

A Licence to Kill: Necroeconomic Suffocation by Stealth and the Fight for Life

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Abstract: Three decades of austerity in the UK have seen the deterioration of the *elemental infrastructures*, those that provided a basic level of security for the population. In this article, we analyse the case of Awaab Ishak, who died (age two) when he suffocated from mould in his home in Rochdale, North-West England. We investigate why and how this child was allowed to die in a rich Western European country with a welfare state, and how this case made visible the necroeconomic policies that have made our most intimate spaces for daily living and breathing dangerous. Exploring the relationship between capital and state, we reveal those who profit from slum housing and examine how premature death from indoor air pollution is symbolically legitimated. We argue that the state's invitation to asset managers to take over social housing has granted property owners and managers a licence to kill.

Keywords: suffocation, indoor air pollution, social housing, racism, class struggle, deregulation

[S]ome lives are breathable, others are suffocating; for many, keeping on breathing is a matter of daily struggle. (Górska 2016:24)

Preface: Awaab Couldn't Breathe

Awaab Ishak took his last breath on 21 December 2020 just eight days after celebrating his second birthday. Awaab's breathing had been laboured for some time. On the morning of 21 December, Awaab's parents, Faisal Abdullah and Aisha Ami, took him to Rochdale Urgent Care Centre (North-West England) in acute respiratory distress. Awaab urgently required artificial ventilation, but medics struggled to get a tube far enough down his swollen and obstructed airway to successfully intubate him. Awaab was transferred to the Royal Oldham Hospital for emergency care but he suffered a cardiac arrest in the ambulance and died later that same day.

An inquest into Awaab's death was heard before Senior Coroner Joanne Kearsley at North Manchester Coroner's Court in November 2022.¹ The Home Office Forensic Pathologist, Dr Lumb, found evidence of fungal spores in Awaab's blood and lungs and acute swelling in his trachea (windpipe) and bronchi (the passages through which air travels into the lungs). Lumb determined that the swelling was caused by "severe granulomatous tracheobronchitis" (Kearsley 2020). Granulomas are clusters of immune cells that form in the body in reaction to infections, inflammation, irritants, or foreign objects.² The granulomas in Awaab's airways and lungs that blocked the insertion of the breathing tube had formed as an immune response to breathing fungal spores in his home. The building surveyor who inspected the property two days after Awaab's death, gave evidence that there was "significant mould" in every room and agreed that it was "unfit for human habitation" (Topping 2022). Coroner Kearsley concluded that "the development of Awaab's severe respiratory condition which led to him going into respiratory arrest was entirely due to the prolonged exposure he had to mould in his home environment" (Kearsley 2020). In short, Awaab died because he had been forced to breathe in air polluted with fungal spores in a damp, mould-infested flat. Given the deadly conditions in Awaab's home, it was likely that he was exposed to mould before his birth.³ Awaab's parents had complained multiple times to their landlord that the environment they were living in was making their baby unwell. Awaab had been treated for respiratory illness several times during his short life.

It was the determination and tenacity of family, journalists, clinicians, lawyers, and coroners⁴ that forced Awaab's preventable death into public view, and with it the endemic malignancy at the heart of the English state's purposefully deregulated housing industry. This case represents the tip of a UK respiratory health crisis (Sinha 2020, 2023, 2024). The situation has intensified and will continue to do so.

Introduction

We first encountered the issue of indoor air pollution through our research as sociologists on the intersections of poverty, housing, illness, racism, and class struggle in austerity Britain. For more than a decade, we have collaborated with clinicians, medics, GPs, medical and health directors, care workers, social workers, charities, and activists working at the front line of Britain's cumulative welfare crisis, and those most affected by deepening poverty.⁵ What we have learnt is that the British welfare state now offers its citizens scant protections against the predatory forces of capital.⁶

The British government has been "failing forward" for some time, perfecting strategies and techniques that extract rather than protect, systematically weakening those it considers to be disposable (Peck 2010). Death through neglect has become institutionally hardwired into care and welfare systems, whilst methods for extracting profit from many forms of care are creatively developed by asset managers (Skeggs 1997). The National Health Service has been significantly

privatised; inadequate healthcare is now the norm with millions on waiting lists for hospital treatments and surgery. Basic social provisions have been withdrawn from disabled people and families, with millions relying on emergency food parcels to survive. Increasing numbers of people are becoming disabled and are dying prematurely because of cuts to vital benefits and services once provided by the state. Indeed, government data reveals “a slowdown in life expectancy of a duration not witnessed in the UK for 120 years and that has not been seen to the same extent across the rest of Europe or in most other OECD countries” (Marmot 2020). We are in a *fight for life* against late capitalist conditions that are killing us (Kelley and Linebaugh 2023).

In this article, we employ the Awaab Ishak case as a lens through which to examine disablement and death from indoor pollution in homes unfit for human habitation in Britain. Our central argument is that the government’s sale and deregulation of state social housing is paradigmatic of the “necroeconomic” logic that underpins the British post-welfare state; policies and practices that condemn people to premature death in the interest of assuring profit.

