



Reflections on doing the work: City Life / Vida Urbana and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

City Life / Vida Urbana¹

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City Life/Vida Urbana is a grassroots community organization committed to fighting for racial, social and economic justice and gender equality by building working class power.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is a data-visualization, critical cartography, and multimedia storytelling collective documenting dispossession and resistance upon gentrifying landscapes.

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Abstract

In this collaborative reflection, members of City Life / Vida Urbana (based in Boston) and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City) describe more about their collectives and approaches to community-based and antiracist research, action, and knowledge production for housing justice in the US.

Keywords

Organizing, housing justice, gentrification, anti-displacement, anti-eviction

In this collaborative reflection, members of City Life / Vida Urbana of Boston and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City) describe more about our collectives and our approaches to community-based research in the United States. We write about how we each prioritize housing and racial justice in our knowledge production and how we use this to amplify our organizing work. We began this reflection after meeting at the Urban Activism Conference in Cambridge, MA

¹ Most of what is in this article was shared from existing internal CLVU documents.

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in 2019, in which City Life / Vida Urbana (CLVU) grounded conference participants in local housing struggles in Boston. CLVU also took conference participants on a walking tour of gentrification in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston where their office is located. On the walking tour CLVU members led participants through the neighborhood, pointing out new luxury and market rate developments being erected without community consent, and describing eviction struggles and the power of community organizing. Poignantly, we all explored a [traveling exhibition on histories of redlining in the US](#), on display in the lobby of their building.

In the reflection that follows, each group describes what undergirds our work and discusses their similarities and differences. Fundamentally both groups work from the ground up to fight racial dispossession in U.S. cities. What is interesting is how we come to this from different angles: while CLVU is a base-building organization, the AEMP produces maps, stories, and data to abet on-the-ground direct action groups in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City. In each of our approaches, our organizations are ultimately committed to knowledge production led by those on the frontlines of facing displacement in the context of the gentrification of U.S. cities. We hope that by talking about our work together in this piece, we can highlight how our different approaches to housing justice both fundamentally rest upon producing knowledge useful to those fighting for housing and racial justice.

What is City Life / Vida Urbana?

City Life works to build the Housing Justice Movement. Our special emphasis within that broad current is anti-displacement, anti-eviction organizing. We focus on building an anti-displacement movement for several reasons:

1. It is the front line of the housing crisis. It is the point where the drive for maximum real estate profit confronts tenant resistance to no-fault eviction.
2. Working class communities of color, who are directly targeted by the real estate industry, can be effectively organized through anti-displacement work to play a leading role in housing and other social justice movement struggles.
3. City Life's anti-capitalist orientation, our willingness to challenge market orthodoxy, and our commitment to an intersectional approach, make it possible for us to do this work. For the same reason, few organizations can do it.
4. Our political orientation helps create a new community of resistance, led by working class people of color, that attracts broad sections of the working class: students, homeowners, lawyers, activists from other movements and others drawn to 'do something' about the out of control housing crisis.
5. New leaders rapidly emerge from this community and are trained to become organizers. City Life's organizing intentionally is structured to develop leaders who come from our base and who have the skills to sustain radical base building and anti-displacement movement building over the long term.

Because City Life has done this work for 46 years, we have experience and resources. We have a committed paid staff and a large number of volunteer staff, most of whom come from City Life's base and have direct experience fighting for their homes. We are the oldest and the main anti-displacement group in the Boston metropolitan area. There are other groups which do great anti-displacement organizing in specific cities or neighborhoods, including the Chinese Progressive Association and the Chelsea Collaborative (both led by people of color). Community Development Corporations in Boston do some tenant organizing. During the pandemic, some left groups have started doing tenant organizing. We welcome groups that do this work that are based among and led by those most affected by the crisis: working class people of color.

What is the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project?

