



Dis/possessive collectivism: Property and personhood at city's end



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ABSTRACT

This article uses the case of anti-eviction politics to examine the urban land question. Following the ideas and practices of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and its global interconnections, it traces the potentialities and limits of poor people's movements as they battle displacement and enact a politics of emplacement. In doing so, it seeks to expand existing understandings of dispossession. Drawing on critical race studies and postcolonial theory, the article pays attention to the relationship between property and personhood in the context of long histories of racial exclusion and colonial domination. It asks: what politics of home and land is possible outside the grid of secure possession and sovereign self? The work of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign points to how various modes of collectivism can be asserted through practices of occupation as well as through global frameworks of human rights. Challenging the secure categories of property and personhood through which liberalism is constituted, such politics is attuned to the present history of racial banishment but is also subject to aspirations of resolution and possession.

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"Riding down the street, we stop at the preacher's and seat ourselves before the door. It was one of those scenes one cannot soon forget:--a wide, low, little house, whose motherly roof reached over and sheltered a snug little porch. There we sat, after the long hot drive, drinking cool water,--the talkative little storekeeper who is my daily companion; the silent old black woman patching pantaloons and saying never a word; the ragged picture of helpless misfortune who called in just to see the preacher; and finally the neat matronly preacher's wife, plump, yellow, and intelligent. "Own land?" said the wife; "well, only this house." Then she added quietly, "We did buy seven hundred acres up yonder, and paid for it; but they cheated us out of it. Sells was the owner." "Sells!" echoed the ragged misfortune, who was leaning against the balustrade and listening, "he's a regular cheat. I worked for him thirty-seven days this spring, and he paid me in cardboard checks which were to be cashed at the end of the month. But he never cashed them,--kept putting me off. Then the sheriff came and took my mule and corn and furniture--" "Furniture?" I asked; "but furniture is exempt from seizure by law." "Well, he took it just the same," said the hard-faced man."

[W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903: 92]

1. Home and land

On the day that I was to spend with JR in Chicago in April 2015, he asked that we first meet at the Richard J. Daley Center and its courtrooms. There were various court hearings underway for foreclosed properties in Cook County. Willie Fleming who goes by JR, or Just Righteousness, walked from courtroom to courtroom to see if any of the cases involved Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae loans. The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, of which he is a co-founder, had recently negotiated a mortgage loan modification program for Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae borrowers but he was worried that judges were not aware of the program or simply not abiding by it. As I kept up with his busy stride, watching him greet various court clerks and police officers, I realized that he was a familiar and frequent presence in these corridors. The courtroom was the first stop in an itinerary, one that was meant to reveal and connect various locations of struggle in the city. Our next stop was the Cabrini Green public housing project, or rather what still exists of it. JR had spent some of his childhood years there, as well as in the Robert Taylor homes, and it was where he first became involved in activism, organising residents facing eviction. Driving past the remains of Cabrini Green, the abandoned rowhomes and "blank slate" open space, he noted that Cabrini Green represented the absurd brutalities of urban transformation: "We were evicted so that the city could have all of this empty land." This specific history is an important part of JR's activism. Indeed, in various portals of communication he goes by the name "iamcabrinigreen."

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Our discussions at Cabrini Green were abruptly interrupted by an urgent text message to JR's phone: a family was being evicted in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood of South Side Chicago. They had contacted the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and he was urged to hurry to the home. We pulled up at the Lee home a few minutes after the sheriff deputies had departed. Nestled among neatly trimmed hedges on a quiet residential street, the house showed few signs – except for a green eviction sticker and an unhinged front door – of the violence that had unfolded just before our arrival. A distraught Mr. Lee invited us into the home, stumbling over his words as he explained to JR that he and his wife had been at the Richard J. Daley Center that morning contesting a pending eviction by Charter One Bank. The circuit court judge had postponed the hearing but the Lees returned home to find their front door broken and sheriff deputies in their dining room ready to implement an eviction. Since the Lees were able to demonstrate that the court case was ongoing, the eviction was called off and the deputies departed. But the moratorium was temporary and it was that realization that hung over our presence in the Lee home. In the midst of the negotiations with the sheriff deputies, Mrs. Lee had contacted the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, having heard about the movement from a friend in the neighborhood. JR quickly determined that what the Lees had faced was a “pre-emptive eviction,” noting that this was a new strategy being undertaken by banks seeking to foreclose on homes. As they talked, JR sitting on the couch, Timothy Lee pacing frantically, Eugenia Lee trying to calm their dog who had been caged by the sheriff deputies to be taken to an animal shelter, I could not find words to respond to the moment. This was home – a living room filled with framed diplomas and family photographs, carefully placed crochet doilies, lovingly curated shelves heavy with curios, cream colored lamp shades covered in plastic, a mantelpiece rich with dolls and statues. But this domesticity was now tenuous, forty-five years of habitation on the brink of eviction.

A week later I returned to the Lee home. The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign had organized a rally to call attention to what they insisted was unlawful eviction and to put pressure on Charter One Bank to call off any subsequent evictions. Indeed, in Cook County, the Sheriff's office under Tom Dart had for a while refused to enforce court-ordered evictions mainly because so many banks had filed inaccurate eviction orders (Hiller, 2013: p. 33). As Hiller notes, the moratorium had strengthened the position of movements such as the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign. That morning, in the crisp sunshine of a cold April day in Chicago, a small band of human right defenders, as they called themselves, rolled out a banner and gave interviews to the lone television reporter and cameraman who were present for the press conference. Timothy Lee spoke eloquently about his hope that a solution could be found with the bank so that he would not lose his family home. As the reporter asked details about the mortgage, a lilting voice interrupted the discussion of loans and lawyers, foreclosure and fraud. Martha Biggs, perhaps the most famous protagonist of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, whose story anchored Gottesdeiner's (2013) book, *A Fight for a Place Called Home*, prompted by JR, broke into song. “This is the people's territory,” she sang, her voice drowning out all other sounds on the street, “fight, fight, fight, for housing is a human right.” The camera pivoted towards her and for a moment that stretch of sidewalk in Auburn Gresham became charged political space.

A few days before the rally and press conference, Timothy and Eugenia Lee had attended, for the first time, the weekly meeting of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign. There, in a corner storefront that had once been a coffee shop, the stalwarts of the movement gathered. Itself a site of foreclosure by Citibank, of eviction threats, and ransackings by a property management company, the office was a modest room with a few pieces of furniture and

posters. As the skies darkened, homeowners and tenants facing eviction and foreclosure also arrived at the meeting. The Trice family, for example, were tenants in a foreclosed building that had been sold to a new owner who persistently threatened them with eviction. Case law was researched, stories and photographs were posted on the website, press releases were drafted, strategy was forged. “We will fight with you,” the group chanted in response to each case of hardship.