Necroeconomics

The concept of necroeconomics emerged out of Marx’s account in *Capital* of the variety of ways in which capital rapaciously feeds off living labour leading to “premature exhaustion and death” (Marx 1887:253). Necro concepts and theories have been most fully developed by scholars of racial and colonial capitalism, to examine contemporary legacies of slavery and colonialism and the neocoloniality of Global North/South extractivism (see, e.g. Banerjee 2008; Manjapra 2022; Mbembe 2019). In this article, we employ necroeconomics as a conceptual framework to scrutinise the ways in which state sanctioned death is institutionalised in post-welfare policies within Britain, one of the wealthiest states in the Global North and formerly the world’s premier colonial power.

The theory of necroeconomics evolved in this article builds on Skeggs’ (2021) essay “Necroeconomics”, an examination of how the British government managed the Covid-19 pandemic. Skeggs identified three primary modalities at work in the government’s response to the pandemic: “necrospeculation”, the ability of state and capital to turn disaster into profit (Klein 2014); “thanatocracy”, legacies and policies of statecraft that both legislate and sanction mass death in the service of capitalist accumulation (Linebaugh 1991); and “social reproduction”, understood here as the divestment of responsibility for the protection of life from the state to individual households and care-givers, especially women and mothers, but also volunteer and third-sector labour (Federici 2004). The British state’s austerity disinvestments are unevenly spatially distributed, with significant intra-urban and regional disparities concentrating “wealth and health in some places, and poverty and illness in others” (Loyd 2014:30). Here we develop the conceptual framework of “the necro” in dialogue with geographical scholarship on race-class inequalities, housing and health inequalities, environmental racism and pollution

(e.g. Bricknell and Nowicki 2025; Gilmore 2022; Loyd 2014; Pain 2019; Pain and Cahill 2022; Pulido 2016, 2017).

No Escape: Polluted Particle Breathing

We breathe automatically. We only become cognisant that we are breathing under certain conditions, for example, when we consciously try to observe or control our breath, when our breath becomes laboured due to exercise, fear, anxiety, or illness, or when air is noxious, poisoned, or polluted. Or when violent attempts are made to stop our breath. As Marijn Nieuwenhuis (2016) argues, it is only when breathing becomes difficult that the politics of the air become visible.

Toxic black mould (*Stachybotrys chartarum*) was first identified as a serious health problem in Prague in 1837. The correlation between black mould and respiratory health is very well evidenced in medical literature (Benton 2024; Holden et al. 2023), but people still die from it, especially babies and children whose lungs are still developing, and those who are immunosuppressed.

The year before Awaab's death, Channel 4 broadcast a documentary in its series *Dispatches; New Landlords from Hell* (2019) scrutinised the impact of indoor air pollution on the health of infants and children living in properties owned and managed by one of the largest private registered providers of social housing in Britain, Sanctuary Housing (the irony!).⁷ One storyline focused on a baby called Jensen, who lived in the seaside town of Brixham in South-West England, one of the most economically deprived areas in the UK. Jensen had been hospitalised 26 times in the first year of his life and diagnosed with reactive airway disorder, an asthma-like condition in which his bronchial tubes were reacting to irritants in the environment, leaving him wheezing and struggling for breath. Jensen and his family live in a house where water is running down the walls, silverfish swarm under the downstairs carpets, the kitchen cupboards are rotten, and the family's mattresses are wrapped in plastic because of mould. Jensen's mum explains that they have been unable to get Sanctuary to fix their property despite providing letters from a GP, hospital doctors, environmental health officers, and local politicians that evidenced that the conditions in their home were seriously impacting their baby's health. Nothing was done.

After Awaab's death in 2020, Daniel Hewitt, an investigative journalist, began an 18-month investigation into homes unfit for human habitation. Hewitt's work resulted in a documentary for ITV, *Surviving Squalor: Britain's Housing Shame* (2021). What Hewitt captured in photographs, film footage, and interviews with tenants was hundreds of families living in extreme and dangerous homes, contaminated with extreme mould and damp, with structural disrepair that included water leaks, raw sewage leaks, and collapsed ceilings; conditions which he described as "barely believable and totally unliveable". He found families resorting to sleeping in one room due to the contamination of bedrooms by mould and children sleeping inside tents in their beds to minimise the impact of breathing in fungal spores while they slept. Many are too scared to report problems in case

they are evicted.⁸ Rarely were any effective repairs made. Daily life subject to suffocation.⁹

Unbreathable Lives

Suffocation is entangled with histories and practices of gender-class-race violence and exploitation. The threads of connection between (un)breathable lives and histories of slavery, colonial capitalism, environmental racism, racist incarceration, bordering and policing practices are becoming apparent. In 2020, “I can’t breathe” became the mantra of global BLM protests, triggered by a viral video of George Floyd being suffocated by a police officer on a sidewalk in Minnesota. Floyd’s final words echoed those of Eric Garner, who was suffocated to death in a chokehold by an NYPD officer in 2014. These public lynchings graphically illustrate Frantz Fanon’s (1965:66) rendering of conditions of Black life in white supremacist societies as “combat breathing”. As Gabriel Apata (2020:242) argues, racial injustice is characterised by “systemic and structural suffocation”.

