



# In defense of ‘Landlord’: Why the term ‘landlord’ continues to be essential to rental housing

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## **Abstract**

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In Ohio and California, legislators have proposed replacing the terms ‘landlord’ and ‘tenant’ in rental regulations. Landlords and landlord lobbyists argue that the feudal origins of the term don’t reflect the contemporary reality of renting. How seriously should tenant organizers, housing researchers and policymakers take these efforts to move on from ‘landlord’? While in their relative infancy, I argue that efforts to rebrand the term expand beyond name changes in organizations to media and legislation. They also seek to obfuscate and muddle what is increasingly one of the key social relations of survival, the landlord-tenant relationship, in order to preserve and expand landlord power and prevent or complicate increased regulation or oversight. To support this conclusion, this paper makes use of a key document analysis of a variety of published sources including proposed legislation, news articles and opinion pieces, and academic articles. Landlords’ (flawed) arguments for change, rest particularly on their claims that landlord-tenant relations are a transaction like any other in which landlords work to provide a simple service to consumers with free agency. I counter that, in fact, landlords and tenants are in an inherently antagonistic and unequal power relationship (Kerrigan & Wachsmuth, 2023), more akin to feudal relations than to the neutrality or even benevolence associated with alternative terms. As such, retaining ‘landlord’ remains essential; to discard it is to discard years of successful tenant organizing and campaigns that continue to highlight the exploitative relationship at the core of landlord-tenant relations to this day.

## **Keywords**

Landlord, tenant, housing provider, rent

## **Introduction: replacing the feudal terminology of landlord**

A recent opinion piece in the Columbus Dispatch, and a related piece of legislation proposed in the Ohio state legislature both make arguments for the abolishment of the term ‘landlord’, claiming that the replacement of feudal terminology would ‘reflect the real relationship between people who provide and who need housing’ (Valdez, 2021a). Working on behalf of the Ohio Real Estate Investors Association (OREIA), a landlord lobby group, Roger Valdez argues that ‘landlord’ and ‘tenant’ should be replaced in Ohio law with ‘housing provider’ and ‘resident’ respectively. Valdez’ argument rests on the idea that most landlords ‘are small family-owned businesses, not powerful land barons’ and that landlords ‘are people who work hard every day to serve their customers as housing providers, not impersonal, wealthy interests bent on eviction.’ Similarly, the California legislature passed a bill in amended form, which had originally called ‘to replace the term “landlord” with the term “lessor or lessor’s agent” and to replace the term “tenant” with “lessee”’, though in the end it only resulted in the formation of a study on the matter (AB 2503, 2022).

For landlords, the rebrand makes sense. Arun Pathak, representative of a Hamilton landlords’ group in Ontario, Canada was cited in a National Post article saying that ‘[landlord] just has a bad ring to it’ and that ‘the term landlord conjures an image...of a callous and wealthy man collecting checks each month and doing little else’. He then declared his group’s intention to have landlords henceforth be called ‘rental housing providers’ (Edminston & Faris, 2018). The Berkeley Property Owners Association in California goes even further, arguing on their website that ‘the continued use of the legal term “landlord” is a slander against our members and all rental owners’ (Berkeley Property Owners Association, 2023). In a 2021 article on the subject, writer Adam Johnson documents how landlords’ nomenclature preferences are expanding from their own personal branding to being adopted by ‘reporters, pundits and [news] editors’ across several different Chicago news agencies. In another similar article documenting some landlords’ push to rebrand, Bridget Read (2022) explains how one day while writing, Google Docs flagged ‘landlord’ as a term that might not be inclusive on her computer. Read speculates that the term may have been flagged because of its gendered nature, but goes on to document a series of individuals and landlord organizations pushing to euphemize the term.

