. W. (2016). Devolution and police power: Organized abandonment and organized violence in racial capitalism's neo-liberal turn. In C. Heatherton & J. T. Camp (Eds.), *Policing the planet: Why the policing crisis led to Black Lives Matter.* Verso.

Gilmore, R. W. (2022). Abolition geography: Essays towards liberation. In B. Bhandar & A. Toscano, (Eds.).*Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*. Verso Books.

Harcourt, R. (2001). *Southern invasion – northern conquest: Story of the founding of Melbourne*. Golden Point Press.

History Skips. (2025) https://historyskips.com/batman.

Howe, R. (1988). Introduction. In R. Howe (Ed.), *New houses for old: Fifty years of public housing in Victoria* (pp. 1-11). Ministry of Housing and Construction.

Jacobs, K., & Flanagan, K. (2016). Public housing and the politics of stigma. *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *48*(3), 319-337. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2013.tb00285.x

Kelly, D., Kunjan, P., & Porter, L. (2025). The impossibility of housing rights. *Overland.* https://overland.org.au/2025/04/the-impossibility-of-housing-rights/

Kelly, D., & Porter, L. (2019). *Understanding the assumptions and impacts of the Victorian Public Housing Renewal Program [Final report]*. Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University. https://cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/understanding-the-assumptions-and-impacts-of-the-phrp-final-report-28-5-19.pdf

Merri Creek Management Committee. (2023). *Wurundjeri-Willam: Aboriginal heritage of Merri Creek*. https://www.mcmc.org.au/

Munro, K. (2017). Rethinking first person testimony through a vitalist account of documentary participation. *Frames Cinema Journal*, 12. https://framescinemajournal.com/article/rethinking-first-person-testimony-through-a-vitalist-account-of-documentary-participation/

Nicholls, S. (2014). Perpetuating the problem: Neoliberalism, commonwealth public policy and housing affordability in Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *49*(3), 329-347. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2014.tb00316.x

Office. (2024). *Retain Repair Reinvest – Flemington Estate: Feasibility study and alternative design proposal [Report]*. https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Retain-Repair-Reinvest-Flemington-Estate_OFFICE_Full-Report.pdf

Olufemi, L. (2021). *Experiments in imagining otherwise*. Hajar Press.

Romanov-Hughes, A. (2015). Batman treaty memorial located. Port Phillip Pioneers Group. https://web.archive.org/web/20150313013352/http://www.portphillippioneersgroup.org.au/pppg5be.htm

Stonehouse, D., Threlkeld, G., & Farmer, J. (2015). 'Housing risk' and the neoliberal discourse of responsibilisation in Victoria. *Critical Social Policy*, *35*(3), 393-413. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018315588232

McMahon, L. (Director). (2024). *Things Will Be Different* [film]. Independent.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office. (2024). *Planning social housing*. https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/planning_social_housing

Victorian Government. (2017. *Homes for Victorians: Affordability, access and choice.* https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Homes-for-Victorians.pdf

Victoria. Parliament. Legislative Council. Legal and Social Issues Committee. (2018). *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program*. Victorian Government Printer. https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/4aea94/contentassets/c0fced4491df40e5a8e95c27aa7350c3/lsic_58-11_phrp_text_web.pdf