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), the race-class politics of breathlessness was foregrounded on a global scale. The COVID-19 virus is transmitted through airborne aerosols, transforming the air into a “horrificing, giant mandible, a vehicle for contamination” (Mbembe 2021:S59). The pandemic forced us to confront the fact that we share our air space; the “unsettling realisation that ... conditions for breathing mean that a breath is not ‘mine’ but is instead saturated with the matter deposited by others” (Dennis 2015:197). Face masks and social distancing measures became emblems of the abject intimacy of communal respiration. And nobody could fail to notice that the “lungs that strain against the COVID-19 virus” were often “the same lungs that have historically struggled against anthropogenic non-viral forms of air pollution” (Tierney 2023:15). The UK government’s response to the pandemic was quintessentially necroeconomic, driven by profit-seeking, the accrual of political influence by gifting state monies to political allies and party funders (the VIP lane).

Social Strangulation

Nerea Calvillo (2023:19) details how the air has long been used “as a free and limitless dumpsite for the waste of industrial production”. Air pollution is part of the ecology of late capitalism, which, as Michelle Murphy (2017:501) notes, is inhaled: “pulled into your lungs, passing through membranes, attaching to receptors, rearranging metabolism” and altering our genetics in inheritable ways (see also Pulido 2017). In a material sense, *pollutants chemically alter us, as they become “us”*, residues from the past that shape socioenvironmental violence in the present (Boudia et al. 2018).

The impact of poor air quality depends on who is breathing in the pollutants, and this varies by age, gender, class, race, and other forces as they articulate in place (Gilderbloom et al. 2020; Kenner 2020; Walker 2012). In Britain, vulnerability to the harms of air pollution has increased as the proportion of people living

in poverty has risen. At the time of writing, circa. 14 million people (1 in 5) are living in poverty in Britain, and of these, four million are classed as “destitute”, defined as being regularly unable to meet basic needs for shelter, warmth, food, and clothing (JRF 2024). Of the destitute, one million are children (Mallorie 2024). The UK has seen the greatest “increase in child poverty rates out of the 39 high or upper middle-income countries in the European Union” (Mallorie 2024). Diseases of child poverty previously rarely recorded in Britain since the establishment of the welfare state, are now returning, including malnutrition, stunting, scurvy, and rickets (Dorling 2023; Marmot 2023). Health inequalities are particularly evident in respiratory disease (Bush et al. 2024). And childhood respiratory diseases, a key predictor of population-level mortality, are increasing (Lee et al. 2023).

For babies and children, breathing in Britain has become a dangerous activity, indoors and out. As Emma Garnett (2020:59) notes, “[c]urrent estimates suggest that people spend 90% of their time indoors and exposure from indoor sources [of pollutants] is increasingly a target of concern for policy and public health”. Mould is encouraged not just by poor building quality but also by the financial cost of heating and humidity control. In cold conditions, both heating and air flow are necessary to absorb the humidity which feeds mould. The official advice given people living on low incomes in damp and mouldy homes is to turn on the heating *and* open the windows. In 2023, “Heat or Eat” charitable campaigns dominated UK news headlines. Who can and can’t access a breathable life is organised along race-class-age lines and is spatially concentrated in poorer areas and regions.

Breathing Too Much

The preventable death of Awaab Ishak made visible the connections between indoor air pollution, childhood respiratory disease, and state housing policy. Awaab and his parents, Faisal and Aisha, lived in a one-bedroom flat on the Freehold estate in Rochdale, built between 1967 and 1975, and managed by the social housing association Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH). Faisal first reported a problem with mould in the property to RBH in 2017 and was told to paint it over, which he did, but it kept returning. After Awaab was born in 2018, they became fearful for the health of their baby:

During the winter, Awaab would develop coughs, and we kept taking him to the doctors; we would tell them about the issues and explain that nothing was getting done ... we knew the damp and mould was impacting his health and we communicated that with both the housing and Awaab’s doctor ...we showed them all the damp and mould around the house ... still nothing was done ... and every time we complained we kept getting knocked back; nobody was listening to us. (Faisal and Aisha, in Tweneboa 2024:116)

The family made an application to be rehoused, to no avail. In the UK, landlords (social and private) are, in theory, legally obligated to make repairs in a reasonable timeframe. If they don’t, tenants can begin a disrepair process to force them

to act; tenants are only advised to do this as a last resort. In June 2020, Faisal and Aisha instructed a solicitor to make a “disrepair claim” against RBH. A month later RBH sent a repair team to the property who suggested that the mould was caused by Faisal and Aisha’s “lifestyle”, making references to “ritual bathing” and a “style of cooking by boiling food”; explicitly racist responses (to which we return below). In short, RBH blamed the family and did nothing.