In the months that followed, the Lees entered into new negotiations with Charter One Bank, including a possible repurchase of the home with a new mortgage of \$55,000. I asked Toussaint Losier, co-founder of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, what the Lees thought of this offer. They have mixed feelings, he said. On the one hand they did not want to be uprooted; on the other hand they were repurchasing what they already rightfully owned. Indeed, the repurchase negotiations were part of a long effort on the part of the Lees to hold on to the home, a process documented by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign as part of their mobilization on behalf of the family:

Since 2013, Timothy Lee and his family have been trying to repurchase the home that his elderly mother lost to foreclosure by Charter One Bank. Unlike most home loan foreclosure cases in the Chicagoland region, Mr. Lee's mother had owned her home ‘free and clear’, except for a \$3300 home improvement loan she owed when she passed in 2010. After dealing with several attorneys that failed to take their case forward, the Lees had attempted to negotiate with the bank themselves, only to find their offers to hold onto their family home repeatedly dismissed by bank officials who purchased the property at auction in February 2013. Six months ago, the Lees were finally able to arrange to have an appraiser from Charter One view the house, but never received any responses from bank officials, except notices from the bank's lawyers that they were in the process of having them evicted (<http://start2.occupyourhomes.org/petitions/citizens-bank-don-t-take-the-lee-family-home>).

Timothy Lee's own statement on the matter, also publicized by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign stated, “We are committed to taking action to stay in our home, but would rather work out a resolution with the bank.”

2. Poor people's movements and the social category of property

In his much celebrated book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond (2016) draws attention to the persistent reality of evictions. No longer framed as the brutal but temporary crisis of the Great Recession, evictions are now being interpreted as the institutionalization of housing insecurity. However, following Rolnik, I view contemporary urban evictions as an integral part of the financialization of the housing sector, a worldwide process which she analyzes as a new frontier of capital accumulation, one that entails the “unlocking of land values” in cities (Rolnik, 2013: 1063). Evictions thus provide a window onto the urban land question, specifically who owns land and on what terms, who profits from land and on what terms, and how the ownership, use, and financialization of land is governed and regulated by the state.

Of course, evictions are not the sole analytical site at which the urban land question can be investigated. For example, my recent research studies a national program in India that sought to initiate urban land reforms, legalizing informal habitation and creating private property rights for slum-dwellers. Through genealogical analysis and ethnographic exploration, I trace the difficult, and perhaps impossible, task of converting a dizzying multiplicity of land tenure, tenancy, and shelter claims into neat little parcels of cadas-

tral property that are legible to the apparatus of government and, more audaciously, to global investors (Roy, 2014). In doing so, I have become increasingly interested in how subordinated groups stake claims to home and land, whether as beneficiaries of programs of government (Roy, 2015) or as a part of the political repertoire of poor people's movements.

In this essay, inspired by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and interconnected struggles, I focus on evictions as a point of entry into an analytical engagement with the urban land question. But in particular, I seek to understand how such forms of contestation work with, and rework, the social category of property. My intent is not only to contribute to the important and substantial debates about property but also to expand them by underscoring the relationship between property and personhood. My effort is informed by, and seeks to contribute to, various lines of inquiry, notably the following four.

First, following Blomley (2004: xvi), I pay attention to different "enactments of property." Blomley (2004: 15) notes that "the question is not so much 'what is property?' as 'what is to count as property?'" I additionally ask: who can count as the subject who can claim home and land? Turning to debates in poststructuralist thought, I follow Butler and Athanasiou (2013) in their efforts to rethink dispossession. While urban political economy has focused on the dispossession of land, labor, and resources, Butler and Athanasiou (2013: 6) emphasize how "self-authoring personhood" has been foreclosed for certain subjects. Thus, in addition to the questions, what counts as property, and who can count as the subject who can claim home and land, their work leads to yet another question: "Who or what holds the place of the human?" (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 32). If certain subjects are always necessarily dispossessed, or constituted as property owned by others, how do they claim property? Do such claims also rework claims to personhood?

Second, this expanded meaning of dispossession is especially important for an expanded meaning of evictions. I rely on the substantial body of work, notably that led by Elvin Wyly, Kathe Newman, and others, to understand the present historical conjuncture of foreclosures and evictions as the conjoining of predatory financialization and racial capitalism. But I also follow the urging of urban social movements such as the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and LA Community Action Network to interpret evictions as part of broader processes of racial banishment. Such a framework highlights the public means of evictions as well as forms of racialized violence, such as slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, colonialism, and apartheid, that cannot be encapsulated within sanitized notions of gentrification and displacement.

Third, if evictions are understood as an instantiation of racial banishment, then what is at stake is how the banished/dispossessed subject enacts a politics of property and how such struggles and claims inevitably entail a politics of personhood. For this, I turn to a growing body of work on what Porter (2014: 3) calls "possessory politics," how "struggles against dispossession too easily become struggles for possession" often through the assertion of rights (emphasis in the original). Following Krippner (2015), I ask whether such politics can be read as an example of "possessive collectivism," "the embedding of possessive claims typically associated with individual rights in what are in effect communal relationships." Or even bolder, can frameworks of racial banishment enable a decolonial and decommodified vision of land? My ongoing engagement with the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, partly ethnographic research, partly a relationship of collaboration and solidarity, is an effort to understand and foreground such political potentialities. In this essay, I focus on one such political potentiality, which I term dis/possessive collectivism. While the obvious manifestation of such collectivism is home occupations and related practices of emplacement, I emphasize global imaginaries and

practices, including those that articulate an ethics of human life in the face of social death. But the limits of emplacement and of humanism are as instructive as their political potentialities. Emplacement, for example, is fraught with postponement, a constant deferral of legal resolution which also marks the impossibility of permanent and secure claims to home and land. If Berlant (2005: 21, emphasis in the original) draws attention to "cruel optimism" as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss," I am interested in the lived process of loss, a loss that is ongoing rather than anticipated, or experienced in the future.

Finally, I situate such processes in what I term city's end. Drawing on the important book, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, by Tania Murray Li (2014), I conceptualize city's end as a zone constituted through mundane and individualized practices of property transactions and negotiations rather than spectacular processes of primitive accumulation. I also mean city's end in a second sense: that the struggles against evictions and foreclosures at such a location may very well seek "resolution," for example the repurchase of property as in the case of the Lees. City's end is thus yet another analytical means for the complex task of rethinking dispossession, its ontologies and geographies.

Indeed, the effort to reframe possession and dispossession lie at the very heart of this essay. What, for example, becomes of the logic of possession when dispossession is understood not simply as a process of capital accumulation but also that of racial banishment? For while property may be owned through a subprime loan, through repurchase, and even through occupation of a foreclosed home, what about the personhood that was once itself property? It is this foundational dispossession that suggests a consideration of dis/possessive collectivism, a political potentiality that might not be easily contained within liberalism's compass of property and personhood, specifically possessive individualism. I thus interpret such collectivism not as the antonym of individualism but instead in McKittrick's (2011: 948) sense of a "collective history of encounter," what she describes as a "a difficult interrelatedness—that promises an ethical analytics of race based not on suffering, but on human life." This is the promise of poor people's movements that are fighting evictions in cities around the world.

3. The politics of emplacement

After we had spent time with the Lees at their home in Auburn Gresham on the day of the pre-emptive eviction, JR took me to see some of the homes occupied by the movement. Organized around a simple but elegant motto, "homeless people in peopleless homes," the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign is often seen to be "a radical urban homesteader movement" (Austen, 2013). Inhabited by members of the movement and restored through collective labor, these homes are now indistinguishable from those around them. No longer boarded up, they house multiple residents, nodes in a secret geography of activism and occupation.