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP) is a counter-mapping, data visualization, and digital storytelling collective with active chapters in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, and Los Angeles. We produce maps, data analysis, films, tools, community events, murals, and text in order to embolden the work of housing and racial justice. All of the work we do is either in collaboration with community groups or in solidarity with housing movements. The AEMP is a collective. This means we are organized using a collective structure in which we collectively make decisions about what projects to take on, the direction these projects should take and the goals of the collective. This also means that we have no paid staff, are volunteer run. Sometimes we get funding to do some of our work and sometimes (more often) we do not. We have found that our structure allows us to avoid some of the problems of the "non-profit industrial complex," meaning that we are able to fluidly respond and engage in projects as we see fit, that we are not bound to grant funding institutions, and that we are able to be explicitly political and anti-capitalist in our orientation.

How do you produce knowledge and organizing in order to abet the work of housing justice?

City Life:

For many years City Life has struggled to oppose forced displacement. Real estate capitalism inevitably leads to displacement, and this has class, race, and gender effects.

Substantively, the law is against us. The law says that even large, corporate landlords can (1) evict without cause and (2) raise rents as much as they want.

Nevertheless, despite this bad law, we're pretty good at the fight against displacement. The hundreds of people who attend our meetings each month regularly win victories far beyond what they (or most social service agencies) think possible. The difference in outcomes between someone who finds our meetings and someone who does not is dramatic. Those who commit to our sword and shield model 'win.' Those who don't get evicted right away.

This is one reason we fought for the Jim Brooks Stabilization Act. If it had been approved by the state legislature, it would not have extended tenant rights. It would have allowed tenants to know about existing rights earlier in the eviction process. Sadly, this modest law was defeated at the Statehouse.

Given the success of the model, there are obvious questions. Hundreds find us, but thousands face eviction. Why don't more people find us? Why doesn't the word spread? Why don't more groups do this kind of work? Why don't groups who do housing search refer to City Life at the same time to try to prevent the eviction? Why do those who find us sometimes give in, settling with the owner for much less than they could have gotten?

Related to these questions is a more fundamental one. Why hasn't resistance to displacement spread virally? In the foreclosure crisis, why weren't hundreds of thousands nationally marching on Bank of America or Fannie Mae? In Boston's current displacement crisis, why do people faced with displacement usually move out? Why not use all your legal rights and resist?

A grievance is not enough to produce organizing.

Experiencing displacement does not on its own produce organizing. 'Oppression breeds resistance' may be true in the long run, in Martin Luther King's long arc of the universe, but oppression does not automatically lead to resistance right away.

Organizing requires two other elements – a sense of righteousness and a sense of capacity or power. You can't organize around your grievance if you think it was 'your fault,' or even if you think it was nobody's fault. You can't think about organizing if you don't think there is any possibility of 'winning.' Part of feeling capacity and power is having an understanding of strategy.

City Life documents have sometimes summed up these two elements with this shorthand:

1. There is a structural crisis of displacement.
2. That crisis is not our fault, certainly not the fault of working class people of color.
3. That crisis is the fault of people who are identifiable.
4. We have the capacity to defeat those people.

There are aspects of the displacement crisis that, if understood properly, lead to a strong sense of righteousness and an understanding of strategy.

"It's mine! I can do what I want with it." Who is the rightful owner?

Periodically, City Life conducts trainings with its members. We ask, 'How dare you think you have the right to not pay a rent increase put forward by the rightful owner of the property? You should be paying market rent!' The responses to this challenge are always interesting, and together we fashion a powerful indictment of how real estate capitalism works.

We start usually with the most basic premise. Who is the rightful owner of the property? Of course, legally, it's the holder of the deed. But we are looking at it morally. Viewed

morally, the people who paid the mortgage are the rightful owners. In any property where the owner doesn't live in the building, the interest and principal on the mortgage have been paid by the tenants. Over time, the tenants buy the building over and over again for a succession of landlords.

Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project aims to inform, empower, and activate communities impacted by housing inequity, displacement, and erasure. AEMP's work restores representational and analytical power to the communities most directly facing urban dispossession and is necessarily oriented towards housing justice. We produce work on contemporary cities that asks who gets to live where and under what conditions, these are questions of the distribution of recognition and resources, of our collective values, and of who has the power in our society to influence such decisions.