As Eleanor Benton (2024:2) details, the UK “has some of the oldest social housing stock in Europe, with the worst performing for energy efficiency”. There has been no major investment in existing stock since the Decent Homes Programme (2000–2010), and the more recent wetter, hotter summers and colder winters are exacerbating damp and mould (Benton 2024). The most recent English Housing Survey (UK Gov 2024) estimated that at least 1.5 million children continue to live in homes that pose significant health harms and that fail to meet the government’s Decent Homes Standard. It found that one million children were living in a home that had “a Category 1 hazard present”, defined as posing “a serious and immediate risk to a person’s health and safety”.

In 2023, Blackpool Council, also in North-West England, discovered that every single one of 18,000 privately rented homes in the area had a damp and mould problem and that 70% of homes in the most densely populated area of the town posed an immediate risk to the health of the people forced to live in them (Halliday 2023).

Awaab took his last breath of the poisonous air in his home on 21 December 2020. The inquest found that the fatal mould in the flat was caused by an inadequate ventilation system. One housing expert described the large panel system concrete flats on the Freehold estate as “sweat box flats”—buildings designed not to breathe (Topping 2022). Other families living on the Freehold estate had also reported mould. Parents told Stephen Topping, a journalist from *Manchester Evening News*, how their children had suffered with asthma since they were born and ended up in the hospital multiple times because they were struggling to breathe. At least two families had been told by GPs that they needed to move for the sake of their health. No matter how many complaints were made, nothing was done (Topping 2022).

A 2022 survey of RBH’s housing stock found that 80% of the properties they owned and managed had damp problems. The same year, RBH conceded it had received “106 formal complaints about damp or mould in their properties” (Rashid 2022). A former RBH employee told Sky News that “RBH have been putting profit before people for a long time. They try to cut corners ... [to] make them more cash-rich ... It’s a death by a thousand cuts” (quoted in Rashid 2022). Years after Awaab’s death, journalists were still finding dangerous levels of mould and damp in flats and houses run by RBH (Lythgoe 2024; Rowlands et al. 2024). As one RBH tenant reported, “we felt like the air in our homes was killing us ... we were told we were ‘breathing too much’” (quoted in Lythgoe 2024).

Necrolegacies of Laboured Breathing

Awaab's short life in a former industrial town in North-West England is a haunting reminder of longer histories of laboured breathing in the region. From the mid-18th century onwards, the air in Britain's industrialising towns and cities became a vector for poisonous gases and carcinogenic particles that impeded breathing, contaminated bodies, and foreshortened lives (Fowler et al. 2020; McIvor and Johnston 2016). Breathlessness, persistent coughs, bronchitis, tuberculosis, and "brown lungs" (byssinosis) were commonplace in mill towns like Rochdale. It wasn't only the thick black smoke from factory chimneys and the fluff-filled air inside Lancashire cotton mills that suffocated people, but also the polluted air inside their homes. Friedrich Engels (2022 [1845]:82, 102), in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, described dwellings in industrial towns as "badly planned, badly built, and kept in the worst condition, badly ventilated, damp, and unwholesome ... Their houses are so built that the clammy air cannot escape". Two hundred years later, "clammy air" and damp dwellings are still killing people.

Engels' attention to the disproportionate impact of slum-living conditions on Irish migrants—British colonial subjects then racialised as non-white (Virdee 2014)—foregrounds racism as a key vector in the exposure of populations to poisonous air. Classed and racially pathologised bodies and places function as "sinks" for pollutants (Pulido 2017:529). As a mother living on the same estate as Awaab and his family, speaking four years after his death, notes:

It gets me upset knowing my daughter is struggling and on steroids—we have furry green mould growing around where she sleeps. I am paying to kill myself, bluntly we are paying rent to slowly kill ourselves in these conditions. (quoted in Lythgoe 2024)

However hard people resist and fight for their family's lives, there are few escape routes for those imprisoned in poisonous home environments.¹⁰

Transferring State Assets

How did a wealthy Global North nation with a welfare state get into a situation where infants can be placed in housing that is knowingly dangerous and will shorten their lives? The more we dug into this issue the more we realised the answers lie in the off-loading of state assets to the private sector and the evasion of legal and ethical responsibility by landlords (social and private), practices legitimated by the symbolic denigration of migrant and working-class populations.

Thatcher's 1980 "Right to Buy" (RTB) policy that enabled people to buy their council (local authority-owned) houses at below market value fuelled Britain's current slum housing crisis. RTB was a strategy to disaggregate housing from state-welfare provisions. It was underpinned by three beliefs: that making working-class people property owners would reduce the state welfare bill, win votes for the Conservative Party, and undermine the power of local authorities (see Murie 2016). RTB benefited a minority of working-class tenants, primarily those living in wealthier areas (especially London) who could sell their properties

on at inflated prices. The longer legacies of RTB have been nothing short of catastrophic.

These transfer policies inaugurated a dramatic shift in the ownership of housing in Britain. Over two million council homes have been sold and more than 40% of RTB properties are now owned by private landlords (Diner and Wright 2024). By 2010, housing associations had overtaken local authorities as providers of social rented housing (Murie 2016:61), fatally weakening regulatory oversight of housing for the most vulnerable. Housing shortages have risen exponentially, inflating house prices and private-sector rents. Private homeownership is now in decline and there is a critical shortage of affordable housing (Diner and Wright 2024). Rates of family homelessness—particularly amongst single-parent households led by women—have soared (Bricknell and Nowicki 2025).