It is important to draw a distinction between these forms of occupation and the vocabulary of occupation popularized by the Occupy movement. Urban homesteading, as practiced by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, requires a constellation of long-term strategies that enable shelter and inhabitation. In a 2012 interview, JR thus drew a distinction between "occupying and organizing," noting that the work of the campaign has been to "show the occupiers [of the Occupy movement] how to organize" (Salo, 2014). Aware of the illegality of such home occupations – the movement prefers to call them home liberations – they assert moral cause in the face of persistent discrimination. Thus JR states:

There have been way more people willing to risk going to jail, 'cause what we do is illegal. And so we tend to frame it like this:

it was illegal for black folks and white folks to be in a room like this back in the '50s and '60s, right? So we say it like this: during the civil rights, they did something ILLEGAL for something that was morally right. They did sit-ins, where in 2011 we're doing something illegally that's MORALLY RIGHT, you know what I'm saying, and we're doing it in forms of livin' in, on live-ins. So we said during civil rights, sit-ins, to human rights live-ins. That housing is a human right and we're gonna enforce it ourselves.

[Salo, 2014: 222]

I read these occupations – this strategic illegality – as a politics of emplacement. In my visits to liberated homes on the South Side, I was struck by the lived experience of domesticity: a meticulous care, a display of sentiment, a curation of beautiful objects. I was reminded of the domesticity that had enveloped me during my visit to the Lee home. In the liberated homes, I had expected to find the desperate bricolage of survival and the careless urgency of occupation. Instead I found a careful curation: patiently polished wood, a piece of quartz reclaimed for a kitchen counter, the favorite painting hung just right, mismatched chairs hugging a salvaged dining table, fireplaces that glowed with warmth while outside the cold winds of April raged noisily. I use “emplacement” quite deliberately, drawing on at least two meanings associated the term: “the process or state of setting something in place or being set in place,” and “a platform or defended position where a gun is placed for firing.” Home liberations are the frontline of JR calls the enforcement and defense of human rights. It is also the intimate practice of constructing domesticity. Such domesticity is not necessarily the aesthetics of possession. Porter thus notes that “the specifically placed and relational nature of emplacement... has the potential to unsettle the dissociative nature of property” and can be read as a “direct critique of the placelessness of property” (personal communication).

While the spatiality of emplacement is immediately evident, its temporalities are perhaps less so. Yet, they are vitally important. Relying on a vacant building ordinance (Section 13-12-25 of the Municipal Code of Chicago), the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign demonstrates that home occupiers are good citizens, improving and beautifying otherwise vacant and neglected property. But its claims to these improved properties are tenuous. There is no obvious legal or political pathway to the formalization of these claims and as the movement leaders often note, most home liberators prefer to stay under the radar than to be exposed to formal relations of documentation and ownership. Recognizing the fragility of these claims and the exhausting effects of what the movement calls musical homes – where every one to two years, a family has to occupy and renovate the next round of vacant homes – a new strategy has been to use property takeovers to pressure banks to donate property. The movement hopes to collect these donated properties and create a community land trust.

Such strategies raise the question of postponement. As I will demonstrate later in this essay, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign on which the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign is modeled, relied on postponement as a way of slowing down the law, of clogging up the courts. Home liberations on the South Side of Chicago seem to belong to the same repertoire of postponement: the deferral of eviction, the stalling of displacement. In this way, occupation – whether of the law, the courtroom, the foreclosed home – becomes a postponement of sorts, a rescheduling of debt and dispossession. As Hannah Appel notes, debt relations are also always temporal relations, be it payment due dates or bond maturity dates. But “while this extended temporality is designed to control, it is also capacious ground for manipulation, deferral, and disobedience” (personal communication). Such is the case with

home liberations, even when they take the exhausting spatio-temporal form of musical chairs.

But postponement also marks the limits of the politics of emplacement. The poignant domesticity of liberated homes makes evident what Berlant (2006: 35) calls the “impasse of living.” Following Berlant (2005: 21), I interpret emplacement as a “cruel optimism,” “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility.” Particularly useful is Berlant's emphasis on loss: “Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (emphasis in the original). Liberated homes are precisely such a problematic object. But Berlant's notion of loss also suggests a security of possession, an ontology of ownership. If we work with an expanded notion of dispossession, with attention to the subject who cannot thus claim possession, not even possession of personhood, then we have to rethink the idea of loss. Cruel optimism then is not attachment in the advance of loss but rather attachment in the *lived* process of loss. The home – the American home – is a problematic object not because it will be lost in the future, through foreclosure or eviction, and not because it cannot be legally claimed through emplacement and occupation, but because it was always insecurely possessed by dispossessed subjects, those rendered outside the grid of white normativity. Bearing the promise of homeownership, subprime lending only intensified this lived process of loss, “replacing the old rigid justifications for *exclusionary* racism with more flexible, entrepreneurial forms of *inclusionary* discrimination that promised opportunity and access to the wonders of the market” (Wyly et al., 2012: 572, emphasis in the original). Such cruel optimism is of course more than the wonders of the market; it is, as Wyly et al. (2012: 586) argue, shaped by the “racial state,” notably distinctive geographies of racialized risk and financial deregulation.

4. Global genealogies

In a poignant account of “gangland Chicago,” Ralph (2014: 170, 179) replaces the idea of the “isolated ghetto” with an analysis of “interconnections” and demonstrates how “inner-city injury” can be “experienced and reimagined as a means to overcome.” Ralph's framework is a vitally important way of thinking about the work of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, especially its politics of emplacement. But in this case the interconnections are strikingly global. The movement has its roots in imaginaries and practices of struggle in the global South. It also persistently engages with global institutions and discourses in order to transform injury into the ethics of human life. I seek to trace such global engagements not to excavate an origins story but rather to consider the forms of collectivism enabled by these interconnections and the meanings of property and personhood, in other words, of dispossession, that are thus entailed.

The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign was catalyzed by the visit, in 2009, of Ashraf Cassiem to the United States. For a while, Cassiem was a legend in Cape Town. A key figure in the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, he faced and fought police brutality in the Cape Flats, resisting evictions, foreclosures, and service disconnections. Badly beaten by the police, most of his teeth knocked out, mauled by police dogs, Cassiem became the face of shackdweller resistance to state violence and housing privatization. Well before the American subprime crisis, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign came into political being by challenging foreclosures by banks in bond housing, state-developed bank-bonded houses, as well as eviction orders issued by the city council for defaults in council house rents or in service payments (Miraftab, 2006: 197). Refusing representation by vanguardist NGOs, the campaign moved evictees back into their homes, blocked service disconnec-

tions, and made frequent appearances in courtrooms, not only invoking the constitutional right to housing but also using the tactics of postponement, of “clogging up” the courts. Cassiem developed a reputation for being able to wear a suit and talk the law as much as he did for a body broken by police beatings. And the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign developed a reputation for legal strategy. Mike Murphy, a lawyer who set up the Legal Coordinating Committee of the movement, explains the strategy thus:

If you looked at the courts, like Goodwood or Kuils River, so many people are being evicted everyday. It [the court] is being used as a debt collection system: just queues and queues of people and all that would happen is that, if they had a lawyer then they would negotiate their date to leave [the house]. More often than not they never had a lawyer – or the lawyer would never arrive – and they [families] were being evicted hand over fist. The very bulk of it gave me the idea for our sole aim to delay and frustrate, to clog the courts up. . . So I tried to show them [LCC activists] how to delay and frustrate in ridiculous ways.