The AEMP was conceived of when a few housing activists sat down at the table at the San Francisco Tenants Union and thought that it might strengthen San Francisco and Oakland housing justice movements to produce maps of evictions, and to conduct analysis to determine top evictors. Some of us also were part of direct-action collectives, and hoped to utilize AEMP's data to coordinate actions against serial evictors, venture capitalists, and imbrications of speculative real estate and technocapitalist infrastructure. Our earliest maps documented where evictions transpired in San Francisco, and produced analysis regarding serial eviction and speculation, uncovering actors behind complex networks of investment and limited liability companies. Additionally, we correlated eviction concentrations with proximity to 'tech bus stops,' the depots of private transportation infrastructure used by Silicon Valley technology corporations. We also analyzed the racial, class, and gender dynamics of displacement, finding that disproportionately, poor and working-class communities of color, female-headed households, and people with disabilities face displacement in the Bay Area.

Significantly, the AEMP emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2013 during a moment now referred to as the dawn of the Tech Boom 2.0, or the moment following the late 1990s Dot Com Boom and 2008 foreclosure crisis, in which Silicon Valley and San Francisco technology corporations began constituting new forms of wealth throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. This boom, which many date as beginning in 2011, also inspired an array of real estate speculators, developers, and politicians to collectively launch a massive surge of evictions, rental increases, and market-rate and luxury development construction.

For instance, our "[Tech Bus Stop Eviction Map](#)," was created in response to public outrage and protests about the private luxury shuttles, colloquially known as the "Google buses" used by tech companies. Many San Francisco residents were angry that private tech companies were taking over the city's public transportation infrastructure by using the public bus stops, and many tenants suspected that the new luxury bus lines were also causing property speculation and thus inciting evictions. We substantiated this suspicion through [cartographic data analysis](#), finding that 69 percent of San Francisco's 'no-fault' evictions between 2011 and 2013 occurred within four blocks of private tech bus stops. Our mapping

was conducted in tandem with the ‘Google bus blockades’ direct actions, which we took part in organizing. These blockades drew attention to the connections between the private tech transportation infrastructure and evictions in the city, a connection that we also made visually accessible through mapping. Further, these maps were used by activists in City Hall hearings on regulating the buses.

This Tech Bus eviction map built on the first map the AEMP produced, our [Ellis Act Eviction Map](#), which shows the accumulation of Ellis Act Evictions in San Francisco since 1994. This map visualizes the alarming growth of Ellis Act Evictions, a type of no-fault eviction prevalent in rent controlled California cities. The Ellis Act is a California state law that permits landlords to ‘exit’ the rental market, evict tenants due to no fault of their own, and change the ‘use’ of the building—most often into ownership units (e.g. condos)—effectively destroying affordable rental housing. Our time-lapse map depicted Ellis Act evictions through a series of ‘explosions’ in which red dots erupt across the city, corresponding to the number of units evicted (as filed with the San Francisco Rent Board). Analyzing the data, one eviction at a time, and cross referencing it with Planning Department data and recorded real estate transactions, we calculated that Ellis Act evictions were increasingly being used by speculators to evict rent-controlled tenants and flip buildings. This analysis of the Ellis Act was then used in political campaigns designed to curb Ellis Act eviction-induced real estate speculation.

From the beginning, we, as a growing collective of organizers, artists, map-makers, researchers, and community members, have embraced an explicit antiracist, feminist and anti-capitalist orientation. In working to visualize and understand new entanglements of global capital, real estate, technocapitalism and political economy we aim to build analyses of the housing crisis that aid those fighting against it. Thus by counter-mapping we refer to a set of practices that make visible the sites of dispossession and resistance that are often elided by capitalist, colonial and liberal mapmaking practices. In our partnership with the Eviction Defense Collaborative, a San Francisco based non-profit legal clinic that provides legal representation to tenants who have received eviction notices, we mapped and analyzed their eviction and relocation data to produce data visualizations that showed how [Black and Latinx residents were more likely to be displaced in San Francisco than white residents](#).