Currently, there is a range of terms used by landlord lobby organizations that goes from using the word ‘landlord’ directly in the group’s name, to others like the Berkeley Property Owners Association explicitly equating the term ‘landlord’ to slander. Large or comparatively professionalized organizations using ‘landlord’ appear to be more common in the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (such as UK’s National Residential Landlords Association and British Columbia’s ‘Landlords BC’) compared to the US, where the largest organizations tend to use ‘Apartment Association’ (such as California Apartment Association), or ‘Multifamily Association’ (such as Arizona Multifamily Association). Ontario’s largest landlord lobby is called the Federation of Rental-Housing Providers of Ontario. Some landlord lobby groups get more creative such as New York City’s ‘Small Home Owners Association’ (which has no indication of ‘landlordism’ or rent anywhere in

the title). With the exception of ‘landlord’ appearing more commonly in lobby and association names outside the US, there do not appear to be any other distinct patterns.

There do however appear to be some efforts to rid ‘landlord’ from internal communications and generally push alternative terms within these lobby groups. The aforementioned case of Hamilton landlords requesting that the media and others (including themselves) use the term ‘rental housing provider’ is paralleled by the California Association of Realtors June 2023 replacement of ‘landlord’ with ‘housing provider’ on their forms (California Association of Realtors, 2023). Read (2022) identified the San Diego-based FBS Property Management, which ‘devotes an entire section of its website to encouraging owners to use *housing provider*.’ Further, Indiana landlords appear to be following the lead of neighboring Ohio and organizing to propose legislation to completely replace both ‘landlord’ and ‘tenant’ (Guy, 2021), though there is no actual evidence of proposed legislation or a formal lobbying effort.

How seriously should tenant organizers, housing researchers and policymakers take these efforts to shift the language of renting? Arguably, Valdez in Ohio and other ‘rental housing provider’ lobbyists and advocates in the rest of the English-speaking world have a point in that we are hundreds of years removed from the feudal origins of the term landlord. So, what then is the motivation behind this drive to change legal terminology in the early 2020s, and what are the potential ramifications of adopting different language? Focusing on the contemporary Anglo-American and private rental context, this paper will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the merits of arguments made by landlords and their proponents, as well as the ‘fit’ of various proposed alternatives to ‘landlord’, such as ‘rental housing provider’ or ‘investor’. To do so, this paper relies on a key document analysis of published work regarding the term ‘landlord’ and potential replacements, including proposed legislation, opinion pieces, newspaper articles, landlord association websites, landlord investment resources (including online forums and landlord ‘influencer’ websites) and academic articles. I noted the arguments being made to jettison the term ‘landlord’ as well as those in favor of proposed alternatives and the assumptions they relied on to illuminate the discursive construction of ‘landlord’ and the contention around its contemporary meaning. This paper is part of a broader research project on ‘Rethinking the Landlord’ that in addition to key document analysis, involved a discourse analysis of the media portrayal of landlords and tenants (Kerrigan, 2022) and 50 semi-structured interviews with landlords, housing organizers and key housing policy actors (including real estate professionals, planners, legislators, and non-profit employees).

Ultimately, this paper concludes we should take seriously efforts to rebrand landlords as their consequences go beyond name changes for landlord lobby organizations, and permeate into the mainstream media and legislation. These changes seek to further obfuscate and muddle what is increasingly one of the key social relations of survival, the landlord-tenant relationship, to preserve and expand landlord power and prevent or complicate increased regulation or oversight. The ‘landlord’ label thus remains an essential term.

To support this argument, the paper first explores potential reasons landlords have only recently begun legislative efforts to change the term in light of long-standing stigmatization,

noting the potential partial explanations of the expansion of those engaging in landlordism, the visibility of landlord-tenant conflict and the pervasive discussion of the housing ‘crisis’. The following section evaluates the extent of the legislative efforts to get rid of the term landlord, and the potential stakes of doing so, using the examples of regulatory evasion in other industries to do so. Moving on, the ‘Arguments to get rid of landlord’ section analyzes landlords’ (flawed) arguments for change, particularly their claims that landlord-tenant relations are a transaction like any other in which landlords—unlike feudal lords—work to provide a simple service to consumers with free agency. I counter that in fact, landlords and tenants are inherently in an antagonistic and unequal power relationship (Kerrigan & Wachsmuth, 2023), more akin to feudal relations than to the neutrality or even benevolence associated with alternative terms. Finally, the paper moves on to a discussion of how the exploitative relationship represented by the term ‘landlord’ facilitates tenant organizing, popular understandings of what landlords do and their underlying social relationship to tenants. Accordingly, it is important to maintain the use of the term.