[Oldfield and Stokke, 2006: 152]

It is possible to read these evictions by private banks and local governments in Cape Town, in neighborhoods such as Mitchells Plain in the Cape Flats, which gained momentum in the late 1990s, as a moment of brutal neoliberalization. And indeed it was. But as the detailed accounts by [Miraftab and Wills \(2005\)](#) show, racialized histories are entangled with such forms of privatization. Council houses, as they note, are “rental units built by the apartheid state during the 1950s through the 1970s to accommodate the population categorized as “colored” who were forcefully removed from their vibrant urban neighborhoods to desolate, controlled areas” ([Miraftab and Wills, 2005: 203](#)). Many of the defaults on housing rents for which the urban poor, especially the elderly were being evicted in the late 1990s, were arrears “accumulated during the apartheid-era rent boycotts” ([Miraftab and Wills, 2005: 203](#)). Similarly, bond housing emerged in the late apartheid era, “during a period in which the state and commercial banks together offered poor working-class black families a first-time opportunity to own affordable homes” ([Miraftab and Wills, 2005: 203](#)). The trajectory of bond housing departs from and yet bears striking resonance with subprime America. I quote at length from the vitally important history recovered by [Miraftab and Wills](#) (see also [Oldfield and Stokke, 2006](#)) to make this point:

Shortly after the houses were delivered, many units' walls and foundations began to crumble and collapse. Because the banks failed to respond to their complaints, some of the new homeowners conducted repairs at their own expense and boycotted mortgage payments. Others were simply unable to make their bond payments, as the majority had no jobs, and many households consisted of multiple generations completely dependent on a single pension or grant. Following the 1994 political transition, those banks that sponsored the construction of these units continued to ignore the reported structural problems and yielded to SERVCON for assistance with defaulters. SERVCON, a parastatal institution jointly established by the government and private banks to minimize the risks involved in administering housing loans to low-income groups through a guaranteed mortgage, proved useful as a tool to collect payments or expropriate housing for “nonperforming” housing loans. The seized units are resold for twice their original price, while the owners, unable to pay their debts, are relocated to more remote and smaller accommodations referred to as “right-sized” homes, which are in substantially poorer condition than are the bond houses.

[[Miraftab and Wills, 2005: 203](#)]

When I met Ashraf Cassiem in Cape Town in June 2015, over tea and sandwiches at a quiet cafe in the Woodstock neighborhood, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign had dissipated. But Cassiem was still fighting foreclosures with a keen eye for the law and a keen sense of the courtroom as a terrain of struggle. I had already read the interview with him conducted by Oldfield and Stokke in which he had explained the importance of the courtroom thus:

In the court the magistrate asked: but *who are you?* They belittle you; make you feel like a nothing. I say: I am here to represent a poor family, to save these people from being evicted. . . Just by standing, I am a spanner in the works. . . We're not there to win. We know we'll lose (in most cases). So I laugh at the process – I laugh at them, they don't know how to deal with that. . . In the high court you're not allowed to speak until you're recognised by the judge. To be recognised by the judge, to even be heard, you have to speak; you have to be rude and loud so they know that you are there. One time the judge towered over me and shouted: *Who are you? What are you doing here?* I just talked until he stopped and saw that he must let me talk. So I talked really loud and really fast.

[Oldfield and Stokke, 2006: 152]

During our long and rambling conversation, unprompted, Cassiem repeatedly returned to the tactics of presence and recognition in relation to the state and its “papers.” “When we were dealing with evictions,” he argued, “we didn't understand the papers. We struggled to understand it until we developed a legal strategy. We then understood that the law can be used by poor people for poor people. And that strategy is postponement.” Indeed, he had come to our meeting with a stack of legal papers – each a foreclosure case – and he took great pleasure in pointing out the minor loopholes, the slips of legal language which might make possible a postponement, a delay, a deferral. This type of postponement has a resonance with the politics of emplacement and its fractured temporalities.

But I was there to ask Cassiem a different set of questions. Intrigued by the relationship between the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, I wanted to understand these global interconnections. Were these indeed the horizontally networked relations of solidarity across poor people's movements celebrated by [Appadurai \(2002\)](#) as “deep democracy”? In Chicago, JR had told me that it was activists from South Africa, notably Cassiem, who had taught them how to fight evictions and foreclosures. “We were resisting displacement from Cabrini-Green but it's our brothers from South Africa who told us what we should do next. Of course we cannot do it how they do it over there. Imagine black people burning tires on the freeways of Chicago. That can't happen. But they showed us the way.” In particular, the 2009 visit to Chicago by Ashraf Cassiem was pivotal in the formation of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and its efforts to “escalate and elevate” struggles against displacement. This specific phrase is often sounded by JR and shows up prominently in an interview with him conducted by Ken Salo as part of conversations with Chicago and South Africa activists. JR explains the impact of Cassiem's visit thus:

Ashraf visited Cabrini Green. . . which is a very well organized community. . . In that meeting he looked at me and said “I heard you went to United Nation. Oh that's nothing.” And I'm like “What? You ever heard about Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, they talked about it, we did it!” And he's like, “Yeah, you guys talked to 'em [the UN], right? And what happened?” I was like, “Nothing” [and Ashraf said] “Yeah right, thought so. . . Okay, what's your next step? “Like, it's like you know you reached the mountaintop, what is your next step? He went on and asked us “OK, you went to the UN, you gotta switch up now JR, do

something else.” So we then decided that we wanted to change the ways in which we fought.

[Salo, 2014: 220]

In his discussions with me, JR had already noted both the importance and limitations of his engagement with the UN and global frameworks of human rights. Instrumental in organizing a 2009 mission visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Raquel Rolnik, JR knew that while the UN report indicted the U.S. for racial discrimination in housing, “no blue helmets were going to embark on the streets of Chicago to defend human rights” or to stall the demolition of Cabrini Green. As Touissant Losier, co-founder of the Chicago Anti-Eviction campaign reflects, “With the U.N. able to do little to forestall threat of mass eviction, Fleming listened to Cassiem and wondered how the WCAEC might serve as an example of how the poor could successfully mobilise to secure their own interests. . . . Refusing to tow the line of polite, legal protest, [Cassiem] emphasized, had served the WCAEC well.” A “South Africa-style eviction blockade” followed days later (Losier, 2015).

Cassiem echoed JR’s account, noting that in visiting Cabrini Green, he was struck by the similarity of the situations across Chicago and Cape Town but also by the “chilling limits” of American politics. “I told them that they had to take down the boards, take back their homes, and take back their community,” he said. “If there are homeless people on the streets of Chicago, why are there empty, boarded-up homes? But they were scared. It was as if Homeland Security had taken over their bodies and minds.” Losier (2015) argues that the “political resonance” of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, in Chicago and elsewhere in the world, lies in the latter’s “attempts to place non-collaboration at the center of its struggles” against “regimes of neoliberal governance.” This “militant ethos,” Losier notes, has a long history in South Africa itself, with “a political line running from the mid-1930s” and recovered “through the numerous student groups, community programmes, workers’ organisations, and popular assemblies that would make up the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s and 80s.”