Brett Christophers (2023) details the differences in these transfers from public to the private and third sectors. Some housing was lucrative, some was used to leverage debt, and some stock had to be “given” away as local authorities could not afford the maintenance costs. Successive governments actively prevented local authorities from reinvesting proceeds from sales to build new homes. They applied restrictions on local authority borrowing for capital expenditure to encourage the further transfer of housing stock to third-party and private providers who, by contrast with local authorities, can access public grants and private finance. Private and third-party actors were often subsidised by public monies in the process of making these transfers, sometimes up to 42% of purchase costs.¹¹ The state also purposely deregulated housing standards so as not to repel investors.¹² The insidious processes behind these transfers have not stopped.

The transfer of local state assets has enabled predators to profit from rentierism and financialisation, *without responsibility or accountability*.¹³ This is the point of deregulation: to incentivise private investment. Housing supply is controlled (by capital and the state) so that there is always a demand for housing—of whatever quality—and private and public (welfare) rents are guaranteed. Property is deliberately allowed to deteriorate in order that maximum profit can be extracted, and if subcontractors are used to “repair” housing (under new minimum regulations), they are often owned indirectly by asset managers. Because the remaining regulatory mechanisms are so benign, a legal case or fine (e.g. levied under a disrepair claim) means doing nothing is often cheaper for social and private landlords than making repairs.

But it doesn’t end there. In fact, the process has intensified and become consolidated. Christophers (2023) charts how private capital in the form of global funds such as BlackRock and Blackstone have now entered the housing market where state guarantees of regular returns (rent) offer them a layer of financial stability alongside riskier portfolios. Rent payments are a steady source of return on investment, especially when they come in the form of tax-payer-funded housing benefits administered by local authorities to renters on low incomes. It’s a win–win on every front for asset managers treating the state as an ATM. It’s a totally cynical process; malevolent by design, it is effectively a licence to kill through profit-seeking and deregulation. As Christophers (2023) argues, in an

asset-manager society, the natural and built environments that sustain us have become vehicles for siphoning money from the many to the few, making social and private housing ever more dangerous.

Necroeconomic Infanticide

Eviction is regularly employed as a mechanism for increasing rents.¹⁴ Local authorities have a statutory duty to pick up housing costs if evicted families are made homeless. English councils are now spending £2 billion a year funding emergency accommodation for 104,000 homeless households, including 139,000 children—more than any point in the last 25 years (Butler 2024). Temporary accommodation, often dangerously overcrowded, squalid, and unsafe, is killing ever greater numbers of children. As Bricknell and Nowicki (2025:98) detail:

The Child Death Overview Panel of the National Child Mortality Database list temporary accommodation as a contributing factor to the child's vulnerability, ill-health and death. The figures for 2023–4 show 80 child deaths in temporary accommodation ... avoidable child deaths steeped in racism and the failure of the state to protect the lives of all children.

In 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government launched a further assault on local authority budgets (Barford and Gray 2022; Gray and Barford 2018; Tyler 2020). By 2024, local authorities had experienced a 40% cut in central government funding. Six have had to issue special notices ("Section 114") as a signal of "acute financial distress" (Ogden and Phillips 2024). This economic strangulation has further impeded the ability of local authorities to regulate housing standards (the minimum standards that remain). Gerry McCartney and colleagues have evidenced how these cuts led to 300,000+ excess deaths in the UK between 2012 and 2019 (McCartney et al. 2022). They identify housing, specifically the unaffordability of heating, lack of insulation, and a rise in unsafe homes, as a contributory factor in the "stark inequalities in premature morbidity" (McCartney et al. 2022:7).

As Pulido (2016:15) argues, the "decision to neglect infrastructure so that it becomes toxic must be seen as a form of violence against those who are considered disposable. This is the politics of abandonment". Suffocation, social murder, and slow, fast, or premature death for babies, the disabled, and the elderly due to sub-standard housing is our present and future: state-sanctioned killing.

Asset Class Struggle

To return to the location of Awaab's death: Rochdale. The local government, Rochdale Borough Council (RBC), is ostensibly still responsible for housing standards, even though it has inadequate resources to *take* responsibility. Local authorities are funded through local taxation (rents, council tax, and business rates) and grants from central government. In 2011, RBC forecast that it couldn't afford to undertake the necessary programme of upgrades and repairs to its

housing stock, as required, under law, to meet the “Decent Homes Standard” (introduced by a Labour government in 2000). Consequently, RBC transferred 13,700 homes, the entirety of its council housing stock, to Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH). In making the transfer, RBC attempted to protect the interests of tenants by insisting that RBH was reconstituted as a mutual housing association (see Rochdale Borough Council 2011). Legally speaking, this meant that ownership was transferred to tenants and employees of RBH, with tenants supposedly protected by the formation of a constitutional commission. Indeed, RBH was publicly applauded as the largest housing mutual in the UK, and the first with both tenant and employee members. RBH also established two for-profit subsidiaries to fund building and improvements, one of which still exists: Rochdale Design and Build. A decade later, the government Housing Ombudsman’s report on RBH revealed spectacular incompetence (Housing Ombudsman Service 2023). As Awaab’s case and others have shown, it is incredibly difficult to hold either social or private landlords to account, because the limited regulations that still exist are toothless.