***Why and why now? The stigmatization of ‘landlord’ and contemporary characteristics of private renting***

In popular media the landlord is a figure that has long been stigmatized. ‘Slumlord,’ a pejorative derivative, in formal use since at least the early 1970s (see Sternlieb & Burchell, 1973) and likely informally for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still commonly used (for recent examples see Ortiz, 2022 and Kenoyer, 2022). The 70s and 80s punk band The Dead Kennedys wrote and performed a song called ‘Let’s lynch the landlord’. And writing from the UK context, Allan & McDowell argued in their 1989 book titled ‘Landlords and property: social relations in the private rented sector’ that the most common image of the landlord at the time was that of a type of ‘folk devil’. A contemporary commentary in *The Guardian* labeled landlords as ‘social parasites’ and suggested that “giving them [landlords] a prize is like giving Stalin a humanitarian award” (Samadder, 2018) while another opinion piece in the online publication *Vice* was titled ‘Landlords are a Scum Class’ (Golby, 2023).

In another sphere of public discourse, graffiti often makes local antagonism towards landlords visible as well. The side of one Montreal building simply declares ‘Landlords = Scum’, while another more commonly seen tag urges readers to ‘Eat yr landlord’ (see figures 1 and 2). And of course, these sentiments have an online presence as well. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Montrealers took to Facebook marketplace to mock landlords as they moved their bunkbed and pool table filled short-term rentals back to the long-term market (Seltz, 2020). Another example is an entire subreddit of 80,000 subscribers ironically named ‘LandlordLove’, which serves as a repository for anti-landlord memes, images, and stories. It makes sense that many landlords would seek to evade such associations, especially when these conceptions contrast so strongly with landlords’ own self-image as good, hardworking individuals (Stratton, 2016), or increasingly as savvy and deserving investors paving the way for anyone to get rich.



**Figures 1 & 2**

*Left:* A covered window in Montreal with LANDLORDS = SCUM written on it.

*Right:* A door in a Montreal alley with EAT YR LANDLORD written on it.

If ‘landlord’ and the closely related term ‘slumlord’ have for so long carried stigma, why is a movement to change the regulatory and popular terminology emerging now? While it is difficult to identify the exact reasons and their causality, three partial explanations may factor into this recent shift. First is the prevalence of ‘small’ investors and their portrayal as the protagonists of the private rental system (Hulse et al., 2020). Research has documented the rise of ‘buy-to-let’ landlordism, typically associated with an increasing number of ‘private’ or ‘small’ investors buying property explicitly to rent to others including in the United Kingdom (Ronald & Kadi, 2018), Canada (Gold, 2022; Dingman, 2022) and Australia (Hulse et al., 2020). At least before the increase in interest rates beginning in March 2022, this growth of ‘small’ landlords appeared to be occurring concurrently (though likely more slowly) than the documented growth of large real estate investment trusts, or REITs, and major institutional landlords (August, 2020; Fields, 2022; JCHS, 2022). An important caveat to this information is the importance of noting differences across Anglo-American census categories, the generally low quality of ownership data, and in the US the differentiation between individual investors and non-individual investors, which includes LLCs who are often also individual investors (JCHS, 2022).