But for Cassiem, the activation of an urban politics of resistance and occupation in Chicago also had particular import for struggles in Cape Town. “The visit to America had a purpose for me,” he emphasized. “The problem, you see, is not in South Africa. It’s in America. I wanted to go to the root of it, to the root of neoliberal capitalism, to the University of Chicago where the policy was born. It was created in Chicago and so it was there that it had to be dismantled. Evictions were not really the point. It was about the monetization that had made us separate individuals. And so it was in Chicago that I wanted to show up. It was there that we had to kill neoliberalism, rescind it, burn it. That’s where we had to shut down the Milton Friedman project. I thought that if we won in Chicago, we would automatically win in South Africa, we would win all over the world. This is why winning in Chicago mattered for us.” It is thus that from the shacks of Cape Flats there emerged an imagination for occupying what Ashraf Cassiem calls the belly of the beast. The work of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign though has been concerned with confronting and challenging not so much the originary forces of neoliberalism as the very foundations of liberalism, i.e. the apparatus of property.

5. “The apparatus of property

In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Butler and Athanasiou (2013) ask a question that is central to the purpose of this essay: “How might claims for the recognition of rights to land and resources, necessarily inscribed as they are in colonially embedded epistemologies of sovereignty, territory, and property ownership, simultaneously work to decolonize the apparatus of

property and to unsettle the colonial conceit of proper and proper-tied human subjectivity?” In previous work (Roy, 2013, 2015), I have suggested that poor people’s movements disrupt, but also maintain, the apparatus of property. From slumdweller mobilizations in the global South to homesteading on the American urban frontier, such movements present claims of rightful occupation and legitimate ownership. In doing so, they often shed light on the inherent illegality of assured, state-sanctioned property relations, but they also assert rights to those very same property relations. It is this dilemma that Porter (2014) dubs “possessory politics,” noting that the “frame of possession” dominates struggles to challenge dispossession and claim restitution. Similarly, Krippner (2015) examines how the discourse of ownership has come to dominate the politics of economic citizenship in late 20th century America. For example, she argues that “the most salient reaction to the foreclosure crisis has been framed in terms of the violation of *individual property rights* committed by banks that did not conduct due diligence in initiating foreclosure proceedings” rather than in terms of “housing as a basic entitlement of citizenship” (emphasis in the original). These dilemmas are amply evident in the politics of emplacement undertaken by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign as it wages a home-by-home defense of domesticity, ownership, and inhabitation. The herculean efforts by Timothy and Eugenia Lee to repurchase their foreclosed home is also an instantiation of such emplacement, one where dispossession is countered only through repeated sacrifice and where secure possession is always in a process of loss.

Porter’s critique of possessory politics is not simply a concern about the assertion of property rights or other forms of individual rights. Instead it is about personhood. She asks: “For what is to become of those who cannot prove their worth across the thresholds of recognition?” (Porter, 2014: 12) thereby returning us to the subject who is always less than human, whose personhood, not just property is always in a process of loss. I will take up Porter’s question in the concluding section of this essay. Here I want to briefly explore an additional argument presented by her: that despite the logic of possession that haunts resistance or restitution politics, it might be possible to craft a “different language of property” (Porter, 2014: 17). In doing so, I also advance an auto-critique, noting that in previous conceptualizations I failed to pay adequate attention to *which* notions of property are being advanced or dismantled by movements and their practices of occupation.

Porter’s call invokes the long-standing work of Blomley on the meanings and practices of property. While it is commonplace to associate property with “possessive individualism,” Macpherson’s (1962) influential term, Blomley (2004: 9) insists that the “ownership model” is only one of many “modalities” of property. Struggles against dispossession, he notes, often rely upon and create alternative modalities, including those that are “made in the names of communities, whether of interest or place.” I follow Blomley’s provocation to think about property as “an important political vocabulary” rather than an established category of rule to return to the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, and specifically to home liberations and their politics of emplacement. What is at work is indisputably a logic of possession but it is not necessarily an enactment of possessive individualism. Instead, collective labor, and to some extent collective inhabitation of liberated homes, remain key, albeit tenuous, components of emplacement. As these homes are always in the process of loss, so there is also an ongoing process of rehabilitation and reclamation. There are no property rights of alienation or transfer here, a situation similar to the instances of homesteading analyzed by Blomley. But there are those of “use, occupation, domicile, and inherent need” (Blomley, 2008: 316). Most important, these rights are predicated on the deployment of labor, leading to an irony highlighted by Blomley (2004: 22):

“thus it is, for example, that squatting activists and neoliberals alike can cite John Locke.”

There are at least two ways in which we can consider the collective aspects of the politics of emplacement. The first is to take account of how property *rights* come into being, which as Blomley (2004: 11) argues, requires “state enforcement.” This of course is the paradox at the very heart of liberalism: that if possessive individualism as an ontological claim to freedom rests on the tenet of property, then property itself depends on state power. In discussing this logic of possession, Macpherson (1962: 256) thus eschews the divide between individualism and collectivism. “Locke’s individualism,” he argues, “does not exclude but on the contrary demands the supremacy of the state over the individual.” It is precisely this relationship between property and state that renders the politics of emplacement fragile, for it is unlikely, in the U.S., that home liberations will be a viable pathway to housing rights.

We are then left with the second aspect of collectivism, which following Krippner (2015), I call possessive collectivism. Krippner’s interest is in how the discourses of ownership invoking individual rights can embed claims in collectivities. Using the example of the community reinvestment moment, she notes that while the claims were of ownership, rather than of distribution, these possessive claims were embedded in the frames of neighborhood and community. “Individuals who claimed a right to credit did so not on the basis of their *individual* ownership of financial assets, but by virtue of their *relationship* to a community of individuals who were in the aggregate property owners” (emphasis in the original). The challenge of possessive collectivism, she concludes, is that “the *collective political project* [can be] *concealed by a highly individualized form of claims-making*, with recipients asserting a contractual right over property they appear to have accrued through personal toil and thrift rather than requesting a form of redistribution from the state” (emphasis in the original). Krippner’s work resonates with what Catherine Fennell (2015: 10–11, 13) calls the “physics of post-welfare care,” one in which “citizenly care” and “sympathy” became the “rights and obligations” of urban residents amidst the demolition of public infrastructures of welfare. While collectivism is possibly inflected with such citizenly care, I mean by it a set of claims and discourses that assert a “collective political project” (Krippner’s phrase), either through collective action or through collective ontologies.

In the case of the Chicago-Anti Eviction Campaign, my research points to three types of collectivism. The first is collective labor. This is the work of home liberations and occupations and it is gendered in significant ways. Many of the home liberators have been mothers. Most recently, the movement has pivoted towards home rehabbing by black youth. The latter has been accompanied by a narrative of self-help. Thus fund-raising campaigns such as this <https://www.gofundme.com/dolton> make the case for “fighting homelessness, neighborhood blight, and youth unemployment.” As has been the case for several decades in the United States, the theme of youth employment, particularly that of black male youth, remains central to imaginations and practices of community development, closely linking self-help and self-determination (Roy, Schrader and Crane, 2015).

