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Dear members of the PI Workshop,

Thank you for letting me participate in this workshop. I decided to distribute a self-contained article, as opposed to a revised dissertation chapter. This manuscript is still under review (Social Problems), though I certainly anticipate having to make revisions, so I would greatly appreciate any and all feedback. I am particularly interested in hearing your insights about how to successfully craft an article that relies so heavily on ethnographic data.

Thanks. I'm looking forward to the discussion!
-Gretchen

The Circle of Dispossession: Evicting the Urban Poor

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The Circle of Dispossession: Evicting the Urban Poor

Abstract: Although tenant evictions are routine in impoverished urban communities throughout the country, scholars of housing and urban poverty have consistently overlooked this social problem. Drawing upon participant observation on eviction crews and in-depth interviews with property owners and managers in the city of Baltimore, this study examines the *social drama of eviction*, focusing upon the orchestration and execution of the court-ordered physical removal of tenants and their property. I find that property owners and managers delegate the “dirty work” of dispossession to a dispossessed population and that laborers on eviction crews tend to differentiate and distance themselves from the people they are evicting, adopting the dominant belief that eviction is rooted in the individual, moral deficiencies of the tenant. These findings reveal that those who are excluded from what Ananya Roy calls the American “paradigm of propertied citizenship” – the homeless – are used to enforce, and serve to legitimate, that very paradigm. I argue that evictions entail a *circle of dispossession*, reproduced both materially and ideologically, and I conclude with a discussion on the invisibilization of eviction as a social problem and the broader implications of these findings for research on urban poverty and marginality. Keywords: Eviction, Homelessness, Day Labor, Baltimore, Urban Poverty

It’s 10:30am and after five hours of waiting in the crowded day labor hiring hall, nineteen of us are dispatched to carry out a string of evictions for one of the largest property management companies in Baltimore. Typical of the hiring hall workforce, the bulk of our crew is made up of homeless, formerly-incarcerated, African-American men. We are given no safety equipment and told nothing about the pay, hours or responsibilities of the job. We pile into five cars for the short trek to a crime-ridden, pest-infested, multi-unit apartment complex located near the world-renowned Pimlico racetrack. I transport Ty, a twenty-two year old, self-proclaimed “full-time hustler” who admits to only doing this because “the paycheck looks good to [his] P.O.,” and Joseph, a thirty-seven year old “regular” who spends his nights alternately on the couches of extended family members and in the alleyway behind the agency, hoping to scrape together enough money to start renting a room of his own.¹

By the time the Sheriff arrives, there is palpable excitement in the air. Mr. Frank, a stern, fifty-something, African-American “maintenance man” who serves as our supervisor for the day, shouts out the apartment number to which we are headed, pointing up a steep, trash-strewn hill to

one of over a dozen two-story, eight-unit, brick buildings. When Mr. Frank knocks on the door of the second floor unit, Calvin, a light-skinned, 42 year-old standing on the staircase behind me, mimics the sound of gunfire – “pow-pow-pow” – referencing the tales he shared earlier that morning about his previous experiences “putting people out.” “Most folks don’t want to leave,” he had said, to which I had nodded in agreement. “No, G, you don’t get what I’m sayin’. They ain’t gon’ leave. They’ll be sitting there with their chrome [gun] in their lap.”

The group of laborers huddled in the stairwell now laugh, thrilled by the imaginary violence of this conflict-laden encounter. When no one answers, Mr. Frank – who oversees between five and eighteen evictions per month in this complex alone – opens the door and gets right down to the task of changing the locks. We excitedly shuffle inside. The Sheriff watches as the first table is carelessly thrown onto the curb and then immediately follows Mr. Frank and a handful of crew members to the next unit, which, as I will later learn, reeks of cat urine, forcing those inside to burrow their noses in their shirt sleeves. Eight of us are left alone to finish clearing out the unit; we are entirely unprotected, in the unlikely event that the absent tenant – about whom we can only draw assumptions – returns to the property. As we throw out the eviction notices and bright-pink warnings about overdue rent that are scattered on the living room floor amidst bent wire hangers, crumpled-up french fry containers and balled-up pairs of children’s socks, Joseph exclaims, “Maybe she be illiterate or shit. Or just high out of her fuckin’ mind. ’Cuz how she gon’ just sit on her ass like she not ‘bout to get the boot, huh?” “Well, she got what was comin’ to her,” Tina, a single-mother and one of only three women on the crew, responds.

We complete six evictions in a little less than four hours. Joseph asks me to open the trunk of the car, so he can put a garbage bag full of pilfered goods inside. He opens the bag to

show me the rap CDs, video games and electrical wire he found in one the units and now plans to sell on the street; this is topped only by Calvin's highly-coveted find of a DVD player. Back at the agency, the dispatcher grabs a bottle of air freshener, fully extends her arm and, without so much as a word of warning, sprays it all over us. At Maryland's minimum wage of \$6.15 per hour, I earn \$22.52 after taxes. Joseph, whose child support is deducted directly from his daily pay, leans his elbow on my shoulder, waves his paycheck in my face and announces, "fourteen motherfuckin' dollars! Can you believe that?"

* * *

Evictions are dramatic, but routine, events in low-income neighborhoods throughout the country, upturning the lives of what is estimated to be millions annually. Unlike the current rash of homeowner foreclosures, which has been painstakingly documented by the media and predominantly attributed to the "predatory lending" of the sub-prime mortgage market, tenant evictions tend to be borne out invisibly and deemed the exclusive result of individual failure.² The invisibility of eviction is so pronounced that some scholars have gone so far as to declare it "the hidden housing problem" (Hartman and Robinson 2003). This discrepant treatment of analogous social problems stems in part from what Dreier (1982:183) identified decades ago as the "obvious flipside" to the centrality of property ownership in U.S. culture, politics and ideology: the stigma attached to renting and, hence, disregard of tenants as a social group.

This article presents a novel sociological account of tenant eviction, predominantly drawing upon participant observation on eviction crews in inner-city Baltimore. Its contribution is twofold. On an empirical level, the article is one of the first to render visible this "hidden housing problem," identifying eviction as an important, but previously neglected, mechanism for the reproduction of inequality while, more specifically, revealing it to be a rich and multi-layered

site for the study of urban poverty (Auyero 1999; Bourdieu 1999; Bourgois 1995; Wilson 2003), one that illustrates, with striking clarity, the characteristic features of what Wacquant (2008) has labeled “advanced urban marginality:” the casualization and degradation of employment, the retrenchment of the welfare state and – most poignantly – the intra-communal division such transformations generate among the socially and economically marginalized.

On a theoretical level, the article uses the case of eviction to extend our understanding of what Ananya Roy (2003) calls the prevailing American “paradigm of propertied citizenship,” defined as an exclusionary model of citizenship that recognizes the formal rights of property while denying the shelter claims of the poor (see also Bromley 2009). There is a growing body of scholarship that has sought to critique this paradigm by drawing out its implications for the propertyless, or “mapping the edges of its exclusion” (Roy 2003:464). Thus, scholars have turned their attention to documenting the simultaneous normalization and criminalization of the homeless in the U.S. (Beckett and Herbert 2008; Duneier 1999; Feldman 2004; Gowan 2002; Mitchell 1997). Yet, while many have examined the kinds of shelter struggles that might subvert this paradigm (Cress and Snow 1996; Roy 2003; Wakin 2008; Yates 2006), few have analyzed the ways in which it is reproduced and, more specifically, reproduced from below by the very subjects it excludes. Based upon this multi-method, ground-level analysis of tenant evictions, I show that those who are excluded from the “paradigm of propertied citizenship” – the homeless³ – are used to enforce, and serve to legitimate, that very paradigm. Evictions thus entail what I conceptualize as a *circle of dispossession*, reproduced both materially and ideologically.