New platforms in the US such as Roofstock facilitate small-scale investment by individuals in single family home rentals. Others have entered the rental market renting to tourists and short-term guests via platforms such as Airbnb and VBRO. While landlordism has a long-standing association with securing income for retirement, the perception of landlordism (in both its short- and long-term orientation) as the avenue for ‘middle-class’ people to escape declining real wages and secure extra income for retirement may be increasing in importance. The proliferation of platform-facilitated forms of investment (such as Airbnb and Roofstock) has likely decreased barriers to entry for those trying to generate income from residential property. As such, landlordism may be seen by individuals partaking

in it as a necessary burden, leading to resentment surrounding stigmatization and contributing to the construction of a broader and more sympathetic image, especially among middle- and upper-middle class individuals likely to have landlords as peers, family members and friends.

The second factor that might be driving increased resentment of the stigmatization of the term ‘landlord’, and emboldened moves to exchange the term for others, is the increasing visibility of tenant organizing and landlord-tenant conflicts. During the Covid-2019 pandemic the need for housing as crucial for survival was brought to the forefront. Some governments reacted with eviction ‘moratoria’ and rent freezes, and while these were mostly partial and with significant loopholes, they still restrained landlords’ control over their property to varying degrees, and thus potentially threatened their financial stability.

Of course, these tensions predate the Covid-19 pandemic as well. When landlords in Hamilton, Ontario declared themselves ‘rental property owners’ instead of ‘landlords’ in 2018, they explicitly mentioned the increase in tension from tenant organizing and rent strikes as part of the motivation for their decision (Edminston & Faris, 2018). Further, while tenant organizing in the Anglo-American context has a long history, it is an increasingly visible and powerful force, including in jurisdictions typically associated with homeownership (Tapp, 2019). The Los Angeles Tenant Union, the Valley Tenants Union (based in Maricopa County), Ireland’s Community Action Tenants Union and Tenants Victoria (Australia) are among tenant groups that have used tactics including naming and shaming landlords, community eviction prevention (which can and has led to physical confrontation) and protesting at landlords’ personal homes. Tenants unions have sprung up or becoming increasingly visible in smaller communities as well, such as the Nelson Tenants Union, for example, in a smaller city of approximately 10,000 people in British Columbia in Canada’s remote interior. Through building-level organizations as well as tenants unions (including York South-Weston Tenant Union) and militant community organizations (Parkdale Organize!), tenants in Toronto have launched rent strikes to prevent evictions, substandard conditions, and significant rent increases (Vallis, 2023; Webber & Doherty, 2021). This is all without mentioning the multitude and long history of organized and militant tenant groups outside of the Anglo-American context.

As such, being a landlord these days can come with increased risks and challenges in terms of public exposure and stigma. Social media as well as online forums and networks have made some of this animosity more visible, and perhaps even allowed it to be amplified in ways simple street graffiti cannot. It makes sense then why some landlords may be concerned about the potential damage to their personal reputations and businesses when there are examples such as the backlash towards HGTV’s Tarek El-Moussaa or the coverage of Brooklyn’s ‘eco-yogi slumlords’ (Read, 2020). The argument that increased ‘social shaming’ is scaring off ‘mom-and-pop investors’ is explicitly made by a self-styled ‘property coach’ who argues on Good Returns, a New Zealand based financial adviser news centre, that ‘what amounts to public shaming of property investors –most of them single investment owning, hard-working Kiwis—and the almost punitive-like legislation they have to bear

creates a social environment that makes people nervous about how they may be perceived' (Lindsay, 2023).

Finally, pervasive media discussions around the housing crisis represent the third possible factor driving today's preoccupation among landlords and their proponents to push for their rebranding. In recent years, homeownership rates have stagnated or declined across the Anglo-American sphere and the high costs of housing, and in particular the drawbacks of renting, become a middle-income household concern. Frustration and blame have over the last few years been primarily directed towards institutional or 'large' landlords, with many articles either 1) focusing on institutional or 'Wall Street' landlords and their negative impacts (for examples see Mari, 2020; Luck et al., 2022) or 2) making commentary on single-family home rental buyers crowding out would-be homeowners (Eason & Perry, 2023). These institutional or 'Wall Street' landlords tend to be harder to defend, and for a moment in the summer of 2023 it even looked like the US federal government would pass a tenant bill of rights. Naturally, landlords and their lobby organizations fear new policies that protect tenants from the worst excesses of the private rental market, such as rent control. In this context, shifting from the well-known and negative associations of 'landlord' serves to obfuscate the active strategies of so many landlords, that result in material harm to tenants and work to avoid being associated with the worst aspects of the ongoing housing crisis.