In 1980, housing associations provided 7% of all social housing, defined in the UK as housing for people on low incomes. By 2019, they provided 61%. When researching the financing of the UK’s social housing market, we found: (1) huge gaps in data; (2) high salaries for executives and managers; and (3) numerous incentives offered to private investors to “invest in social housing”—considered to be a secure “passive” form of return on capital. One of the benefits from this sort of investing, as numerous online investment guides reveal, is that you do not have to provide maintenance or management.¹⁵ Neither predatory privateers nor (some) social housing providers appear to care about maintaining living/liveable standards. For example, the aforementioned social housing conglomerate, Sanctuary Housing, owns 125,000 units of (primarily ex-local authority) accommodation, has total assets in the order of £4 billion, and made an operating profit of just under £200 million (as recorded in its 2017–18 accounts), but is seemingly indifferent to the suffocating conditions in which some of its tenants are living. In 2017–18, the total annual remuneration of Sanctuary Housing’s chief executive was recorded as half a million pounds (US\$652,355).

Awaab suffocated to death because almost every element of UK housing policy for the last 40 years has encouraged the use of housing as a form of financial speculation for the rich. Aeron Davis (2018), after interviewing 350 elite leaders, concluded that the British Establishment is dominated by “reckless opportunists”. Many had little expertise or interest in public service, but were only in it for the short-term, for the money. These elites reap maximum rewards for themselves and move on, leaving disaster after disaster in the services which they were supposed to steward. The Rochdale case suggests a low-rent version (literally).

In summary, institutionalised value grabbing creates the conditions that Engels (2022 [1845]:34) termed “social murder”, returning us to Christophers’ (2023) argument that we are now in a politically charged “asset class struggle” (Ward and Brill 2024:356). Housing is the principal vector of this late capitalist “asset class war” (Swyngedouw and Ward 2024:267).

Suffocating Racism

Awaab's parents came to Britain after fleeing civil war in Sudan, a state formerly under British colonial rule (1899–1956).¹⁶ Like many poor “low-rent” towns in England, Rochdale is a designated “dispersal” area for the re-location of asylum seekers and refugees. It is difficult to ascertain how many people have been “dispersed” to Rochdale as the data are opaque. We do know from the government's (social) Housing Ombudsman's 2023 report on RBH, that anti-migrant racism was institutionalised within RBH's operations. The report offers multiple examples of racist comments, voluntarily made in interviews with RBH staff, that demonstrate how the perceived “lifestyle choices” of asylum-seeker and refugee tenants are used to blame them for damp and mould. The report refrains from using the term institutional racism, concluding that the comments paint “a disturbing picture of residents being judged entirely by staff members” revealing “prejudices, lazy assumptions and an attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees that is wholly unacceptable” (Housing Ombudsman Service 2023:9). The chair of the Greater Manchester Tenants Union Committee, Tofunmi Odugbemi, offers a more accurate analysis of the report's data and findings: “The racist, derogatory, and xenophobic language by RBH [staff] points to a culture of ... deep disdain for individuals from poorer working-class backgrounds, racialised communities ... and migrants and refugees” (quoted in GMTU 2023). Indeed, as Awaab's dad, Faisal, noted on his interactions with RBH staff, “I feel actually that they have not considered me to be a human being” (quoted in Jones and Donoghue 2022).

In the US, the link between institutional racism and housing is firmly evidenced historically and through analysis of the political economy of the subprime crisis, especially in geographical areas of de-industrialisation (akin to Rochdale) (Dymski 2009), and through campaigns against pollution (Walker 2012). Awaab's case surfaced how racist hierarchies and classifications—necrolegacies of British colonialism—structure people's exposure to and experiences of environmental hazards in the UK. In the ultranationalist political climate of post-Brexit Britain, racism is routinely activated and weaponised to legitimate “sustained assaults” on conditions of living and dying (Davis 2022:xvii; Kelbert and Parhar 2025).¹⁷ Indeed, many of the hundreds of people who have shared their stories about the dangerous and squalid conditions in which they are forced to live, have detailed the explicit, endemic, and routine racism they have experienced in their interactions with local government employees and managers (see Tweneboa 2024). Racism is a vital component of the wealth-poverty producing machine of assetisation.¹⁸

We have documented in detail the intensification of the contempt, disregard, and categorisation of Britain's multi-ethnic working class as morally “undeserving” (Skeggs 1997, 2004, 2009, 2017, 2021; Tyler 2013, 2015, 2020). We build on this work here to argue that the privatisation and financialisation of housing have been enabled by this consistent symbolic stigmatisation of people *and* the places where they live (Lloyd and Bonds 2018; Slater 2018; Tyler 2020; Tyler and Slater 2019). For those on whom the policies land, we have seen a state licence to kill develop, dramatically exposed through Grenfell Tower, London in June

2017, when 72 people died in a fire. The deaths could have been prevented. The residents had complained for years about the safety conditions in their block of flats. The local authority did not listen, pay attention, or care.