The Literature on Evictions

The literature on housing and urban poverty in the U.S. has been curiously silent on the subject of eviction, a fact that lends considerable support to recent claims about the obfuscation

of displacement within contemporary urban scholarship (Slater 2006; see also Newman and Wyly 2006).⁴ There is no systematic data on evictions collected at the national, state or, in most cases, city-wide levels. We thus have no reliable figures on how many people are evicted each year, no clear understanding of the underlying causes of eviction, no detailed picture of how and under what conditions evictions are actually carried out and no comprehensive sense of what happens to individuals, families and communities in the wake of eviction.

This lack of attention to the social problem of eviction – at once, an economic, geographic, judicial and political phenomenon – is particularly surprising given that research has consistently documented the fact that the poor are disproportionately prone to forced relocations, the emotional, economic, health and social impacts of which can be drastic (Bartlett 1997; Crane and Warnes 2000; Ehrenreich 2001; Fischer 2000; Gans 1962; Hartman and Robinson 2003; Stack 1974; Stenberg, Kareholt and Carroll 1995; Turk 2004). For instance, Phinney et. al. (2007) examined the housing problems of current and former welfare recipients in a city in Michigan. Using longitudinal cohort data from the Women’s Employment Study, they found that 20% of respondents had experienced an eviction and 12% had experienced homelessness at least once between fall 1997 and fall 2003. Over a third (39%) of high school dropouts experienced an eviction during this time, as did fully half of respondents with a criminal conviction. Most notably for the purposes of my analysis – which is particularly illustrative of the link between precarious work and precarious housing – respondents who had experienced these negative housing events were not necessarily less likely to be employed, leading the authors to conclude that “work provides incomplete protection against housing instability” (Phinney et. al. 2007:836). Despite such robust evidence of shelter insecurity, eviction – as threat or reality, as “haunting” (Gordon 1997) or horror – has not made more than a fleeting appearance in even the

most in-depth studies of the lives of the urban poor; it is, for instance, entirely absent from a widely-discussed debate concerning poverty and urban ethnography (Anderson 2002; Duneier 2002; Newman 2002; Wacquant 2002) and entirely absent from a more recent review of qualitative studies on poverty (Newman and Massengill 2006).

There are two notable exceptions to the otherwise glaring absence of scholarship on eviction. First, sociolegal scholars have devoted significant attention to the juridical proceedings of housing or rent court, where in most jurisdictions landlord-tenant disputes are adjudicated and the wheels of the eviction process are set in motion. This scholarship reveals the relative powerlessness and functional voicelessness of tenants who systematically lack legal representation (Bezdek 1992; Eldridge 2002; Piccard 2006; Seron, Frankel and Van Ryzen 2001) and who, in some cases, are subjected to “cultural discrimination” (Lempert and Monsma 1994) and status degradation ceremonies (Lempert 1977). Of particular relevance to this article is a study conducted in Baltimore which reports that tenants in rent court – nearly all of whom are poor African-American women⁵ – are “unrepresented and unassisted before, during or after [their] court appearance[s].” This study concludes that rent court operates as “a theater of class conflict in which businesses and their hirelings...exercis[e] significant advantages over the individual defendants whom they bring before the court, who are poor and poorly situated with respect to the attributes that garner respectful hearing in court rooms” (Bezdek 1992).⁶ Other legal scholars have analyzed the relationship between eviction and social control, dissecting the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s punitive “one strike and you’re out” eviction policy which requires local public-housing authorities to evict any tenant whose family or guests are involved in any criminal activity, committed on or off the premises, regardless of

whether or not the tenant even knows about the activity (Delaney 2004; Hellegers 1999; Mele 2005; Mock 1998; Rubenstein and Mukamal 2002; Saghir 2004).

The second exception is the growing attention paid to the tenant-screening industry, comprised of an estimated 650 companies that gathers information on prospective tenants' credit records, criminal backgrounds and landlord-tenant (civil) court filings (Hartman and Robinson 2003; Kleysteuber 2007; Short et. al. 2006; Thacher 2008). Landlords regularly purchase these reports as the first stage of their tenant-screening process, viewing them as a now-standardized tool for "efficient, effective and professional risk management" (Short et. al. 2006: 930).

Although we lack nationally-representative data on the use of tenancy screening and although the implementation of this practice undoubtedly varies across localities, a founder of one tenant-screening company reports: "It is the policy of 99 percent of our [landlord] customers in New York to flat out reject anybody with a landlord-tenant record, no matter what the reason is and no matter what the outcome is" (cited in Kleysteuber 2007:1347). Akin to the mark of a criminal record in the labor market (Pager 2007), being "listed" in a tenant database (i.e. having been brought to court for a landlord-tenant dispute) effectively means being pushed out of the formal rental market and into ever-more precarious and makeshift living arrangements. The growth of tenant-screening as a technique to exclude "risky," "offending" tenants from the rental market illustrates how eviction operates as a mechanism of exclusionary closure, further marginalizing already disadvantaged populations and thereby reproducing class, gender and racial inequality (Roscigno, Karafin and Tester 2009).⁷

By focusing solely on these legal underpinnings, juridical procedures and screening processes, what is entirely obscured by the literature is the *social drama of eviction* or what we might call, to echo an earlier referenced study, the "theater of class conflict" involving the

orchestration and execution of the forced removal of tenants and their belongings.⁸ This article analyzes eviction as a worksite, focusing upon the perspectives and practices of both property owners and managers and their hired eviction crews. It shows that, for a variety of reasons, property managers outsource the physical labor involved in eviction to a “just-in-time” workforce: evictions are typically carried out by precariously-housed day laborers. Though this presents an opportunity for solidaristic identification amongst the poor, laborers on eviction crews tend to espouse the same disparaging characterizations of tenants as do the property managers who hire them, thus reinforcing the belief that eviction is rooted in the individual moral deficiencies of the tenant. In this social drama of eviction, the vertical conflict between landlord and tenant is subtly transmuted into a lateral conflict amongst the propertyless. I argue that evictions entail a circle of dispossession and conclude with a discussion of the broader significance of these findings for our understanding of “advanced urban marginality.”

Data and Methods

This data used in this article are drawn from a much larger study of the formal day labor industry. For this article, I draw upon data gathered through ten months of participant observation working through a Baltimore branch office of a leading day labor, or “on demand staffing,” company that I refer to as InstaLabor. Over the course of this fieldwork, which took place in 2006-2007, I was dispatched to carry out sixteen separate evictions in three different, privately-owned, low-income residential apartment complexes located in impoverished and highly-segregated African-American neighborhoods on the West side of Baltimore. This kind of deep immersion provided both unparalleled access to evictions, as they took place in real space and time, and first-hand experience with the labor of dispossession.⁹ While this article draws specifically upon the copious ethnographic field notes written as a participant on eviction crews,

it is informed by countless informal discussions that took place over the course of nearly three full years of ethnographic fieldwork amidst marginally-housed day laborers, for whom eviction and housing insecurity were frequent topics of conversation.

I supplement the ethnographic field notes with data obtained through a total of 59 in-depth, face-to-face interviews. I interviewed day laborers (N=40) who had worked on one or more evictions, whether as an employee of InstaLabor or as an employee of one of eight competing day labor companies operating in the city of Baltimore. These semi-structured interviews averaged two hours in length and consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit respondents' narrative interpretations of their work and housing trajectories and, more specifically, their experiences working on eviction crews. Well over half of these workers were recruited through my ongoing fieldwork, so they were people with whom, by the time of the interview, I had a previously-established working relationship; the remainder were recruited through convenience sampling during one of several visits to competing day labor agencies. I also conducted interviews with landlords (N=5), representatives from property management companies (N=11) and staff members of tenant advocacy organizations (N=3). These interviews averaged 55 minutes in length and focused upon the specifics of the eviction process, the respondent's experiences with the eviction process and the respondent's assessment of landlord/tenant law in Maryland. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and, along with the relevant field notes, iteratively coded for thematic content – particularly, the meanings actors imputed to evictions – using HyperResearch qualitative data analysis software (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995).