It is important to note that evidence from the Canadian and Australian contexts suggests that contemporary media portrayals of landlords are mixed, as I demonstrated in earlier research (Kerrigan, 2022) there is a prevalence of portrayals of the landlord as a valorized 'rational' figure strictly responding to broader economic trends (and therefore largely without responsibility) in addition to less common portrayals of landlords as exploitative and even as 'victims' of tenants or rental regulations. Hulse et al. (2020) go further to showcase a common 'mum-and-dad' image of landlords as 'essential housing providers.' Further, Canada's national broadcaster has run a series of positive articles, largely devoted to the negative consequences for landlords who are unable to evict their tenants in a timely manner (see Hwang, 2022; McInnes, 2022). Therefore, while negative portrayals of landlords are present, they are not ubiquitous, and as shown in this section, they are longstanding. Instead, it is important to understand other trends in contemporary landlordism that may be driving the shift, including the expansion and proliferation of landlordism among middle-class households, landlord-tenant conflict and the pervasive discussion of the housing crisis.

### ***Extent, reach and stakes of rebranding 'landlord' in public discourse***

As noted previously, both the Ohio and California state legislatures have proposed replacing 'landlord' and 'tenant' since 2020. At the time of writing, it appears that no other states have proposed similar measures. Despite their forceful rhetoric, neither initiative specifically points to the stakes of the issue beyond 'more accurately' naming the landlord-tenant relationship. The legislation in California, proposed by a Democratic Party politician, argues that 'in 2022, nearly a millennium after King William's proclamation, the most progressive state in the United States of America continues to use the terms "landlord" and

“tenant” to describe the legal parties to a rental agreement. The time is now that these archaic and medieval terms are put back in the very distant past where they belong’ (AB 2503, 2022). Similarly, the primary justification put forward by Valdez (2021a) is that the terms no longer ‘fit’. Despite this, in their backgrounder on the proposed SB 272 Ohio’s Legislative Service Commission suggests that it “makes no substantive changes to the law” (Little, 2021, p. 1). So, then, what are the stakes? Is it simply a move towards more accurate, updated terms?

What both the proponents proposing to replace the term ‘landlord’ and I agree on is that how we discuss the landlord-tenant relationship matters. The landlord-tenant relationship is associated with certain rights and responsibilities that both parties take on. What proponents neglect to highlight is that letting the term ‘landlord’ fall into disuse enables an invisibilization of the responsibilities and foundational relations between the two parties, as well as the explicit power differential between them. Three salient examples of the impacts of rebranding can be seen in new terms facilitated by the rise of platform capitalism following the great financial crisis of 2008: namely gig workers as contractors instead of employees; short-term rental operators as ‘home-sharers’ instead of landlords or hoteliers; and the existing sympathetic categorizations of landlords via common tropes such as ‘mom-and-pop’.

Labelling and regulating gig workers as contractors instead of employees has had significant detrimental effects influencing material outcomes for these workers. As Ravenelle (2019, p. 36) notes, classifying ‘employees’ as ‘contractors’ is a phenomenon driven by an employer’s desire to avoid responsibilities like workers’ compensation, overtime, and disability accommodation’ and involves a transfer of risk from employer to employee. Increasingly codified into law, this rhetorical manoeuvre has allowed companies like Uber to portray a long-standing profession (taxi driver) as something ‘new’ that should therefore not be subject to existing rules and regulations, particularly in terms of workers’ rights. The rebranding of ‘employee’ as ‘contractor’ further tilts the scale of the power dynamic between employer and employee, facilitating materially worse and more precarious conditions for the employee. To support the argument that ‘contractors’ represent a different category, Uber and other companies have frequently noted that as contractors their workers benefit from increased flexibility in their hours, as they are able to make money in their spare time, and that they will ultimately be harmed by regulatory efforts. The replacement of ‘employee’ with ‘contractor’ is not limited to gig workers though; other industries have also reclassified employees as ‘independent contractors’, a practice particularly common among ‘sharing economy’ companies because of the close association between contractors and innovation, rather than exploitation.