Conclusion: Fighting for Life (against State Sanctioned Killing)

Britain's public housing was built to provide a basic level of security and dignity to working-class people. In this article, we have detailed how necroeconomic policies have reshaped housing and health. It's not just capital, asset managers, not-fit-for-purpose policies, reckless or indifferent landlords at play, but longer histories and legacies of de-valuation and de-legitimation (of people and places) grounded in colonial capitalist histories of necro-categorisation. In terms of Britain's current housing crisis, this involves the sorting of the population "into those who cling to a category of 'life'—people who comfortably own habitations that are constructed safely—and those deposited in a category of 'death'" (Renwick and Shilliam 2022:128). These overdeterminations articulate to shape the air we breathe. Or not.

Millions of people in Britain currently endure conditions of "real precarity": conditions based on proximity to death (heat or eat?). We use the term "real precarity" because recently precarity and insecurity have been defined as "universal conditions", spreading to the middle classes as a form of governmental precarisation, for example, governing through insecurity (Lorey 2015). Here, we offer a concretised and elemental perspective on precarity, defining it as living a totality of violent insecurity, including the impossibility of breathing safely, the inability to secure a safe space to inhabit, an embattled life of total disregard, devaluation, and lack of care.

By thinking with Awaab's case, we have shown how indoor air pollution in slum housing is foreshortening British lives. But we have also exposed how harms and hazards, such as endemic damp and mould, have transformed the air itself into a re/source of power, not only of an atmospheric and concentrated kind, but as a mitochondrial-enabling agent of power, one that moves between multiple domains of life, historical, social, institutional, environmental, and economic (Tierney 2023). Writing about post-colonial and racialised relationships to air pollution in Hong Kong, Timothy Choy (2011) argues that the air is conditioned to make live and let die. The inhalation of air is a literal process of absorbing the political, thereby problematising conventional inside/outside and material/immaterial dichotomies. Air is the gaseous medium of politics, and our breathing bodies serve as its filters. Or not.

As we investigated Awaab's death, we found many other cases of indoor and outdoor air pollution; by waste, by traffic density and proximity, and by cheap toxic building materials, to name a few. The most well-known death from air pollution in the UK is that of Ella Roberta Adoo Kissi Debrah (age 9). Ella suffocated to death on 15 February 2013, in her home in Lewisham, London, *just a few metres from one of the most congested roads in the city*. In 2020, Ella was the first

person in the world to have air pollution cited as a cause of death. But only after a concerted campaign led by her mother, Rosamund.¹⁹

The air has been infiltrated by that which we cannot see, which is probably why sci-fi and cli-fi has provided us with best representations. The invisible will kill us—which enables a significant challenge for those of us studying inequalities through representations, institutions, and structures, although the abstract and concrete relation remains. The super-rich are already evading the most horrific consequences of atmospheric degradation by investing in “safe spaces”: air-filtered bunkers for tech billionaires in New Zealand, air domes for private international schools in Beijing, powerful air filters in high-rise Dubai, private oxygen sources to filter in clean air in elite real estate offers (Graham 2016).²⁰ For most, it is difficult to escape the invisible harms of polluted air. It seeps into our bodies. We have to fight back.

After Awaab’s death in 2020, a coalition of actors mobilised, including the coroner (who rightly issued a preventable death notice), Awaab’s family’s lawyers (who worked pro-bono), medical doctors and researchers (who used the case to highlight the desperate impacts of squalid housing on population health), journalists, tenant organisations, and the housing charity Shelter. Together they forced a national government response and the passing of new legislation, Awaab’s Law (2024). Under Awaab’s Law, social landlords (private landlords are initially excused) will have to investigate and fix reported health hazards (such as mould and damp), within specific timeframes as part of a new Social Housing (Regulation) Act (2023). While this marks an important shift in UK housing policy, it remains to be seen whether this legislation will be effective or enforceable. Awaab’s Law has already been delayed (currently to 2027), in large part because the costs of compliance (for government and landlords) are so immense. The burden of enforcement will fall on local government Housing and Environmental Health Officers, roles which have been cut by a third since 2010. Meanwhile, tenants continue to breath polluted air. Babies and children continue to die.

Three decades of austerity in the UK and a longer history of deregulation, privatisation, and financialisation of state services have seen the deterioration of the *elemental infrastructures* that provided a basic level of security for the population. Our water now contains significant amounts of industrial toxins and sewage, our land and soil have been infiltrated by PCBs²¹ and microplastics that manifest through food, and the air is filled with noxious chemicals. In this article, we have examined how austerity and pollution are concretised (literally) in people’s homes and stealthily embodied through breathing polluted air.