Soon after the germination of our project, the San Francisco Anti-Displacement Coalition formed, and then the Bay Area-wide Regional Tenants Organizing Network – coalitions that we are active within. Recently we have formed new partnerships in Alameda, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties, and have even opened chapters in Los Angeles and New York City, always working alongside (rather than for) an array of partners. Based entirely upon volunteer efforts, our internal structure facilitates horizontality, internal leadership growth, skill-sharing, and anti-capitalist politics. In addition to producing maps and analysis of real estate driven displacement, we’ve grown to also produce narrative-based work. From our oral history project to our interactive murals and projections, from community power mapping to interactive video and projection work, the scope of our project is ever-expanding, yet always backed by our entanglement in activist spaces and solidarities. As we produce our work with numerous partners and within

coalitions, our pieces live within overlapping and diverse networks and spaces, from those of tenant organizing and direct-action collectives to those of policy and academia.

While maps are powerful narrative tools in their own right, they can never tell the whole story. They embody their own reductive view from above. In an effort to open the relationship between representer and represented and better center the lived experiences of those facing displacement in all of their intersectional contours, AEMP launched its Narratives of Displacement and Resistance (NDR) oral history project in 2015. The NDR's first archive of oral histories can be accessed through an online map that co-locates personal narratives against the geography of evictions in which they were produced, thus serving to link narrators' individual experiences of displacement and resistance to their larger social, political, and geographical context and while building solidarity and community-based power among project participants. Our storytelling and narrative work has since grown to include multiple videos, a call-the-wall mural in San Francisco's Clarion Alley, a zine of resistance stories, a community power map of Oakland, and narrative maps in San Francisco, Alameda, and Los Angeles counties, to name a few. All of this is based upon collaboration with on-the-ground community partners and other grassroots arts and tenant and housing rights organizations to ensure that we are incorporating, addressing, and supporting the issues that are most important to marginalized communities.

For example, AEMP's (Dis)location: Black Exodus is a multi-platform publication and public workshop series centered around the issue of local housing justice. The first chapter, *Black Exodus*, builds upon the AEMP's commitment to centering communities most impacted by issues of structural racism as the primary producers of social and historical knowledge. Activated by the unprecedented out-migration of Black San Franciscans from their historic neighborhoods, our aim with this project has been to foreground Black storytelling and art-making as well as focus on the struggles of Black people to live, thrive, and remain in San Francisco. Since launching, *Black Exodus* has employed a participatory arts-based approach, centering community members throughout the process including: community power mapping with residents of historically Black neighborhoods, photovoice; oral history interviews with Black residents; tenants' rights workshops; zine making with submissions from local Black artists; and short documentary films.

We have also been in the midst of producing our first-ever book, *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance* which will be published with PM Press this year. *Counterpoints* brings together cartography, essays, illustrations, poetry, and more in order to depict gentrification and resistance struggles from across the San Francisco Bay Area and act as a roadmap to counter-hegemonic knowledge making and activism. Compiled by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, each chapter reflects different frameworks for understanding the Bay Area's ongoing urban upheaval. The chapters include: Evictions and Root Shock, Indigenous Geographies, Health and Environmental Racism, State Violence and Gentrification, Transportation and Infrastructure, Migration and Relocation, and lastly, Speculation and Speculative futures. By weaving these themes together, *Counterpoints* expands normative urban-studies framings of gentrification to consider more complex, regional, historically grounded, and entangled horizons for understanding the present. Understanding

the tech boom and its effects means looking beyond San Francisco's urban borders to consider the region as a socially, economically, and politically interconnected whole and reckoning with the area's deep history of displacement, going back to its first moments of settler colonialism. *Counterpoints* combines work from within the project with contributions from community partners, from longtime community members who have been fighting multiple waves of racial dispossession to elementary school youth envisioning decolonial futures. In this way, *Counterpoints* is a collaborative, co-created atlas aimed at expanding knowledge on displacement and resistance in the Bay Area with, rather than for or about, those most impacted.