Second, the Chicago and South Africa movements, as well as related movements such as the LA Community Action Network, insist on a vocabulary and praxis of human rights. Eviction blockades and home liberations are waged in the name of defending human rights; JR presents himself as the enforcer of human rights; members of the campaign enthusiastically endorse the human rights and global goals frameworks of the United Nations. Yet, the movement is no simple expression of global liberalism. Hoover (2015: 1092) argues that the invocation of human rights by the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign must be seen as having

“radical potential” because it “uses the ambiguous but universal identity of ‘humanity’ to make claims on the established terms of legitimate authority.” He sees this as related to, but distinct from, human rights as a project of global liberal governance. What is at stake here is how the project of asserting (collective) property rights through emplacement is entangled with the work of asserting (collective) personhood through human rights. That entanglement, I argue, is a key part of the specificity of dis/possessive collectivism, a point I make more fully in the next section of this essay.

Finally, there is the question of land. In 2009, a few months before Cassiem’s visit to Chicago, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign published an open letter in *The Nation* addressed to “all poor Americans and their communities in resistance.” In it, South African activists addressed the “privatization of land” but also noted the racialized history of such dispossession: “Colonialism and apartheid dispossessed us of our land and gave it to whites to be bought and sold for profit.” The letter clarified the purpose of the movement: “While our actions may seem like a demand for welfare couched in a demand for houses, social grants and water, they are actually a demand to end the commodification of things that cannot be commodified: land, labour and money” (<http://www.thenation.com/article/fighting-foreclosure-south-africa/>).

This is a decolonial ontology, one that necessarily reframes the history and obligations of property and thus the meanings of dispossession and possession.

Yet, on the South Side of Chicago, in neighborhoods such as Auburn Gresham, the ontology of decolonization is uneasily sutured with the politics of emplacement. Not only must the home liberations negotiate possessory politics but also evictees such as the Lees seek resolution through the (re)purchase of property. Such contradictions lie at the heart of the political potentiality that is dis/possessive collectivism. While I take up this matter more fully in the concluding section of the essay, that difficult suturing is clearly evident when there is a conceptual shift from the generic concept of land to the specific concept of plantation, as articulated by Katherine McKittrick (2013). In an essay titled “Plantation Futures,” she writes;

“It is through the violence of slavery, then, that the plantation produces black rootedness in place precisely because the land becomes the key provision through which black peoples could both survive and be forced to fuel the plantation machine.”

6. Racial banishment and the potentiality of dis/possessive collectivism

“My sense is that language may fail us here.”

[Athena Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 2013: 5]

The case of the Lee eviction is a classic example of what Wylie and Ponder (2011) have termed “subprime America.” While the systematic production of the subprime crisis, and its distinctively racialized instruments of predation and profit, are well known, and I will thus not rehearse them here, Wylie and Ponder (2011: 529) draw our attention to how “predatory practices in the subprime market were especially harmful for elderly African American women, many of them widows.” Especially striking in their analysis are the many examples of elderly African American women “living on fixed incomes in older homes, often entirely paid off, and in need of cash and credit for home repairs and other needs” and who were disproportionately targeted as subprime customers (Wylie and Ponder, 2011: 539, 559). Such seems to be the story of Timothy Lee’s mother and the fateful \$3,300 home improvement loan she took out in 2010.

“Subprime America” came sharply into view as a crisis during the Great Recession and its devastating aftermath. But a growing body of work documents the persistence of evictions and foreclosures well after the crisis has supposedly abated, noting that they are perhaps more coercive than ever before. Thus [Desmond \(2016\)](#) argues that evictions have become a key feature of American urban life. Specifically, [Hiller \(2013: 31\)](#) notes that in Chicago, tenants, despite paying rent, are being forced out of foreclosed buildings by banks through “coercive methods such as turning off utilities, neglecting maintenance, and giving tenants misleading information.” He estimates that since 2009, “over 50,000 rental units in Chicago have gone into foreclosure, predominantly in low-income, minority neighborhoods.” Despite federal and state legislation and city ordinances protecting tenants from such evictions, these “extralegal practices” continue. Not surprisingly, movements such as the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign seek to enforce tenant protection legislation. At times they are successful, as in the case of the Trice family whose eviction was blocked by a court ruling. It is also now becoming evident that the market in “troubled home mortgages” is being restructured through the influx of private equity and hedge funds that are “emerging as aggressive liquidators” ([Goldstein, 2015](#)). This particular *New York Times* report draws attention to private equity firms such as Lone Star that are capturing the market for distressed mortgages and that are now facing complaints that they are “too quick to push homes into foreclosure and are even less helpful than the banks had been in negotiating loan modifications with borrowers.”

The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign is keenly aware of such frontiers of risk, speculation, and profit. But it also deploys an analysis of racial dispossession. Its history precedes the subprime crisis and is instead rooted in the organizing by Cabrini-Green residents against displacement. Taking my cues from the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, as well from related movements, such as the LA Community Action Network (LA CAN), I seek to conceptualize such displacement as racial banishment. Pete White, co-founder of LA CAN, insists that the concept of gentrification is not sufficient to explain the forms of displacement – the sheer disappearance of African-Americans – that are now underway in cities such as Los Angeles. JR presents a global historical analysis of displacement, situating current evictions on the South Side of Chicago as one of numerous, worldwide iterations of apartheid and racial cleansing. Patricia Hill of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign frames evictions, including her own, as an instantiation of white supremacy. Such narratives co-exist with, and are also somewhat divergent from Cassim’s focus on the “beast,” the globalization of a project of neoliberalization authored by Milton Friedman and enabled by American imperialism.

Banishment is not new. Historically, it has been a form of criminal punishment as well as of political discipline ([Badat, 2013](#)). What is of significance is the renewal of banishment at the urban scale. For example, [Smith \(2000\)](#) draws attention to gang free zones that enact “civil banishment,” exiling gang members through ordinance. Particularly useful is an analysis of banishment as “legally imposed spatial exclusion” by [Beckett and Herbert \(2010\)](#). They argue that “new urban control tools” aim to “banish their targets from contested urban spaces for extended periods of time and rest on an innovative blend of civil, criminal, and administrative law ([Beckett and Herbert, 2010: 3](#)). These practices, they note, are experienced as punishment, even imprisonment, and also prefigure and enable traditional punishment, such as criminal justice sanction. Further, the logic of banishment is “expansionary” – “many citizens are subjected to multiple exclusion orders, such that much of the city becomes a ‘no go’ area for them ([Beckett and Herbert, 2010](#)). Finally, [Beckett and Herbert \(2010\)](#) emphasize “the central role of the state’s coercive power” in such forms of “spatial ostracism.”