I further augment my analysis with data gathered in the following ways: I spent 35 hours over the course of seven days in Baltimore's designated rent court, either as an observer of the

process or as a companion to one of my research subjects; I “shadowed” a deputy sheriff on the eviction unit for one full business day; I attended public hearings on a City Council bill to amend eviction law, and; I analyzed legal documents and documentary materials pertaining to landlord-tenant law. Taken together, these varying sources of data allow me to confidently report upon the institutional processes as well as the ground-level social dynamics played out during the routine execution of eviction orders in Baltimore. Fieldwork and institutional analysis, in other words, are intertwined in the pursuit of empirical discovery and theoretical construction.

My decision to write specifically on the subject of eviction was inspired by a woman in my study named Evie whom I met at Labor Depot, a regional day labor company operating out of a loading dock off an alleyway in one of Baltimore’s ghetto neighborhoods. Labor Depot is strategically located within a couple blocks of a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, two methadone clinics and a prisoner re-entry program, all of which provide the company with its underemployed, easily exploitable and entirely African-American labor pool. This kind of targeted recruitment, particularly towards the homeless (known in industry vernacular as “bodyslamming”), has been consistently documented on the literature on day labor (Bartley and Roberts 2006; Kerr and Dole 2005; Parker 1994; Peck and Theodore 2001; Roberts and Bartley 2005; Snow and Anderson 1993; Theodore 2003). Labor Depot dispatches up to 125 laborers a day to perform menial jobs, including evictions, for what amounts to less than minimum wage after the requisite fees are deducted for equipment and transportation. The manager of the company explained his business as such: “We’re in the labor industry. You might say we rent people. I mean, we do it legally. We rent people, we don’t rent appliances.” It is thus ironic that when looking back over my field notes from the day I first entered the agency, I found the following description of the waiting area:

There's a dirty cement floor and row upon row of folding metal chairs, facing a haphazardly constructed dispatch office, consisting of wood and plexiglass, covered with a blue tarp. There are no "comforts" like TV and coffee to help those who'll spend the rest of the day here waiting for work. The hall feels like a garage, more suitable for cars, tools or cargo than living, breathing human beings.

The day I met Evie, she seemed eager for a witness to her suffering and spent the rest of the afternoon showing me a paper trail of her descent into homelessness and precarious wage labor. "I'm gonna give you a whole other little study right here: eviction," she announced as she combed through the pay stubs and court documents that she kept stashed in a crumpled plastic bag. Evie was in the midst of what she insisted was an "illegal eviction." The landlord's "self-help" efforts were, in this case, particularly sinister.¹⁰ After Evie complained repeatedly about the lack of gas and hot water, the landlord accused her of threatening arson. She was arrested and held in custody on \$10,000 bail. When it was determined at her bail hearing that she had no prior criminal record, Evie was released on her own recognizance only to find that the locks on her apartment had been changed and all her possessions (amounting, in her estimation, to \$500) were trapped inside. That day, she filed the paperwork charging her "landlady" with an illegal eviction, a charge later upheld by the court which found "beyond any reasonable doubt" that the landlord "availed self-help techniques." Due to the frequent and irregularly scheduled court hearings she now had to attend, Evie could not hold down a "regular" job. "So I gotta keep bullshitting around with these people in here [Labor Depot] just to survive." Homeless, Evie reports that she's "sitting in a fucking shelter right now," quite literally. She stays in a notoriously insalubrious shelter named "The Ocean" where residents are forced to sleep sitting upright in chairs, which has left Evie's ankles so swollen that she can no longer comfortably tie

the laces on her sneakers. “I go there because you can come and go as you please. Because as long as I’m messin’ around with these temp places [Labor Depot], I can’t go to no place [shelter] that requires you to be there at a certain time, ‘cause I never know when I’m a get a job and when I’m a get off.”

As I will go on to demonstrate, Evie’s predicament – as recent evictee and occasional evictor, of precarious work and precarious housing, of pittance wages and homelessness – is not uncommon. It epitomizes the circle of dispossession outlined in this article.

Setting the Stage

Poverty and Housing in “Charm City”

As longtime resident and urban theorist David Harvey (2000:133) puts it bluntly, Baltimore is “an awful mess.” As one of the nation’s poorest cities, it is a prime setting for investigating the economic destitution and social vulnerability that underlies eviction. In 1950, Baltimore ranked as the sixth largest city in the country, buttressed by its massive steel and ship-building industries. Since 1960, Baltimore has lost two-thirds of its manufacturing jobs (a net loss of roughly 100,000 jobs), nearly one-third of its total population (from 940,000 to 640,000) and over half of its white population.¹¹ By all indicators, the downward spiral continues. Between 1990 and 2000, median household income in Baltimore declined by 7%, now ranking 87th among the largest 100 cities (Brookings Institution 2003). More than one in five Baltimoreans live in poverty (21.5% as of 2004) and nearly 40% of families with children live at or below the poverty line. Joblessness is phenomenally widespread. Baltimore ranks sixth from the bottom among the nation’s one hundred largest cities when it comes to labor force participation: in 2000, just 57% of the city’s working-age residents were gainfully employed or looking for work (Hopkins 2004). Even this figure obscures the fact that thousands of these

workers toil under precarious conditions in the city's booming, well-entrenched temporary staffing industry.

As a result of continued depopulation and economic disinvestment, housing in Baltimore is in shambles. Half of all households in Baltimore are rental households with a median income of a third less than the city's overall median income. These figures confirm Turk's (2004:911) findings that rental housing in the U.S. is "the province of a decidedly poorer population than the majority of homeowners." In a report published by the Urban Institute, housing expert Sandra Newman (2005:6) argues that there is a serious housing crisis in Baltimore "because so many renters are poor – and getting poorer – not because a shortage of rental housing has bid up rents to unattainable levels." Newman estimates that there are twice as many poor renters as there are affordable housing units in the city. According to the relatively recent estimates of the 2006 American Community Survey, 52% of Baltimore rental households spend more than 30% of their household income on rent. Moreover, 30,000 households are on the waiting list for public housing and/or vouchers (Jacobson 2007; Brookings Institution 2003). To make matters worse, around one-third of the rental housing stock – comprised of both multi-family housing developments and "scattered site" row houses – fails to meet basic housing codes of physical adequacy (Newman 2005).

The effect of this "shelter insecurity" is profound (Bratt et al. 2006). Under such conditions of chronic poverty, wide swathes of the population face the periodic, even perpetual, threat of eviction.¹² In 2006, there were 139,489 complaints filed against tenants for failure to pay rent. That means that there were more filed complaints than there are rental households (roughly 128,000) in the city as a whole. What we cannot determine from this figure – given that landlords can file complaints against tenants each month a payment is missed, resulting in

multiple complaints against the same household over the course of a year – is the actual number of rental households legally threatened with eviction proceedings each year. Regardless, it is undoubtedly the case that with anywhere between 7,000 and 8,000 evictions a year, and countless more legally threatened with eviction, the specter of forced displacement – and homelessness – looms large. These figures undoubtedly underestimate the scope of eviction, for as pointed out by Hartman and Robinson (2003:463), “tenants move out and give up the battle at many different stages.” Thus, many of those who are displaced as a result of an eviction notice or eviction proceedings are not included in the official eviction figures. The figures also fail to take into account illegal “self-help” evictions, such as that experienced by Evie. Finally, the figures do not account for tenants evicted from their apartments as a result of the dramatic spike in property owner foreclosures. Nevertheless, using these underestimated figures, a 2003 report found that Baltimore evicts a higher proportion of renters (5.81 evictions per 100) than the comparative cases of New York (1.26), Philadelphia (2.74), Cleveland (1.46), Detroit (4.94) and Washington D.C. (5.70) (The Abell Foundation 2003).

