WHEN CITIZENSHIP IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH CAPITAL: THE CASE OF THE CITY OF TORONTO'S DISPLACEMENT HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS

Matthew Cianchetti
ARTSSCI 1C06

Homeless encampments have a significantly positive impact on those who do not or cannot access housing services. Recent literature on houselessness asserts that encampments can be important sites of autonomy for the most vulnerable amongst those experiencing houselessness—people of color, women and gender diverse peoples, and people who use drugs—providing them with a sense of safety and belonging, as well as stable access to social services and healthcare (Yakubovich et al. 2025; Zwick et al. 2025; Boucher et al. 2022; Martin 2022; Cohen et al. 2019). However, encampments are systematically and repeatedly being displaced by both local law and municipal by-law enforcement officers in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, frequently stripping inhabitants of their possessions, community, and access to outreach services (Martino et al. 2025; 2024; Rady and Sotomayor 2024; O'Grady et al. 2013). Furthermore, the City of Toronto's increasingly displaces encampments near neighborhoods undergoing gentrification; where the population of a space shifts from being predominantly working-class to middle- and upper-class (Rady and Sotomayor 2024; N. Smith 1982).

In this paper, I argue that this pattern of displacement is telling of a broader story. Since Toronto's amalgamation in the 1990's, the city has been politically restructured around neoliberal ideals. These ideals center the individual; how individual freedom is of the utmost importance; how the individual possesses sole responsibility over their own well-being; and how capitalism provides the means for complete freedom and self-reliance (Harvey 2007; Larner 2000). The role of the state following these ideals, such as the City of Toronto, is to maximize opportunities for capital accumulation and economic development (Sager 2011; Harvey 1989; Kipfer and Keil 2002). In Toronto, these opportunities for economic development have coalesced into the creation of the "competitive city," in which the city itself became a commodity (Kipfer and Keil 2002, 234). This commodification occurs through gentrification, wherein the state dispossesses land from the working class and advertises it towards the more affluent middle class to turn a profit (N. Smith 1982; 1979). Because people experiencing houselessness are heavily stigmatized by dominant social norms, their existence in city spaces threatens its commodification (Wacquant et al. 2014; Wacquant 2007). Therefore, the removal of those experiencing homelessness from the 'public' view is seen as necessary by the neoliberal state. The displacement of encampments represents the City's prioritization of capital over the well-being of those experiencing houselessness, demonstrating that those with capital experience the benefits of the state and those who lack it experience the consequences.

Situating Toronto's Accumulation Through Dispossession

Gentrification is more than an economic process. Critical literature surrounding gentrification asserts that it cannot be reduced to rising-rent environments and market-induced displacement, as many often do (Kallin 2017). Rather, gentrification is a deliberate action by the state to attract capital and development to the city (Kallin 2017). This perspective stems from viewing gentrification and urban renewal within the context

of neoliberalism, in which the state's goal is attracting capital towards itself.

During the industrialization of North American cities, factories, manufacturing plants, and related services were located in urban areas due to the proximity of labor (Albet and Benach 2017). Thus, Toronto attracted capital as it became a space where goods could be manufactured. However, during the de-industrialization and urban sprawl of North America cities, those factories that made urban land valuable began to leave, bleeding the City of its source of capital (Taft 2018).

Thus, the City had to find new ways to attract capital, culminating in *accumulation through dispossession*, making Toronto, and the ability to live in it, a commodity (Harvey 2003; 1989). As outlined by urban geographer David Harvey, *accumulation through dispossession* is the continuance of primitive capital accumulation practices. These practices include the commodification and privatization of land and forceful expulsion of its inhabitants, conversion of various forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights, and the monetization of exchange and taxation (Harvey 2003). Accumulation through dispossession most commonly occurs when something of value, often land, is acquired cheaply and sold back to users at a higher price (Harvey 1989). Herein lies the ability to profit from the commodification of the city. This is critical for the economy of the post-industrial city as it creates new value for the space it occupies. Therefore, the state has a vested interest in furthering accumulation through dispossession (Kallin 2017; Harvey 1989).

Another critical geographer, Neil Smith, argues that accumulation through dispossession occurs in cities through gentrification, or more specifically, through the closing of the rent gap (Slater 2017; N. Smith 1982; 1979). To make the largest profit off land, real estate developers search for where the value of land is lowest and accumulate it at a low cost (Slater 2017; N. Smith 1982; 1979). Then, in tandem with city government, they increase the value of the land through renovating existing housing stock, increasing local amenities, and building public infrastructure to create a more desirable neighborhood to live in (Slater 2017; Smith 1982; 1979). Once this is complete, they then rent out the land at a higher price to newer, wealthier tenants (Slater 2017; Smith 1982; 1979). Smith notes that the state is the instigator of closing rent gaps, as it makes the land more valuable through promising investment in public transit near gentrifying areas, offering incentives to developers, and removing zoning regulation and rent control (Slater 2017; Smith 1982; 1979). However, the literature presented by Smith, Slater, Harvey, and others suggests that a critical part of the state's involvement in closing the rent gap is through dispossessing the land from previous inhabitants, who often possess little capital, or, worse, are weakening the value of the land through societal stigmatizations (Horgan 2018; Albet and Benach 2017; Mazer and Rankin 2011; Slater 2004; Harvey 2003; 1989; Hackworth and Smith 2001). This paper emphasizes the state's role of dispossession in closing the rent gap, specifically, through the displacement of those experiencing homelessness from public spaces.