In 2019, members of the Los Angeles Tenants Union Northeast local teamed up with The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project to create a counter-narrative by and for tenants who are experiencing and resisting displacement. We seek to move beyond defining our neighbors by their eviction story, and more fully capture their experience of being a tenant in our community. We want to document how it feels to live in Los Angeles — the smell on your block, what it feels like to walk down the street, what it means to know neighbors. In essence, what it feels like to be part of the fabric of Los Angeles. Documenting these stories of power, resistance, and strength attempts to provide a whole story of displacement in Los Angeles, but most importantly to encapsulate what living and fighting to stay in our city feels like.

The L.A. AEMP chapter has also been collaborating with Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (B.H.A.A.A.D.) to map artwashing and displacement in Boyle Heights. This project is a compilation of maps, artifacts and narratives on galleries detailing the ongoing fight against artwashing and displacement in Boyle Heights, drawn from the archive of the B.H.A.A.A.D. We write this in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic with 491,000 households bracing to fight against potential evictions when L.A.'s moratoriums expire. The struggle for housing in L.A. will now face a wave of further pressure and speculation by city and private developers — no doubt some will once again use art and gallery space as their entry into working class neighborhoods.

Our New York City chapter, in partnership with the Right to Counsel and JustFix.nyc. has produced the Worst Evictors Map, which maps who the worst evictors are in the city and the evictions that they've filed. Our methodology for making the worst evictors list combined data analysis from publicly available data with on-the-ground knowledge. We found it important to use a variety of tools and strategies when generating this list, as an effort to make the most comprehensive survey of who is evicting New Yorkers, as well as to provide a list that would help and encourage New Yorkers to organize.

In response to COVID-19, all AEMP chapters came together to launch our COVID-19 Housing Map to provide renters and tenant organizers with crucial data tools to fight displacement locally and globally. Based upon crowdsourced data as well as ongoing research by AEMP members and partner organizations, the map consists of two main components: (1) a constantly updated map of housing protections on city, county, state, and national levels; and (2) a crowdsourced layer that documents housing justice actions, tenant associations, and rent strikes, including (forthcoming) audio and video interviews conducted with Tenants Together and Hope. We began crafting this map in March 2020 in the wake of COVID-19

and its dire impact on tenants. Since then, the project has become a full-time AEMP project, as we are constantly updating the map with new and expired policies, and will soon be adding language justice components, along with interviews.

Our Tenants Rise Up: Fighting for Housing Justice in the Bay Area 30-minute film, is a project produced with the Regional Tenant Organizing Network that weaves together three housing justice struggles in the Bay Area. It features stories of Black Panther Aunti Frances’ organizing against her own eviction in Oakland, community work against an impending Google campus in San Jose, and the fight for rent control in Santa Rosa. While the film was produced pre-Covid, we launched a community screening for it in November 2020, contextualizing how these movements helped lay the groundwork for current organizing to cancel rent and abolish the police.

The AEMP has also been working with the SF Anti-Displacement Coalition and the Mapping Action Collective in Portland to create Evictorbook, a look-up tool that allows tenants to look up addresses and landlord and determine who the evictor is and what other buildings they own and have evicted. We are also currently expanding Evictorbook to Oakland in collaboration with the Bay Area 4 All initiative and a number of community partners. We have created this landlord portfolio tool in part because it has become increasingly difficult to understand corporate evictor structures as since 2008, an increased number of landlords are investment companies operating through an array of obtuse sounding limited liability companies (LLCs) and limited partnerships (LPs). For instance, Veritas, San Francisco’s biggest and perhaps most abusive landlord, buys up buildings through individual LPs and then evicts and harrasses their tenants. Evictorbook allows tenants to determine the other buildings that Veritas owns, so that tenants can organize multi-building campaigns to help organize against evictions and harassment.