Overview of Eviction Procedure in Baltimore

The summary ejectment process, the legal term for eviction for non-payment of rent, dates back to what has been referred to as the “revolution in landlord-tenant law” of the 1970s, when jurisdictions across the United States enacted new regulations of the rent-collection process, prohibited retaliatory evictions and instituted an “implied warrant of habitability” to enable tenants to raise legitimate complaints about hazardous conditions in the property (Rabin 1980). Because landlord-tenant laws are enacted at the local and state levels, the process whereby property owners collect rent, or, in failing to do so, take back possession of their property, varies considerably by jurisdiction.¹³ Here, I provide a brief and general outline of the

eviction process in Baltimore, Maryland. This legal background is important because it sets the parameters under which evictions can be executed and thereby provides much of the necessary context for grasping the qualitative material that follows.¹⁴

As early as one day after rent is due, landlords can file suit with the District Court. This differs from most other cities where landlords are first required to send the tenant notice of late payment and wait several days for a response before filing a complaint in court. This helps to explain the staggering number of court complaints filed, averaging roughly 3,000 per week. Within five days of receiving the complaint, the District Court issues a summons to the tenant for a court date in a special civil court known as “rent court” where a single judge handles a docket of 300 to 1,200 cases a day (Abell Foundation 2003; Vozzella 2003). If the tenant fails to appear in court, the judge issues a default judgment of possession to the landlord. If the tenant appears at court, one of two things occurs. Most tenants will meet with a representative of the landlord and pay the balance or sign a court-approved payment plan (this effectively means they plead guilty and are issued a stay of judgment with the contingency of meeting the requirements of the payment plan).¹⁵ Other tenants will go to trial, where, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the judge issues a judgment for possession, ordering the tenant to pay or vacate the premises within four days. If the tenant does not pay or vacate within four days, the landlord files for a “Warrant of Restitution,” which orders the Sheriff to forcibly evict the tenant, giving possession of the property back to the owner. The landlord then calls the Sheriff’s office to schedule a date for eviction. The entire process – from initial court complaint to forcible removal and repossession – can be as short as 30 days. The tenant advocates and property owners I interviewed agree that this is one of the most expeditious eviction timelines in the country. Judge Keith E. Matthews,

the administrative judge for the city's District Court, stated "it's easier to evict someone in Baltimore City than almost anywhere else in the country" (Vozzella 2003).

The eviction process ends in one of three ways: (1) The eviction is cancelled if, exercising his or her "right of redemption" (commonly referred to as the right to "pay and stay"), the tenant pays the amount due before the Sheriff and crew arrive and the first piece of furniture is placed off the premises. This can occur four times within a 12-month period (meaning tenants can go through the entire court process and tender the money owed when the Sheriff is knocking on the door) before landlords have the option of annulling the tenant's right of redemption; (2) The tenant can abandon the property in anticipation of the forthcoming eviction, resulting in what property owners and managers call a "skip," requiring the eviction crew to perform what property owners and managers refer to as a "trash-out" of the possessions left behind; (3) The tenant can wait until the scheduled forcible removal, resulting in what property owners and managers call a "live eviction." City law prevents evictions from taking place during rain, snow or freezing temperatures and, crucially for the purposes of this analysis, city law requires that the landlord arrange for and provide the labor force necessary to expeditiously carry out the eviction.

Findings and Analysis

Property Management: "It's not for the faint of heart"

A representative from a large property management company, with nearly a dozen multiunit housing developments throughout the city, describes eviction day:

The stress level for both the landlord and the tenant is incredible, especially on the day before eviction. Last week was a great example. Our biggest development has 2,000 units in it. And on the night before eviction, our list of scheduled evictions was 150 units when we closed those doors at 8pm. The next morning, by the time the Sheriff got there at

10am, we were down to 30 units, from 150. Those people all paid... So the freak-out factor for us is, we know the Sheriff is going to be there at 10am and my people are here by 7:30am the morning of the eviction, ya' know, making a list and checking it twice. I can't even begin to tell you the stress level the managers go through on eviction day. I'm not suggesting the focus shouldn't be on the stress of the tenant trying to get it together, cause I know that's really stressful. And nobody wants to put someone out unless it's really the end of the line. But the stress level is unbelievable. The angst level is up to here [she holds her hand above her head]. It's like running a battlefield.

Emphasizing the heightened level of stress that is involved, the property manager likens the orchestration and coordination of eviction day to “running a battlefield.” This results in large part from the tenant’s right of redemption which, as pointed out in the previous section, enables the tenant to pay the amount owed up until the moment the Sheriff and eviction crew arrive and the first piece of furniture is placed off the premises. In the case above, the number of evictions to be carried out in a single housing complex on the West side of Baltimore dropped overnight from 150 to 30, requiring a substantial feat of coordination akin to, in her words, “making a list and checking it twice.”

Every single landlord and property manager I interviewed insisted that the right of redemption encourages tenants to be tardy with their rent, turning them into “deadbeats” who habitually and deliberately delay payment. Far from serving as the safety net it is intended to be, property owners and managers believe that the right of redemption breeds delinquency and irresponsibility on the part of tenants.¹⁶ For instance, the representative of a small property management company states:

Most property managers will tell you, there are, despite your thorough screening procedures for tenants, you're still gonna end up with people who lose their jobs or put their rent on the bottom of the list and say, 'Okay, if I don't pay my July 1st rent and the eviction doesn't take place until mid-August, I got forty-five days. I can string it out.' What I'm saying is that these people turn in to habitual late payers. They're deadbeats. They're making promises they can't keep: they're making car payments; they're paying child support. Whatever it is they're paying, they're not paying me first, ya' know.

It is instructive to recognize the double register of the term “redemption,” for although payment of rent may “redeem” tenants in the eyes of the law, it does not “redeem” them in the eyes of the landlord. In the quote above, the property manager recognizes the sort of unforeseeable structural crises that might prevent tenants from paying rent on time (e.g. job loss), but nonetheless places ultimate responsibility for the eviction upon the tenant’s poor choices and degraded character.

A representative from a separate property management company puts it this way: “It's very interesting, the Baltimore culture problem behind it is really very different than what you'll find in other places around the country because you have this whole ‘pay and stay’ thing and it's almost like, ‘do you feel lucky?’” Here, the representative discusses the social problem of eviction as a “culture problem,” wherein tenants treat their tenancy as a game of chance, gambling on how long they can delay payment of rent without facing eviction. This characterization is also used in rent court, as in a case I observed where the legal representative of this same property management company repeatedly declared before the Judge, “Your honor, this tenant has played the game very well.” Another representative of a property management company echoed this focus on the attitudinal and behavioral deficiencies of tenants as the root

cause of eviction by summarily stating, “If they wanted to keep it [tenancy] and if they tried hard enough to keep it, they could keep it.”

Yet, the “battlefield” metaphor introduced above does not simply speak to the tremendous unpredictability and careful coordination required on eviction day. It also exemplifies one of the most consistent and striking patterns to emerge from my interviews with landlords and property managers, who overwhelmingly spoke of evictions as “dangerous.” As a manager of a West Baltimore housing development explained:

The property management business is not for the faint of heart. Let me tell you, it is not pretty. It's a very emotionally-charged situation when you're doing an eviction and the people, the tenants, are still there and they still want their property and they have not made arrangements for either taking care of their property, moving to another place or whatever. They're dangerous! People get extremely angry! I mean, you look at them, you have to look at them and say, 'You didn't pay the rent! I'm sorry that this has to happen, but---!' That does not prevent them from being angry and resorting to violence when they see their stuff being put in a trash bag and thrown out on the street.

When I pressed for specifics, she went on to tell me stories of landlords beaten and even murdered by desperate tenants, angered about being forcibly removed from their homes: “There have been cases, back in the old days of self-help, where tenants have shot landlords. There was a landlord who was killed by a tenant doing an eviction.” Notably, she did not mention any *recent* acts of violence committed by tenants, nor did she mention any specific acts of violence that she herself had witnessed. Given that nearly all of Baltimore’s roughly 7,500 yearly evictions are carried out without significant violence – due to the presence of the Sheriff and, as I’ll discuss in more detail in the subsequent section, the fact that most tenants have already

abandoned the premises by the time of eviction – this widely-reported “danger” warrants critical reflection.