More specifically related to the housing sector, it is also interesting to note how short-term rental operators are typically referred to as ‘hosts’ or most sympathetically as ‘home-sharers’ on platforms such as Airbnb. While true ‘home-sharers’, i.e. those occasionally renting a room in their private residence, may have been more prevalent early on in Airbnb’s history, the platform is increasingly dominated by relatively sophisticated commercial operators who act far more like hoteliers, managing numerous units, dynamically pricing and standardizing units. As much recent research shows, these operators also represent



increasing percentages of revenue earned and nights stayed (Combs et al., 2021; Cocola-Gant et al., 2021; Belot et al., 2023). Despite this, the sector remains underregulated compared to the long-term rental sector, the primary alternative potential use of these housing units (Belot et al., 2023).

While it is difficult to make causal arguments between this under-regulation and the label ‘home-sharer’ as opposed to ‘landlord’, the terms ‘host’ and ‘home-sharer’ remain key rhetorical tools deployed by short-term rental (STR) platforms and operators’ lobbyists. Particularly in the early years of Airbnb, this created a popular sympathetic image of the platform as innovative and beneficial to both individual ‘hosts’ and cities writ large. Importantly, the label ‘home-sharer’ foments the idea that STR operators are something different and new, and therefore should be subject to different rules and regulations than hoteliers or landlords.

Landlords characterized sympathetically with a ‘mom-and-pop’ prefix seem to be increasingly prevalent, and it is common to see the term used both in academic contexts and in the media (Hulse et al., 2020; Johnson & Shirazi 2021). This contrasts with initial research into the history of the term that found it glaringly absent from major historical landlord-tenant studies including Allen & McDowell (1989), Sternlieb & Burchell (1973), Krohn et al. (1977), and even studies unabashedly sympathetic to landlords (see Lehrer 1990). Furthermore, one of Canada’s major daily newspapers recently began using the bizarre term ‘artisanal’ landlord unironically (Dingman, 2022; Gold, 2022). Typically, these qualifiers for the term ‘landlord’ are used to differentiate categories of landlords, and often in sympathy-inducing ways. Media outlets and landlord advocates often combine ‘mom-and-pop’ or ‘small’ with ‘landlord’ to put the class’s most sympathetic members at the forefront of the discussion in their efforts to challenge reforms to landlord-tenant law (see Cuozzo, 2023; Moorcraft, 2023).

Accordingly, the similarity between all three cases is that a term which carries material and historical meaning (‘employee’, ‘hotelier’, ‘landlord’) is substituted or qualified in a way that allows the discursive construction of a sympathetic group (‘gig worker’, ‘home-sharer’, ‘mom-and-pop’), which in turn foments the reduction of regulatory oversight. Of course, and importantly, a lack of regulatory reform benefits not just these ‘sympathetic’ members but the broader category. Platform economy companies such as Uber and Airbnb have shrewdly managed to shut out most of the historic members of their occupational categories (taxi companies and landlords, hotels or traditional bed-and-breakfasts respectively), which has been an essential component of their business models. While Uber and Airbnb manage to cloak themselves in ideas of innovation and disruption to cut out traditional members of their respective categories, the ‘mom-and-pop’ landlord tends to benefit the historic category of ‘landlords’ as a whole.