It is rather straightforward to apply the concept of banishment to the expulsion of the homeless from American cities, or to park exclusion orders, or civil gang injunctions. I argue that it is also useful to apply the concept to the case of evictions. As noted earlier in this essay, it is not sufficient to understand evictions as the unfortunate workings of real-estate markets; instead they have to be understood as an instantiation of what [Wyly et al. \(2012\)](#) term the “racial state.” The emphasis on the role of the state or public means is crucial, be it histories of redlining or geographies of deregulation or the sheer physical act of enacting eviction. For example, JR and other members of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign note that while the sheriff’s office has been reluctant to implement evictions, especially pre-emptive ones, the District Attorney’s office has placed considerable pressure on the sheriff to execute evictions. More broadly, as [Rolnik \(2013: 1064\)](#) argues, “it is through the wholesale intervention of central and local governments that a massive spoliation of the assets of the poor has taken place, opening up new frontiers—land hitherto part of the commons (such as public housing or traditional informal settlements)—to financial investors.”

But the question remains: in what ways are such forms of urban banishment also racial banishment? [Beckett and Herbert \(2010: 34\)](#) note that these punitive techniques “are sometimes used to limit the mobility and rights of those whose principal ‘offense’ consists of being poor, homeless, and/or of color.” But racial banishment also entails a more persistent racialization of space. If banishment is enacted to uphold the norms of “order” and “civility,” then it is necessary to recognize the social meanings associated with these norms. Thus [Ghertner \(2011: 1168\)](#), in demonstrating how slums in Delhi are designated as “zones of incivility and nuisance,” draws on the work of Kristeva and McClintock to show how the desire to expunge the abject becomes “political processes of abjection—in this case the large-scale removal of slums as abject objects/outsidiers. Such is the case, JR would argue, with the forms of “cleansing” underway in Chicago, from the demolition of public housing to tenant evictions to war zones ruled by gun violence (<http://chicagoantieviction.org/2016/07/activist-says-displaced-tenants-are.html>).

But as is evident from my use of the concept of city’s end, I am equally interested in forms of racial banishment that are not mass evictions or visible forms of cleansing. As discussed earlier, I model the concept of city’s end after [Li’s \(2014\)](#) analysis of land’s end. Her concern is with contexts where the enclosure of land does not take place through land grabs or evictions or a large development project. Instead, she examines how indigenous highlanders in Sulawesi, Indonesia, privatized their common land to plant boom crops, thereby generating “socially legitimate property rights” ([Li, 2014: 95](#)). She means land’s end in a dual sense: as the end of land as a commonly held resource as well as a dead end where the promise of development was scarcely fulfilled through the private ownership and use of land. I read the Lee eviction as an example of city’s end. The attempted eviction by Charter One Bank can be understood as an instance of speeded-up extralegal forms of foreclosure. But the financial gains to be made from such a pre-emptive eviction are trivial: at best the collection of mortgage insurance. The predation of a reactivated market in troubled home mortgages is not necessarily at work here, not as yet at least. The Lee home, like others that have been foreclosed in this part of the South Side, would most likely lie vacant, boarded up, and be quickly looted and stripped. Nor is Auburn Gresham in the crosshair of new plans and projects for urban growth and expansion that might require a blank slate strategy of emptying out homes. The taxi driver who reluctantly dropped me off at the eviction rally, locking the car doors and trying to convince me to return to downtown Chicago, saying “Sister, you will get killed here today, this is not a neighborhood you should be in, even in broad daylight,” emphasized that

even if a house were given to him at zero cost he would not live in Auburn Gresham. Put bluntly, the Lees are not in the way. Their home is city's end, its neatly trimmed hedges and quiet streetscape transformed by mundane practices of loan fraud and mortgage insurance payouts rather than spectacular processes of primitive accumulation. The Lee home also marks city's end in a second sense of the term: that the struggles against evictions and foreclosures at this location seek resolution, for example the repurchase of property.

It is this second meaning of city's end that is particularly significant for a conceptualization of racial banishment. In their recent article on mortgage debt, [Garcia-Lamarca and Kaika \(2016: 313\)](#) frame mortgages as a biotechnology, "an increasingly intimate relationship between practices of everyday life and speculative practices of global real estate and financial markets." They also note that the majority of their informants were engaged in negotiating "a solution" such as refinancing or grace periods with the bank ([Garcia-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016: 321](#)). It is precisely these temporalities of postponement and these lived experiences of cruel optimism that are at work on the South Side of Chicago. But if we are to think about not only about the financialization of housing but also the racialization of housing, as Garcia-Lamarca and Kaika invite us to do, then in the context of the United States, such financialization is necessarily constituted through racialization. That racialization, as I have already argued, is much more than racial discrimination and racial exclusion. It is about foundational dispossession – the subject whose claims to personhood are tenuous and whose claims to property are thus always a lived experience of loss. Take the case of the Lees. While they sought resolution, even expressing willingness to repurchase the home with a new \$55,000 mortgage, these negotiations soon fell apart. Recently, Charter One Bank hired a new realty company and property manager who "showed up with the police and a record of the eviction and demanded that they leave. In spite of this, the Lees are back in the house and still attempting to purchase the home from the bank" (Losier, personal communication). It is this impossibility of financial resolution that requires an expanded understanding of dispossession.

Liberalism's compass of property and personhood is usually read as possessive individualism. But it also needs to be read as what [Harris \(1993\)](#) has called the "whiteness as property." She means by this not only "racially contingent forms of property and property rights" (1993: 1714) but also "the evolution of whiteness from color to race to status to property." [Harris \(1993: 1780\)](#) insists that challenging such racialized structures requires affirmative action that is not just corrective but rather distributive. For such an impulse she turns to South Africa where "affirmative action" has been a "strategic measure to address directly the distribution of property and power, with particular regard to the maldistribution of land and the need for housing ([Harris, 1993: 1790](#))." But also at stake here are intractable questions about personhood, or what [Butler and Athanasiou \(2013: xi\)](#) pinpoint as the "sovereign self." Whether it be possessive individualism or a universal humanity, the sovereign self is often a precondition for the claiming of rights, be it property rights or human rights. But who is authorized to be this sovereign self? Who has the historical permission for such sovereignty? And what are the stable locations of home and land from which such a sovereign self can be deployed, represented, and performed? I ask these questions not to contrast the sovereign self with figures of unfreedom, such as the slave. Instead, I want to draw attention to the constitution of freedom through unfreedom. In other words, contrast and constitutiveness are quite different relationalities. Butler thus asks: "...What do we make of the idea that we have property in our own persons? Are persons forms of property, and would we be able to understand this legal formulation at all if it were not for the his-

torical conditions of slavery and those forms of possessive individualism that belong to capitalism?" ([Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 7](#)). A concept of racial banishment is thus an attempt to take into account such relationalities, to understand how the foundational dispossession of certain subjects is constitutive of liberalism and its economic geographies. It leads us to the question: what politics is possible outside the grid of secure possession and sovereign self?