I would argue that there are three reasons for the widespread emphasis on danger. First, it reveals the way in which exceptional cases come to be perceived as the rule. When the topic of eviction makes the news, it typically involves some sort of violent or gruesome scenario, therein overshadowing the routine, even banal nature of eviction as a constant churning and dogged displacement of the urban poor.¹⁷

Second, the emphasis on danger reflects the risks associated with the “dirty work” of the property management trade, for, as one landlord admits, evictions entail “going into a dirty, nasty place and carrying out dirty, nasty things.”¹⁸ He went on to highlight the workplace dangers involved:

The other part about this that is dangerous is that in the case of an eviction where the tenant has left whatever they don't want behind, you never know what's really in that stuff. We've had evictions where there's been medical waste and needles and live animals of all sorts of stripes. And we're not talking just dogs and cats, but reptiles and snapping turtles and you just have no idea! You have no idea when you walk into a place what you're going to find. And that does create some hazards for the people doing the eviction, because you just don't know what's going to be there.

Finally, the widespread emphasis on “danger” reflects landlords’ perceptions, stereotypes and expectations of their poor and overwhelmingly African-American tenants. Take the following statement from a property manager:

You have to realize that sometimes you are dealing with people who are, who have problems that are far beyond nonpayment of rent; they have illness problems, domestic

violence problems and, more often than not, criminal tendencies. That all is exacerbated by the eviction process. And that is what creates the danger.

This emphasis on tenants' "problems" and "criminal tendencies" is echoed by a landlord of three multi-family apartment buildings, who states:

It's warfare. Many times, these are bad situations. These people do not want to be evicted. You got to remember that we're dealing here with the worst of the worst. Often, they are involved, or related to people who are involved, in serious gang activity.

By insisting that they are dealing with the "worst of the worst," people with "criminal tendencies," landlords and property managers implicitly suggest that evictions are dangerous because the people they are evicting are members of a dangerous class. Thus, the symbolic framing of tenants as irresponsible "deadbeats" coexists with this second framing of tenants as violent offenders. Both serve to highlight the moral deficiencies of the tenant and in so doing, operate as a way for property owners and managers to justify an act about which they nearly all admitted to feeling some sense of discomfort. "It's always uncomfortable," one property manager mentioned numerous times throughout our interview. "No one likes doing evictions, no one *wants* to do an eviction."

Due to the utter unpredictability of evictions (given, as I have discussed, both the right of redemption and the contingencies of weather), the real and perceived risks of carrying them out and the desire to keep costs down to the absolute minimum, property owners and managers outsource eviction labor to a disposable, "just-in-time" workforce.

"The labor is just whoever!" a representative of a small property management company curtly and quizzically replied when I asked who actually performs the physical labor of evictions. His response, vague as it may seem, aptly captures the anonymity, disposability and

inter-changeability of the individuals hired to form the eviction crew. “You gotta understand,” he went on to explain. “If I’m at the point of eviction, I’m already pissed as shit... The last thing I wanna do is spend another big chunk of money to pay some people [to carry out the eviction].”

Other landlords I spoke to were only slightly more specific, referring to “random guys picked up off the street” or “temps,” like Evie, hired through one of nearly a dozen day labor agencies scattered throughout the city. One property manager insisted: “*We* certainly don't do that [carry out evictions]. We hire temps to do all that work. So they will be the ones to meet the deputy sheriff and maintenance supervisor. All we do is sign the paperwork. We authorize it, but they are the ones to enforce it.” A landlord of several scattered-site units similarly reported, “We have to have crews to do that, people we hire - temporary workers or whatever - for eviction day.” Even the deputy sheriff I shadowed for a day acknowledged that eviction crews in Baltimore are almost always comprised of “temps.”

Whether hired off the street or hired through a formal day labor agency, eviction crews in Baltimore are recruited from the most marginal fractions of the urban poor. And evidence suggests that this practice extends beyond the case of Baltimore. In the neighboring city of Washington D.C., eviction service firms routinely hire homeless individuals to perform evictions. A class-action lawsuit, filed by the National Coalition for the Homeless in 2006, has charged that at least since 2002, a group of six eviction services companies have been violating minimum wage and antitrust laws by conspiring to pay the homeless five dollars per eviction, regardless of the number of hours they work. Robert Brandt, the supervisory deputy of the U.S. Marshals Service at the District of Columbia Superior Court, was quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* as saying: “I would imagine that 80% of evictions in the city are conducted by

independent eviction companies...[who] are almost without exception ones that pick up crews at the homeless shelters as their primary source of labor” (Phillips 2006).

Ironically, although evictions push tenants towards homelessness, they simultaneously provide the homeless with work that offers, beyond petty wages, salvageable and sellable goods and an elevated, if fleeting, sense of status. In the next section, I draw upon ethnographic field notes to provide a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the social drama of eviction, documenting in particular the experience and perspective of workers on eviction crews who, to cite a previously quoted landlord, “go into a dirty nasty place and carry out dirty, nasty things.”

Eviction Labor: “Putting People Out”

Despite their shared circumstances of poverty and shelter insecurity, the precariously-housed laborers who make up Baltimore’s eviction crews consistently differentiate and distance themselves from the tenants whom they are evicting. This is no doubt facilitated by the fact that the vast majority of evictions turn out to be what are referred to as “skips,” where the tenant has vacated the apartment prior to the moment when the Sheriff and crew arrive. According to data provided by the Baltimore City Sheriff’s Office, tenants are absent from the premises in more than three fourths of evictions, although it warrants underscoring that, throughout the duration of my research, it was not always easy to determine whether a tenant had deliberately “skipped” or whether a tenant was merely out of the house, uninformed of the precise date of the eviction and therefore caught by surprise when they came home to find that they had been “put out” (see Coda). Practically, what this means is that eviction crews typically perform “trash-outs” of tenants’ belongings – legally declared abandoned property the minute it hits the curb – but have very little, if any, face-to-face interaction with tenants.

In the context of tenant's absence from the premises, eviction crew members often develop "imaginary stories" about the tenant and the underlying causes of the eviction (Hochschild 1983:147).¹⁹ As the following ethnographic narrative makes clear, these "imaginary stories" tend to evoke similarly disparaging characterizations of tenants as those articulated by the landlords and property managers.

There are twenty-four of us laborers on today's eviction crew, filtering in and out of apartments in groups of roughly four to six. Jerome, a maintenance worker for the property management company and our de-facto supervisor for the day, tells me that there are five to twelve evictions in this 128-unit apartment complex each month, every one of which is carried out by day laborers hired from InstaLabor. I work for much of the morning alongside an older, homeless, African-American man named Will, who is wearing a dirty dust mask around his neck and clothes literally caked in filth. He has just finished a 12-hour overnight shift cleaning boats in the harbor off of Canton. After a short nap back at the agency, he was sent right back out on this eviction gig. When I insist that he must be dog-tired, he shrugs and says, "at least it's work."

A family from the housing development trails us from unit to unit, scavenging through the tall mounds of furniture, kitchen supplies and bags of goods we place on the curb. They watch our actions like hawks watch their prey, staring down every single thing that we carry out of the building. A heavysset, middle-aged, African-American man scopes out the wares, sending desired items home with one of three kids by his side. "Yo, the wolves are out there," a guy in our crew shouts from inside one of the apartments. Another worker replies, "The wolves are in here!" Donna, a woman from our crew, has taken a large stuffed animal from the apartment: a giant, red bulldog. She carries it with her from unit to unit, using it as a stool during the

downtime between evictions. Proud of her treasured find, she leads a portion of the crew in a rousing collective chant of the rap-hit, “Who Let the Dogs Out?”

About a dozen of us eventually follow the Sheriff and Jerome to the next building over where we are told that we will be evicting two of the four units. A family is moving out of one of the units, but I am slow to see the connection between the U-Haul backed up onto the lawn, the kids scurrying about and the eviction we are about to perform. I find out later that the grandmother heard at the last minute that her daughter and four small grandchildren were going to be evicted, so she mustered up the energy and gathered together the cash to rent a U-Haul in hopes that her grandkids could save some of their belongings. When I retell this story to Henry, he declares, “Mama must be a rock star [crack addict]! Serves her right.” While the grandmother and her two eldest grandchildren continue moving their belongings down the building’s main staircase and out into the truck, we begin evicting their neighbor.