The political foot-dragging around Awaab’s Law is a reminder that appeals to the state, the institution who purposefully designed, created, and legislated these policies, are likely to be limited. It’s like asking a lion to protect the animal it has just killed. Hope resides with those collational movements who continue to fight for life, for the safe housing, clean air, and water that allow us to exist.²²

In November 2023, protestors from Greater Manchester Tenants Union and the Social Housing Action Campaign demonstrated outside the annual Affordable Housing Awards in Manchester, holding banners that read “Mould is Political”,

“Your Surplus is My Sickness”, “You have Gold, We have Mould”, a quintessential example of asset class struggle. In 2024, Medact (health workers for health justice) and the Homes for Us Alliance forged a national “Mould is Political” campaign (NEF 2024). As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2021:200) and colleagues argue, “Britain’s decline is an invitation to build futures in which more of us, all of us, can breathe”.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ Under the UK Coroners Act 1988, a coroner is required to open an inquest into a death when the cause of death is unknown, sudden, unexpected, unnatural, or violent.

² Granulomas in the airways or lungs are ordinarily associated with the long-term effects of inflammatory or autoimmune diseases, such as tuberculosis. It is extremely rare to find them in the airways of young children.

³ In feedback on this paper, paediatric respiratory consultant Ian Sinha drew our attention to a growing body of scientific literature on the impact of black mould on foetal development, including birth weight and respiratory development of the unborn child (see Kyei et al. 2020).

⁴ On the important role played by coroners in making public the deadly impact of cuts to state welfare provision, see Kirton-Darling (2023).

⁵ Imogen Tyler has worked with Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission (2018–ongoing); with the UK Poverty Truth Network (2020–2024); with regional NHS workers and clinicians, leading population health training workshops on poverty, racism, and stigma for the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) (2023, 2024, 2025); and with the Joesph Rowntree Foundation’s “Stigma Free Futures” Design Team (2022–2024). Between 2019 and 2023, Beverley Skeggs worked with the North West BAME Covid group, consisting of frontline medics, key workers in the community, and directors of health, and Adult Social Services North West which included frontline care, NHS health and social workers.

⁶ We use the term “British” in this article, and we refer primarily to Westminster government policies; however, the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) have greater protections in some areas of welfare provision (including housing).

⁷ See also Channel 4’s *Dispatches: Landlords from Hell* (2011); *Landlords from Hell Revisited* (2011); and *UNTOLD: Inside the Rental Housing Crisis* (2022).

⁸ Bricknell and Nowicki (2025:74–75) note that “private tenants who formally complain about issues ... such as mould and damp were twice as likely to receive a no-fault eviction (Section 21) notice from their landlord”.

⁹ In multiple online videos and in his important book, *Our Country in Crisis: Britain's Housing Emergency and How We Rebuild*, social housing activist Kwajo Tweneboa (2024) has detailed many similar accounts of toxic, dangerous, and unliveable housing conditions.

¹⁰ See Hilda Kurtz's (2007) work on the central role of women, often mothers, in clean-air movements.

¹¹ See Michael Oxley (1999) for an analysis of the complexities of the policy and accounting processes involved across various housing privatisation schemes.

¹² The Building Act 1984, for example, reduced building regulations from 306 pages to a mere 24, and in the process precipitated the building-safety crisis that led directly to Grenfell.

¹³ These transfers were in a few cases successfully resisted (see Watt 2009).

¹⁴ Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 enabled landlords to evict tenants without providing a reason. See Desmond (2016) on the similar logics of eviction in the US.

¹⁵ See, for example, Yield Investing's guides to investing in social housing <https://yieldinvesting.co.uk/investment/social-housing/page/3/> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

¹⁶ Awwab's grandparents would have been British colonial subjects. The British government who implemented the “Southern Policy” which contributed to the South Sudanese Civil War (2013 to 2020).

¹⁷ Kelbert and Parker's (2025:3) analysis of Awaab's death offers an extended analysis of “mechanics of racialised neoliberal capitalism” and “the racialisation of the migrant as a ‘disposable subject’”.

¹⁸ See Edwards (2016) on housing as a wealth and poverty producing machine.

¹⁹ See <https://www.ellaroberta.org/about-ella> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

²⁰ Global elites are now assisting the atmosphere. Carbon banking, for example, that involves the sequestering of forests (including land stolen from Indigenous peoples), and the installation of forest plantations in the Global South by oil companies and other global conglomerates, has been critiqued as “carbon colonialism” (Lyons and Westoby 2014). The carbon banking industry is projected to be worth \$1.7 trillion by 2050.

²¹ PCBs are toxic, man-made, hazardous carcinogens the use of which is now largely banned or heavily restricted, but they continue to be detected in soil, surface and ground water, and in the food chain.

²² There are numerous examples of grassroots “fight back” against gentrification and place-based stigma, and against pollution and environmental harms in the UK. For examples in this journal, see Luke and Kaika (2019) and Nayak (2019) for case studies in the North of England, and Horton and Penny (2023) for a London case study.

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