In this essay, provoked by the work of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and its global interconnections, I have traced a political potentiality that I term dis/possessive collectivism. Such politics, as I have noted, links anti-eviction struggles to human rights. Such politics seeks to liberate homes from commodification while also practicing emplacement. Such politics uses postponement as a tactic but is also acutely aware of protracted histories of persistent exclusion and deferred reparation. Put another way, the politics of dis/possessive collectivism sutures contradictory elements in a theory and practice of property and personhood. This is perhaps most evident with the question of land which, as I have noted earlier, is a key aspect of dis/possessive collectivism.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, [W.E.B. Du Bois \(1903: 27\)](#) draws attention to the role of land in Reconstruction: "the work of establishing the Negroes as peasant proprietors." The promise of land to "freedmen," he notes was a "bitter disappointment" but it was also "the righteous and reasonable ambition to become a landholder." [DuBois \(1903: 116\)](#) goes on to analyze the numerous ways in which black farmers were to be entrapped by debt and lose their land, their farms stripped of "every single marketable article,—mules, ploughs, stored crops, tools, furniture, bedding, clocks, looking-glass,—and all this without a warrant, without process of law, without a sheriff or officer, in the face of the law for homestead exemptions, and without rendering to a single responsible person any account or reckoning." [DuBois \(1903: 116\)](#) concludes that the only explanation and "remedy" for such processes was that "we must accept some of the race prejudice in the South as a fact."

I connect Du Bois's analysis of the "Black Belt" to what [Mbembe \(2003\)](#) and [McKittrick \(2013\)](#) designate as plantation. For [Mbembe \(2003: 21\)](#), the plantation is a "political-judicial structure" defined by "the slave condition" which in turn "results from a triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status." The slave has value as property but otherwise suffers "social death" or "expulsion from humanity altogether." Building on, and yet departing from Mbembe's analysis, [McKittrick](#) conceptualizes the plantation as a place of exploitation as well as of rootedness. As I have noted earlier, she conceptualizes land as "the key provision through which black peoples could both survive and be forced to fuel the plantation machine."

Such notions of land allow us to think with an expanded notion of dispossession as well as of collectivism. I thus interpret collectivism not as the antonym of individualism but instead in [McKittrick's \(2011: 948\)](#) sense of a "collective history of encounter," what she describes as a "a difficult interrelatedness— that promises an ethical analytics of race based not on suffering, but on human life." This, I suggest, is what poor people's movements necessarily do, for they must work with the ethics of human life rather than with the persistence of social death. Such too is [Mbembe's \(2011\)](#) call to think about democracy as a "community of life," a project that takes "the form of a conscious *attempt to retrieve life and "the human" from a history of waste*" (emphasis in the original). Put broadly, dis/possessive collectivism is a political potentiality forged in the context of racial banishment, a banishment that is predicated on the permanently insecure possession of property and personhood.

Finally, I must acknowledge that I borrow the specific term, dis/possessive collectivism, from debates about world literature, or more specifically about the worlding of languages and literatures. In *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*,

Apter (2014), argues that World Literature “affirms a psychopolitical structure of possessive collectivism.” She likens the canon – and commodity – that is World Literature to “the world-class museum or art collection,” or perhaps what in urban studies we can designate as the “world-class city”. Possessive collectivism, for her, is nothing more than possessive individualism – “with its self-regarding notion of personhood (of “self” as self-ownership) and happy fit with neoliberalism” – “scaled up to the proportions of the World.” The uncanny resonance with Krippner’s conceptualization of possessive collectivism is apparent. But Apter puts forward the possibility of dis/possessive collectivism. Drawing on Bruce Robbins’s idea of a dispossessive ethics of reading she argues that such a stance casts “World Literatures as an unknowable state, a literature over which no one asserts proprietary prerogative and which lends itself to a critical turn that puts the problem of property possession front and center.” I suggest that we carry over such a conceptual framework to critical urban theory and its analysis of dispossession. As a political potentiality, dis/possessive collectivism challenges the “proprietary prerogative” at stake in the idea and ideology of home and land. It is thus a politics of our time as well as a politics waged against the secure categories of personhood and property through which liberalism is constituted.

7. Postcolonial postscripts

I conclude with two postcolonial postscripts. First, in a provocative essay, Wyly (2015: 2534) draws attention to “gentrification as a dimension of planetary urbanization” and notes the pervasive “upward class transformation of urban space.” Equally important, he argues that recent iterations of critical urban theory have disavowed the analysis of gentrification as a worldwide process. Wyly (2015: 2531) writes: “At precisely the moment when gentrification is becoming truly transnational and powerfully planetary, we are asked to liquidate the intellectual and political investments of generations of critical inquiry in favour of evolving theories of ‘globalized contingency’ that have now even attacked postcolonial theory itself as ‘hegemonic’ (Ong, 2011: 3, 8 in Wyly, 2015: 2531).” I am sympathetic to Wyly’s interest in a generalizable theory of urban transformations, but as I have noted in reflections on urban theory, generalization must not be confused with universalization (Roy, 2016). I interpret the conceptual and political shift from gentrification to racial banishment enacted by movements such as LA CAN and the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign as an effort to call into question universal (read: liberal) categories of property and personhood. This, I would argue, is the significance of postcolonial thought: to demonstrate how seemingly universal categories have been forged through historical difference. In recent work, I turn to early writings by postcolonial theorists such as Guha (1996) to foreground how the “rule of property” was “bent backwards” in the matrix of colonial administration, quickly reaching epistemic and political limits (Kumar and Roy, 2017). In this particular case, that of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in Bengal, the settlement of land and the bureaucratization of revenue required the construction of a category of personhood: native proprietors. This in turn yielded an enduring paradox: Physiocratic thought – defined as a critique of feudalism within the context of Europe – produced and reinforced neo-feudal relations in colonial India. The urban land question in India today is indelibly shaped by this paradox of proprietary prerogative.

Second, as postcolonial theory enlists me in the task of a political economy attentive to historical difference, so it requires me to foreground the politics of representation associated with all projects of knowledge. In this essay, I have not found the appropriate vocabulary to describe my research methodology. Ethnographic in intention and affect, although lacking the consistent immersion

that many would see to be the hallmark of ethnography, my engagement with the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, LA CAN, and the vestiges of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign is neither that of distance nor that of belonging. I started studying these movements with the specific research questions I stated at the outset of this essay: How do poor people’s movements stake claims to home and land? Do such claims generate new meanings of property and personhood and thereby reconstitute the urban land question? But in my role as director of the Institute on Inequality and Democracy at UCLA Luskin, I have also sought to amplify their narratives of struggle. Such work defies the familiar formats of academic-community engagement such as co-production. The institute takes its conceptual cues from poor people’s movements, relying on their vocabulary for the analytical scaffolding of research and pedagogy. Yet it is not necessarily a direct participant in the collective action that animates these movements. I would like to think of this as the unstable terrain of solidarity but postcolonial critique makes me wary of such a claim. This too is part of the collective history of encounter, the “difficult interrelatedness” of the global university to poor people’s movements. Dis/possessive collectivism is thus also an effort to rethink the “proprietary prerogative” of critical urban theory. Alongside the questions, “What is to count as property?” and “Who can count as the subject who can claim home and land?” is this question: “Who is the authoritative interlocutor of politics?” In my first encounter with the legendary Pete White of LA CAN, I asked how the institute can make itself useful. He answered: “Do your work. Theory. History. We are telling you that what we are experiencing cannot any longer be explained as gentrification. We are experiencing banishment. Give us a theory of banishment. Give us the history of banishment.” This essay is the first step in a response to the task outlined by Pete White.

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