As soon as Jerome opens the door, a terrible stench wafts out into the foyer where we are standing. We enter into an apartment that is chock full of stuff; nothing, it appears, has been moved. The occupant of the unit – whom Jerome later tells me is an elderly widow – has not appeared to have taken a thing with her, wherever she might now be. The apartment is dirty and cluttered and I hesitate to venture further inside, let alone touch anything. I’m wearing a thin pair of ripped latex gloves, provided not by my legal employer (InstaLabor) but by one of the property management company’s maintenance workers who had offered them in an act of chivalry. A few of my coworkers are wearing gloves they have brought with them, but many more are working bare-handed.

We set about to work, taking turns bellowing complaints about the smell. I start with the piles and piles of trash loaded atop a rickety, metal kitchen table in the living room. As soon as I

move a portion of a pile, a grey mouse scurries down the rusted leg. I scream at the top of my lungs. The mice, we quickly learn, are everywhere, having infested the place seemingly long ago. Aside from the living vermin, there are dead vermin scattered across the dirty, carpeted floor, and based upon my quick, horrified glances, it appears that many of them are decapitated. I go into the bathroom to try to wash my hands, only to find that the water has been turned off. It is then that I notice unopened boxes of mouse and rat traps in the medicine cabinet: evidence that the tenant had been trying or was at least intending to deal with the infestation, to no avail.

I come back out into the living room and stare at a series of family portraits and youthful graduation photos, even a marriage certificate, adorning the wall. I have a plastic bag in one hand, but I can't bring myself to take down these photos and toss them out. "You can't think about it, G," Andre yells over his shoulder as he continues to toss the tenant's belongings into a bag. "Just throw it out," he snaps and I reluctantly comply.

After two laborious hours, we finish cleaning out everything in the uninhabitable living room and kitchen, including the soiled and dilapidated couch that is covered in a tussled nest of pillows and sheets and sagging with the imprint of someone's perpetual body weight. We collectively agree that the tenant must have routinely slept on it. This is confirmed when we step inside of the bedroom to find a full, wooden bedroom set, but no bedding. The mouse population in the bedroom triples. As a quartet of men starts disassembling and hauling out the furniture, another guy opens up the door across the hallway to a second bedroom. He utters a loud groan of disgust and stumbles back several feet, overwhelmed by the pungent, acidic odor of feces that now permeates the air. The room is entirely void of furniture; its walls bare; the vinyl shade on the lone window pulled all the way down adds to its suffocating appearance. All that the room contains is layer upon layer of newspaper, across every inch of the floor, stacked nearly a foot

off of the ground, as high as my kneecaps. Jerome comes over, peers his head inside and says something about how this must be where the tenant let her dog go to the bathroom. For a moment, I imagine this elderly woman and her dog barricaded inside this rodent-infested apartment. Will shouts, “If someone lives likes this, they sure as hell deserve to be evicted.” Sounds of affirmation – “hmm-mms” – are muttered by several other crew members now huddled and laughing near the door.

I leave the apartment, unwilling to pick up the feces- and urine-saturated layers of newspaper. Word of the conditions inside the unit has spread quickly and by the time I join the rest of the crew outside in the delightfully fresh air, Henry jokes around with me, asking “ya gonna write about that in your book?” We stand on the sloping yard, watching the handful of crew members carry out the bedroom furniture, bags of trash and soiled newspapers. Meanwhile, a portion of the crew is now removing the remainder of the family’s possessions in the upstairs unit. The three small children look helplessly upon the toys, clothes, furniture and other belongings, now piled high upon the lawn. One of the little girls, who looks to be around six, is sitting on the grass cradling her infant sibling. The kids are passively watching the spectacle, occasionally whispering in each other’s ears when they see one of their belongings thrown onto the curb like a half-eaten corncob. They seem too shy, ashamed or nervous to run over and pull out what they want from the growing pile. Twice, I walk over to them and offer them framed photos that I’ve pulled out of the “trash,” asking if they would like to keep them. The eldest girl nods and clutches them to her chest, but then quickly turns away from me without making eye contact. The whole time we are at this building, a growing number of neighbors gathers around and starts picking through the ruins. Everyone seems to be watching everyone else.

The social drama of eviction offers us a rare, simultaneous view into the conditions of housing and the conditions of labor at the very bottom of the U.S. class structure. Moreover, it provides us critical insight in to the question of how the dispossessed experience and respond to their direct involvement in the dispossession of others.

In the ethnographic narrative above, Will, who resides in a downtown homeless shelter, reacts to what I will euphemistically call “the dog room” by declaring, “If someone lives like this, they sure as hell deserve to be evicted!” This declaration echoes the judgments made by Joseph and Tina in the ethnographic prelude to this article, wherein they imagine the absent tenant, whose eviction notices are scattered across the living room floor, to be “illiterate or shit or just high out of her fuckin’ mind.” Although the uninhabitable conditions in the apartment reveal the landlord’s failure to uphold the warrant of habitability and thus the tenant’s right to withhold payment of rent, Will judges them as evidence of the tenant’s moral failings and, hence, as justification for the eviction and his role in its execution. He thus embraces the goal – repossession – of the property management company, his *de facto*, but not *de jure*, employer for the day.

Recall Evie, the woman I introduced towards the beginning of this article. After going through an illegal eviction, she resides in a homeless shelter and works for a day labor agency that frequently dispatches her to work on evictions. However, she insists upon a clear distinction between her own experience of eviction and the “imagined” experiences of those whom she has evicted. Although she readily acknowledges the emotional challenges of the job, she, like Will, Joseph and Tina, ultimately emphasizes the tenant’s lack of responsibility, thus justifying what she sees as the “simple” matter of the landlord’s right to repossession:

It's a hard thing to do, ya know? People get into situations for all kinds of reasons. But my thing is, if you did the eviction the proper way, if it's a proper eviction, with the Sheriff's okay, you already got the ample notice and whatever else, so it's not like they just walked up today and said 'Move the fuck on. It's time to go.' You done dragged your feet for whatever reason and that's that. See, there's a real difference, ok? They give you time and more time and whatever else. If you don't think it's true and you wait 'til that point, then oh well. I'm not saying it's a good thing. You don't wanna see nobody in the streets. But if you didn't prepare, ya know, you gotta prepare for stuff, you gotta be responsible. You didn't pay the rent, ok? It's simple, it's real simple. You got family, you got children, ya know what I mean. You should be more responsible!

BJ, another day laborer with whom I worked on several evictions and who, as a registered sex offender, experiences near-blanket exclusion from the labor and housing markets, offers a similar perspective.

I know what it's like to get your shit put out. I been put out plenty of times. We were getting evicted left and right down in Prince George's county [Maryland]. My wife kept smokin' up all our rent money! These people deserve what's coming to them, 'cuz...they in there smokin,' drinkin,' acting like they own the goddamn place. Well, nah uh, I don't pay these fuckers no mind. Move the fuck out, that's all I gotta say.

Particularly striking about BJ's remarks is his decisive tone. Like Evie, BJ draws specifically upon his own experiences of eviction to denigrate the tenants he "puts out," again rooting the cause of eviction in tenant's moral and behavioral deficiencies. However, unlike Evie, it is

precisely because of his close personal identification with the tenant that BJ so firmly embraces his role as evictor, deriving from it a situational sense of status, fleeting as it may be.

Finally, we come to the case of Spiro, a 28 year-old, formerly-incarcerated, African-American man who shuffles his wife and their three young sons between his mother-in-law's overcrowded row house and a low-budget motel on the suburban, but still African-American, outskirts of the city. As a "regular" at InstaLabor and a frequent participant on eviction crews, Spiro points out the very real possibility of someday being hired to evict family, friends, neighbors or, most pointedly, himself. "That kinda stuff [eviction] could be happening to me with what I'm going through," Spiro insightfully notes. "I figure like, damn, [InstaLabor] might be at my house one day! Taking stuff!" Spiro is, in fact, the one respondent in my study to go on to explicitly articulate a moral quandary about his participation in the act of "putting people out."