Homelessness as Cause for Dispossession

Homelessness is a long-standing social issue in the city of Toronto. Starting in the late 1990s, Toronto experienced—and continues to experience—a housing affordability crisis as a result of the federal and provincial governments' discontinuation of public and non-public housing programs, ongoing gentrification, and the financialization of all forms of housing (Kipfer and Sotomayor 2024; Suttor 2016). With housing becoming unaffordable and the city's population increasing, the number of people experiencing homelessness has only increased within the city (Quayum et al. 2024). Furthermore, the city's shelter system is continually oversaturated, with May 2023 seeing an occupancy rate of 99.9% (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). All of this has resulted in

visible homelessness (i.e., homelessness on streets, in parks, and other public spaces) being at an all-time high at a time in which the city has been emboldened to displace them (Quayum et al. 2024).

In Toronto, the displacement of people experiencing homelessness out of the 'public' view is a common and systemic phenomenon, often in the interest of dispossessing public land from previous inhabitants and repurposing it for a perceived higher and better use (Martino et al. 2025; 2024; Rady and Sotomayor 2024; Gordon and Byron 2021). For example, in 2019, an urban revitalization project, The Bentway, sought to "transform nearly two kilometers under the Gardiner Expressway into a new gathering place for [the] city's growing population (Gordon and Byron 2021, 855)" However, the land under the Gardiner Expressway, which is publicly owned, was by no means a new gathering place. Historically, informal encampments have inhabited the area, providing shelter for those experiencing homelessness (Gordon and Byron 2021). Thus, constructing The Bentway required the removal of people experiencing homelessness and consequently, the disposing them of their access to the city. This dispossession of people experiencing houselessness by the City of Toronto was achieved by utilizing public by-laws and ordinances stating that constructing a tent on city property was not permitted (Gordon and Byron 2021). In mid-March, city staff arrived with heavy machinery, destroying the encampments and seizing residents' belongings (Gordon and Byron 2021).

It is important to note that the dispossession and displacement of those experiencing homelessness occurs not only because they occupy space but also because of the effect they have through occupying visible space. Stigma, rudimentarily defined, is the symbolic designation and meaning attached to a person (Goffman 1963). The stigmatization of those experiencing homelessness occurs through multiple dimensions, including functionality (functional individuals being more widely accepted within society), aesthetics (visibility and social acceptability of appearance), personal culpability (the perception of an individual's responsibility for becoming homeless), and unpredictability and dangerousness (Takahashi 1997). Thus, those who are housed often affront feelings of a lack of security and safety in the presence of those experiencing homelessness, even if they present no criminal threat to the community (Martino et al. 2024; 2025; Hodgkinson et al. 2024). Recent literature asserts that this designation of meaning also attaches to space. In a theory of territorial stigmatization put forth by Loïc Wacquant, he posits that people's perceptions of the symbolic character of space create and shape social relationships with that space (Wacquant et al. 2014). And, over time, particular social and spatial conditions, or persons and places, are mutually tied through stigma (C. B. R. Smith 2010; Takahashi 1997). While territorial stigmatization may enable revanchist attitudes towards specific neighborhoods, perceived as needing revitalization, the persistent presence of heavily stigmatized social conditions may scare off investors or middle-class consumers who possess capital, which is antagonistic towards the state's goal (Horgan 2018). Therefore, displacing people experiencing houselessness is integral to the state's function.

The City of Toronto's ability to dispossess people experiencing homelessness' access to the city, is to portray them as non-citizens. In Toronto, the social categories of *taxpayer* and *citizen* have been mutually constitutive (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). Because the citizen-taxpayer category functions to exclude the "non-taxpaying other" who is "implicitly less entitled to protections and rights" (Rady and Sotomayor 2024, quoting Walsh 2018, 4). This framework is critical because it shapes why decision makers feel greater responsibility to city residents who pay taxes and are more civically active than those experiencing homelessness (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). Thus, unhoused people are denied the same access to city councilors, the mayor, or other city officials, compared to their housed counterparts (Rady and Sotomayor 2024).

Therefore, when it comes to policy solutions, unhoused people are seen as a problem to the city's value, rather than constituents in need of support (Rady and Sotomayor 2024).

Overall, the stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness leads to their dispossession by the state. Because of the feelings of insecurity and lack of safety they evoke in the middle class, the existence of people experiencing homelessness in public spaces produces negative territorial stigmatization. Their presence scares away potential investors and harms the images of gentrifying areas, inhibiting the state's goal of accumulating capital. Furthermore, the stigmatization of the unhoused leads to their lack of political representation in the city's decisions, making their marginalization either warranted, as viewed by the middle class, or simply irrelevant.