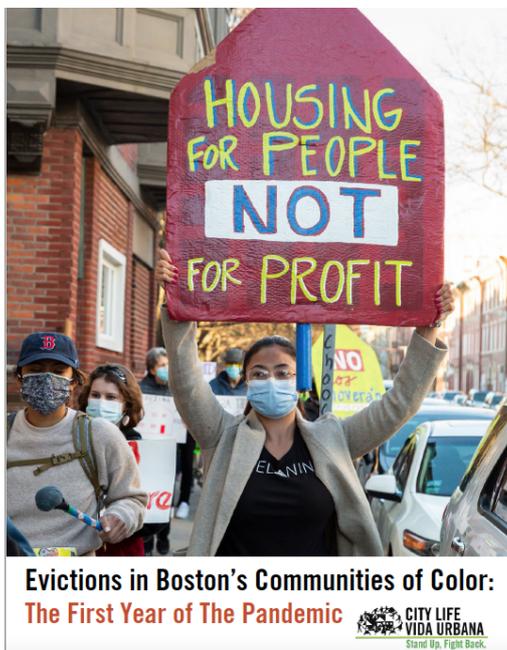


Figure 1

CLVU Report:
Evictions in Boston’s Communities of Color: The First Year of the Pandemic

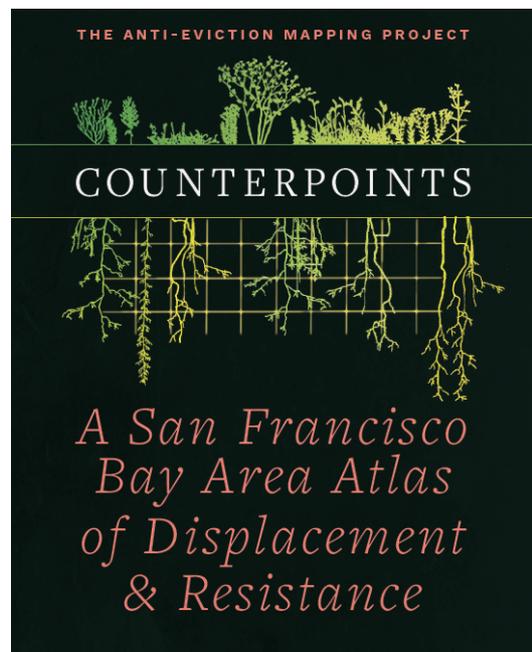


Figure 2

AEMP’s new atlas project:
Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement & Resistance

To this end, the AEMP, in collaboration with the AI Now Institute and [people.power.media](#), has also been creating knowledge around what we are defining as [landlord tech](#), or the platforms and systems and landlords and property managers use to surveil tenants, automate evictions, and augment real estate speculation practices. Our new website [Landlord Tech Watch](#) crowdsources landlord tech deployments and also offers a nomenclature of landlord tech according to tenant harms. As we have observed, landlord tech has only increased during COVID-19 as landlords [capitalize upon the pandemic](#) in order to install new surveillance systems in the name of ‘safety.’

Conclusion

In this piece, both groups have laid out how they use knowledge and organizing to fight displacement and build a broad-based anti-displacement movement. CLVU describes their ‘sword and shield’ model that they employ, a method that they have proven works even in the face of the ways in which the laws about eviction are unjust. AEMP has laid out its emphasis on doing analytic work that restores power to those most affected by urban displacement through data visualization, mapping and storytelling. What lessons for housing justice organizing can we collectively learn by thinking together and sharing our different histories and work? For us, what comes to mind first is the lesson that the structural crisis of urban housing displacement requires organizing that, in stopping evictions and racial dispossession also produces grounded tenant-driven knowledge to better understand our cities. This is just as important as ever as we face COVID-related eviction and rental debt crises.

About the authors

City Life/Vida Urbana is a grassroots community organization committed to fighting for racial, social and economic justice and gender equality by building working class power. We promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systemic change and transform society.

The **Anti-Eviction Mapping Project** is a data-visualization, critical cartography, and multimedia storytelling collective documenting dispossession and resistance upon gentrifying landscapes. Primarily working in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City, the volunteer-based collective produces digital maps, software and tools, narrative multimedia work, murals, reports, and community events. **Manissa Maharawal** is an assistant professor of anthropology at American University whose research focuses on the spatial and temporal dynamics of contemporary urban social movements in the United States, from Occupy Wall Street and anti-gentrification activism to Black Lives Matter. **Erin McElroy** is co-founder of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, and is also part of the *Radical Housing Journal*’s editorial collective. Erin’s research focuses on intersections of property, technology, race, housing, and empire, and is an incoming assistant professor of American studies at the University of Texas, Austin.