I wouldn't do it again, ya know what I mean? I don't think InstaLabor should have a part in that. Because InstaLabor hires, ya know, like crackheads, dope fiends, whatever, you know what I mean? They don't have no---, they just hire anybody, really. Then to have people like that going through your stuff, ya know what I mean, that ain't right!

Spiro empathizes with the tenant, not out of a moral or political commitment to the tenant's right to housing, but because of the presumed indignity of having one's property ("stuff") meddled with by "crackheads, dope fiends, whatever,"²⁰ the population from which Spiro distances himself, but to which he nevertheless sees himself as having been relegated via his position on the very margins of the labor market. Like we saw at the very beginning of this article – in Calvin's titillating vision of an encounter with armed tenants – Spiro perceives evictions as, at root, conflicts between tenants and hired eviction crews, as opposed to conflicts between tenants and landlords. Indeed, the landlord is an invisible actor in his recounting of this social drama.

Such findings show the ways in which eviction is rendered invisible as a social problem not simply from the top-down, as Hartman and Robinson (2003) have noted, via the government's failure to document the scope of the phenomenon. Eviction is also rendered invisible as a social problem from the bottom-up, via this transmutation of vertical conflict between classes (the propertied and propertyless classes) into a lateral conflict amongst the propertyless. More than simply undermining potential bases of solidarity amongst the poor, these symbolic frames and social dynamics – what I will go on to conceptualize as a circle of dispossession – render invisible the structural inequalities that give rise to eviction in the first place.

Discussion

Ananya Roy (2003) has argued that the U.S. is characterized by a “paradigm of propertied citizenship.” Under this prevailing paradigm, the homeless are excluded from citizenship and rendered marginal in discourse and practice. While many scholars have been concerned with the kinds of struggles that could challenge this paradigm, my research shows that those excluded from the paradigm – the homeless – are used to enforce and serve to legitimate it. In this respect, evictions entail what I conceptualize as a *circle of dispossession*, reproduced both materially and ideologically.²¹ The dispossessed serve as the physical labor force used to carry out the dispossession orders – a job that offers, beyond petty wages, a relative sense of status and access to tenants' belongings for use or resale – thus directly contributing to the growing ranks of the dispossessed. But these dispossessed workers, deploying the idiom of moral individualism, reproduce the dominant perspective that eviction results from tenants' moral and behavioral deficiencies. In so doing, my findings suggest that they affirm property rights over and above any countervailing claims to a “right to housing” (Bratt, Stone and Hartman 2007) or “right to place” (Imbroscio 2004). This study thus provides empirical confirmation of Bezdek's (1992)

claim that among the poor in the U.S. “there is virtually no evidence of a belief that they deserve as an adjunct to their humanity, to rent premises that are free of dangers posed by rats, falling plaster, and defunct plumbing. Nor do poor tenants possess the belief that they deserve to be freed of the threat of eviction and homelessness.”

Given the dearth of scholarly research on this topic, one aim of the paper has been to illustrate eviction as a “strategic research site” for the study of urban poverty,²² one that brings in to simultaneous focus the precarious and degraded conditions of housing and labor at the bottom of the U.S. class structure. Since the analysis herein only begins to scratch the surface of the social problem of eviction, I conclude by highlighting several broad, and intersecting, areas for future research.

In terms of the eviction process, comparative research is necessary for understanding how evictions are carried out in other states, with differing laws with respect to the rent-collection and repossession process, and in other nations, with differing housing policies and priorities and state regulation of the housing and labor markets. In terms of tenants, future research should address the short- and long-term consequences of eviction (both the threat and the reality of forced displacement). Longitudinal research, along the lines of that conducted in Sweden (Stenberg, Kareholt and Carroll 1995), would go a long way towards addressing the gaps in our knowledge, particularly in so far as it links consequences (i.e. aversion of eviction, move to new leased apartment, makeshift housing arrangement, move to homeless shelter) to tenants’ capacity to mobilize social and institutional resources. Evidence from the Swedish study suggests that tenants still in the unit at the time of forcible eviction tend to be worse off than those who leave at any point beforehand (Stenberg, Kareholt and Carroll 1995). This finding, paired with my own ethnographic material, reveal evictions to also be particularly opportune sites for research on

“literal social isolation” (Klinenberg 1999). Finally, in terms of the broader community, future research should address the effect on tenants of bearing witness to evictions on a routine basis in their apartment complexes and surrounding neighborhoods. Under what circumstances does such “contact” generate resistance? Under what circumstances does it generate discipline, making tenants more submissive to the power of the landlord? Under what circumstances does it normalize eviction, leading economically-precarious tenants to expect it as a “normal” event in the life course, similar to the way in which poor, young, African-American men now expect incarceration?

Coda

While I was conducting this research, Baltimore was in the midst of adopting a new ordinance pertaining to eviction, entitled the “Clean Streets Bill,” which went into effect in October 2007.²³ The bill is a significant compromise between tenant advocacy organizations and property owners. It made two key changes in the way the city regulates evictions. First, landlords are now required to provide notice to the tenant of the scheduled eviction date in each of three ways: (1) first class mail with a certificate of mailing at least fourteen days in advance of the eviction date, (2) certified mail at least fourteen days in advance of the eviction date and (3) notification posted on the premises at least seven days in advance of the date of eviction. Second, landlords can no longer dispose of the tenant’s belongings – “eviction chattel” – on the street; rather, they must haul the chattel directly to the dump at their own expense. Landlords found guilty of illegal dumping will now be subject to fines of one thousand dollars per day.

This update is further confirmation of the shifting role of the state characteristic of advanced urban marginality, from “provider of social support for lower-income populations to supplier of business services and amenities for middle- and upper-class urbanites – chief among

them the cleansing of the built environment and the streets of the physical and human detritus wrought by economic deregulation and welfare retrenchment” (Wacquant 2008b:198). The driving impetus behind the bill – as explicitly indicated by its name – was to clean the streets of Baltimore. City officials, property owners and community activists alike agreed that the “common and depressing sight” of eviction piles littering the city’s streets hurts property values, lowers perceptions of neighborhoods, invites vermin and incites vandalism and crime (Di Pasquale 2006; Rodricks 1999). Arguably even more noticeable is the fact that piles of eviction chattel invariably attract crowds of poor people, who – as my own ethnographic data reveals – scavenge through the ruins for goods to use or resell.

Initial evidence suggests that the ordinance has contributed to a decrease in the number of evictions, due to the fact that landlords are now *required* to notify tenants of the precise date of the scheduled eviction (Fritze 2008). Yet, the bill has had the additional effect of obliterating the physical evidence of eviction, making them all the more insidious and invisible. Throwing the tenant’s belongings on the street – humiliating as this might have been for the tenant and unsavory as this might have been for the community – offered the tenant the possibility, if not the promise, of salvaging pieces of his or her life. But it also made evictions visible, if only in their effects.

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NOTES

¹ To ensure anonymity and to comply with IRB requirements, I use pseudonyms for all individuals and companies referenced throughout this article.

² In making this argument, I do not claim that the victims of homeowner foreclosure have escaped individual blame. Rather, I mean that tenant evictions for nonpayment of rent are rarely attributed to anything *other* than individual responsibility. The recent discourse of “innocent” renters (i.e. renters facing eviction because the property in which they reside has been foreclosed upon) serves to underscore my point in that it suggests an unstated norm of individual blame.