Social Regulation and Displacement

The stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness, and their lack of perceived citizenship, provides the means and the motive for the City of Toronto to displace and dispossess them. Most often, the City of Toronto utilizes by-laws and similar measures to displace people experiencing homelessness, especially where it is most intensified—in encampments (Rady and Sotomayor 2024; Martino et al. 2025; 2024). Threats by the state notwithstanding, encampments can be important sites of autonomy, dignity, and identity production for those who inhabit them (Yakubovich et al. 2025; Zwick et al. 2025; Boucher et al. 2022; Martin 2022; Cohen et al. 2019). Furthermore, encampments offer a sense of security and community for those experiencing homelessness, providing them with stable access to outreach workers and resources (Yakubovich et al. 2025; Zwick et al. 2025; Cohen et al. 2019). And because occupying public space is not itself a crime, the state is forced to criminalize behaviour adjacent to homelessness, manifesting in the use of nuisance laws and statutes criminalizing social disorder, making encampments illegal in all but name

(Martino et al. 2025; Rady and Sotomayor 2024; O'Grady et al. 2013).

One of the most prominent statutes used by the City of Toronto is the Trespass to Property Act, enabling municipal administrators to displace those whose conduct allegedly disturbs the quiet enjoyment of property (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). As nuisance complaints are inherently indeterminate as they are context-specific and tied to dominant discourses of acceptable conduct, they are inherently tied to stigmatization (Rady and Sotomayor 2024; Graziani et al. 2022). In one Toronto neighbourhood, when asked about their view of homelessness encampments, one housed neighbour was quoted to say, "There were over 100 tents in the park ... there's a lot of drinking, fighting, screaming. Just not really something I want to [deal with] around lunchtime (Laurie 2021, para. 10)." Thus, nuisance complaints are just one tool for the city to justify its dispossession of public space from those experiencing homelessness (Rady and Sotomayor 2024).

Targeting the criminalization of social disorder, the City of Toronto also utilizes legislation that targets specific actions related to vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, most prominently the Ontario Safe Streets Act (O'Grady et al. 2013). This act criminalizes specific actions of "disorderly/anti social behaviour," categorizing them into three offences, including panhandling, solicitation of an audience, and the unsafe disposal of needles, condoms, and glass (O'Grady et al. 2013, 542). This legislation renders people experiencing homelessness at risk of further penalties following the initial infraction, such as increased fines, warrants, and incarceration (Martino et al. 2024).

The criminalization of homelessness in Toronto is inherently tied to accumulation through dispossession, due to its temporal and spatial attributes (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). Both encampments and laws criminalizing nuisance and social disorder have existed for a long time (Rady and Sotomayor 2024; Flynn et al. 2022). However,

it is only recently that the City of Toronto has used those laws to displace encampments. Furthermore, the displacement of encampments is most prominent in areas undergoing gentrification (Rady and Sotomayor 2024). Thus, the city's discretion in using these laws points toward their motivations in doing so: to promote gentrification and accumulation through dispossession (Rady and Sotomayor 2024).

Therefore, criminalizing actions of social disorder—actions that are not inherently criminal yet are perceived by the public as a nuisance or harmful—is routinely used by the City of Toronto to dispossess people experiencing homelessness from the city they inhabit. This criminalization is temporally and spatially specific to areas experiencing gentrification, emphasizing how the displacement of those experiencing homelessness in public space is a direct result of the City of Toronto's goal of promoting capital and investment.

Summary and Discussion

Through analyzing the actions of Toronto's city government in the broader context of neoliberal governance, this paper examines the role of capital in the city's regulation of space. Examining the process of gentrification as something more than an economic and social phenomenon the active role of the state becomes more apparent. Governing according to neoliberal ideals, the City of Toronto must attract wealth towards itself to function, create jobs, and boost the local economy. In the aftermath of deindustrialization, this need for capital resulted in gentrification and accumulation through dispossession through the closing of rent gaps, in which the municipal government created profit opportunities for developers in disinvested land and thus, created value.

For gentrification to fully actualize, the city must present its public spaces as safe, culminating in the spatial sanitization of anything, or anyone, that would suggest otherwise. Thus, in the face of increased homelessness in visible spaces, the municipal government forcefully displaces encampments situated within public areas through the manipulation of existing ordinances and legislation. The criminalization of homelessness in Toronto's public spaces critically affects state-society relationships, specifically, the practice of urban citizenship and the question of who the city perceives as their constituents. Through prioritizing the accumulation of capital, the city demonstrates that those with capital, and thus those who own property, are considered citizens, and those who lack or cannot afford housing are considered nuisances. In conclusion, the example of the violent displacement of those experiencing homelessness in Toronto's gentrifying neighborhoods shows that a state that relies on the valuation of land will, if necessary, use force to create that value.

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