³ There is considerable definitional ambiguity about what constitutes “homelessness” (Hopper 2003; Rossi 1989; Shlay and Rossi 1992; Snow and Anderson 1993). In this article, I use the concepts “homeless,” “precariously-housed” and “marginally-housed” interchangeably. I do so to underscore the fact that “the line between being homeless and being domiciled is a fuzzy boundary, often and easily crossed” (Shlay and Rossi 1992:133). Calling for what he labels an “anthropology of makeshifts,” Hopper (2003:17) argues that “...researchers have directed their attention to those currently without shelter, missing many who are intermittently in that condition – not only those who manage to cadge a berth on a friend’s couch or living room floor, but seasonal workers who continue to replicate the century-old rhythms of on-again, off-again employment.”

⁴ Although this article, and the debate it has inspired, focuses upon gentrification, Slater’s claim about the displacement of displacement is more broadly applicable, as I argue with respect to the dearth of research on evictions.

⁵ Though such a task is beyond the intent or scope of this article, it is imperative that we work to obtain reliable and detailed demographic statistics on evictees. My own observations mirror Bezdek’s findings that the primary targets of eviction (in Baltimore) are poor, African-American, female-headed households, suggesting that the three principle and intersecting axes of inequality – class, race and gender – are absolutely critical to an understanding of this social problem.

⁶ This argument is supported by research conducted on New York City’s Housing Court. One study finds that only 21% of tenants are represented by a lawyer, as compared to 78% of landlords; another study reports that only 12% of tenants have legal representation, as compared to 98% of landlords. Results of a randomized experiment show that, irrespective of the merits of the case, legal assistance produced large differences in outcomes for tenants in housing court: tenants with counsel were half as likely to be issued a warrant of eviction and much more likely to win stipulations requiring rent abatement or repairs (Seron, Frankel and Van Ryzen 2001).

⁷ Roscigno, Karafin and Tester (2009) do a remarkable job of documenting a wide range of exclusionary and non-exclusionary forms of discrimination within the arena of housing (both rental and sales). However, because their focus is on state- and federally-prohibited forms of racial discrimination, with data culled from the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, they overlook the legally-sanctioned exclusionary closure enacted through increased tenant screening and blacklisting. It is important, I would argue, to consider this form of exclusionary closure – which

necessarily pushes individuals and families into makeshift housing, if not into homelessness outright – alongside the well-documented increase in anti-homeless legislation across the United States. Together, these trends illustrate the “paradigm of propertied citizenship,” adding further evidence to Mitchell’s (1997:311) claim that “a whole class of people simply cannot be, entirely because they have no place to be.”

⁸ My use of the concept of social drama is inspired by McFarland’s (2004:1251) conception of social dramas as “volatile episodes of social action that erupt forth from the otherwise smooth surface of routine social life,” by Becker’s (2007:204-222) call for multivocality in our representations of social events and by Hughes’ ([1971] 1993:342) call for research “to penetrate more deeply into the personal and social drama of work.”

⁹ Throughout my fieldwork, I kept my status as researcher hidden from management. For examples of other workplace ethnographies that employ lack of full disclosure in order to investigate elements of the labor process or workplace culture, see Henson (1996); Rollins (1985); Sallaz (2002); Williams (2006). Although aware of the ethical debates surrounding such a lack of full disclosure, securing managerial approval to conduct participant observation would have posed a number of ethical and practical problems. This lack of full disclosure notwithstanding, I never pretended to be anyone other than who I am and, over time, revealed my researcher status to workers. Through persistent immersion, I came to be accepted in the day labor pool as a “regular” and as an “old-timer,” but it would be highly inaccurate to suggest that, as a white woman working amidst predominantly black men, I blended in or operated “covertly.”

¹⁰ “Self-help evictions” refer to instances when a landlord evades the court and illegally takes matters into his or her own hands, often by changing the locks or shutting off utilities in an effort to rid the property of tenants. Prior to the 1970s, all evictions were what we would now consider “self-help evictions” (though this term only came into being after legal regulation). See section entitled “Overview of Eviction Procedure in Baltimore” for further explanation.

¹¹ See William Julius Wilson (2003) for a broader discussion about deindustrialization and “white flight” in the production of concentrated black poverty.

¹² The threat of eviction both feeds upon and produces a heightened level of vulnerability. In a recent study of sexual harassment in the field of housing, Tester (2008) presents evidence of landlords using the threat of eviction to sexually coerce economically vulnerable tenants. In some cases, landlords deliberately sought tenants incapable of paying rent whose housing options were severely constrained and who were thus more vulnerable to the landlord’s sexual advances.

¹³ While there are other reasons why landlords evict tenants (e.g. violation of lease), the overwhelming majority of eviction cases stem from non-payment of rent. For example, a study conducted in New Haven, Connecticut found that 93% of evictions stemmed from nonpayment of rent (Gottesman 2007).

¹⁴ As Bromley (2009:582) states: “The personal experience of eviction entails a cascading array of legal mechanisms, texts, violences, including eviction notices, writs of possession, arbitration and bailiffs, all of them sustained by principles of landlord-tenant law as well as wider common law conceptions of property.”

¹⁵ A legal representative of a large property management company whom I interviewed estimates that tenants “hardly ever” successfully follow through on their payment plan and are eventually evicted. He explained: “[The payment plans] are not supposed to be unconscionable, but I will tell you that eighty percent of mine would probably fit that bill. I make payment plans for 100% of the tenant’s income. How do you eat? How do you do anything? I get them to plead guilty and I get the court to stamp that. Fine! [He slams his fist on the table.] You have no money for food, diapers, milk. Nothing!” For more on this point, see Hartman and Robinson (2003:478-9).

¹⁶ Many landlords point out that this can come at a substantial cost to the tenant, since most leases specify that late fees and court costs, in addition to overdue rent, must be paid in order to avoid eviction. Landlords estimate that tenants who are late with their rent end up owing an additional 10-15% in fees, resulting in a collective total of millions of dollars simply to maintain occupancy (Abell Foundation 2003:6). One landlord I interviewed remarked: “I’ve called people [tenants] in and said, ‘Look, you paid me an extra \$2000 last year [as a result of late fees, court fees, etc]. That’s money that should have been in *your* pocket that went right to *my* pocket. Go to a loan company, borrow the money for next month’s rent and get back on track!’ And they may do that. Occasionally, that’s happened. But nine times out of ten, that doesn’t happen.”

¹⁷ One of the more recent instances to make national headlines was the January 2008 discovery of four decomposing bodies by marshals serving an eviction notice at a residence in the southeast district of Washington D.C. (Klein and Zumbum 2008).

¹⁸ Readers might recall that Hughes (1971:343) used the example of the apartment-house janitor to illustrate his conception of “dirty work.” While he focused specifically on their dealings with tenants’ trash, he did not address arguably the “dirtiest” work of all within the property management business: eviction. For further analysis of the “dirty work” and social control activities of lower-level employees in property management, see Asbury (1988).

¹⁹ Representing “the heel of capitalism,” bill collectors develop “imaginary stories” about customers (e.g. “lazy imposters lounging amid stolen goods”) to support the emotional labor – suppression of empathy – required of the job (Hochschild 1983:16, 147). Unlike Hochschild’s bill collectors, however, eviction crew members rarely have face-to-face interaction with tenants and are not subject to institutionally-defined “feeling rules.”

²⁰ For a nuanced account of the interactional invocation of the “crackhead” social identity, see Copes, Hochstetler and Williams (2008). As the authors explain, the label “crackhead” “is commonly used in casual speech as a metaphor and illustration of personal failure and lack of responsibility” (p.254).

²¹ Eviction is a paradigmatic but by no means exclusive site where we see the *circle of dispossession* at work. For example, drawing upon my more expansive fieldwork, I have found that day laborers, who often cite the lack of transportation as a major barrier to finding work, are routinely hired to drive repossessed cars at auto auctions. The circle of dispossession became clear to me when, on our way to the car auction one day, a coworker named Michael told me that his own car had just been repossessed, which was why he couldn't "get back on his feet" to find a "real job."

²² Robert Merton (1986:10-11) defines strategic research material as that material which "exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that it enables the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems and the discovery of new problems for further inquiry."

²³ The new ordinance, Council Bill 07-0665, amended Articles 13 and 19 of the Baltimore City Code.