In their article ‘In Defense of *the* Landlord’, Yamen et al (2020) showcase (perhaps unintentionally) the potential regulatory stakes of rebranding the term ‘landlord’. Similarly, to Uber and Airbnb, Yamen et al (2020) use the rhetorical maneuver of highlighting a sympathetic member of a class to argue for reduced regulation for the whole class. Simultaneously Yamen et al. (2020) invoke the figure of the ‘mom-and-pop’ or ‘small’

landlord and highlight stories of tenant nonpayment and landlord hardship. They go on to use these stories to make the argument that the term ‘landlord’ should be replaced with ‘property owner’, and that landlords should be treated like any other kind of property owner. The authors define property ownership as ‘the right to possess, use and dispose of it’ (Yamen, et al, 2020, p. 289), and emphasize a narrow idea of property as the right to exclude. This limited definition of property ownership suggests a changed legal and regulatory context that jettisons the responsibilities of landlordism for the comparatively simple restrictions of property ownership more broadly. The remainder of their article challenges the legal basis of any restrictions to property owners’ capacity to fully realize profit, such as rent control provisions or restrictions on repossession that are present in some US jurisdictions. It seems unlikely (though not impossible) that Californian and Ohioan landlords, for example, would spend money and political capital on a narrow rebranding to adopt a more ‘inclusive’ alternative to landlord (for example a gender-neutral variant such as ‘landliege’), given their local legislative contexts. While trying to avoid the stigma associated with the term ‘landlord’ is likely part of the story, this section has shown that changing terminology can be part of a strategy to evade existing regulations and contest or diminish the potential of new ones.

As will be discussed more fully in the following section, a wholesale legal rebrand to ‘rental housing provider’ or even ‘owner’ or ‘lessor’ has concrete drawbacks for tenant struggles, notably being a less accurate descriptor of landlords and the landlord-tenant relationship. This serves to further obscure existing understandings of the social relations involved in renting, and creates a discourse more sympathetic to landlords by adopting a term that connotes neutrality or even remits to the idea of non-profit housing providers. As was mentioned earlier, as homeownership rates stagnate in the Anglo-American context, renting is increasingly important to a wider segment of the population, and these slippages around terminology have real implications for regulation, study and organizing in the private rental sector. The remainder of this paper presents first an analysis of why the term ‘landlord’ remains well-suited despite its feudal origins (though not without conceptual issues), followed by an evaluation of alternative terms, and finally a discussion of the term’s relevance to contemporary housing and tenant organizing today.

### **The arguments to get rid of ‘landlord’ and why class and feudalism remain essential to understanding contemporary landlord-tenant relations**

‘Landlord’ is a term with powerful historical and discursive connotations that remains best suited to describe those who control and own residential property for rental income. Contrary to what those wishing to change the term argue, the word ‘landlord’ best captures the distinctly antagonistic form of relational class power, the origins of this power (control over land), and the specific form of work (asset sweating) that landlords perform. Asset sweating refers to maximizing returns on existing assets via minimizing expenditures instead of reinvestment, as described by Christophers (2020) and is a term broadly used with regards to investment and asset acquisition strategies. Following Kerrigan & Wachsmuth (2023) this paper defines landlord relationally as the class of actors who exist in an interdependent, antagonistic and exploitative relationship with tenants over the control of the means of social

reproduction. In the following sections I contest key aspects of the arguments put forth to change the term landlord, by arguing for the continued relevance of the feudal origins of the landlord concept, the ongoing extra economic and economic power conveyed to landlords by control over land, and to understand that landlords do not do work beyond ‘asset sweating.’

### ***The class power of landlords over their tenants and the unity of the landlord class***

As previously noted, ‘landlord’ is a term that carries historical weight from its feudal origins. Under feudalism, landlords’ power was primarily based on their judicial relationship (typically via inheritance or royal decree) to land, giving them the ‘right’ (related to ownership) and ability to extract a surplus from serfs and tenants (Massey & Catalano, 1978). This surplus was extracted via rent, of which the simplest form was labour rent (Massey & Catalano, 1978).

In England over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, landlords shifted from using ‘extra-economic’ means (most notably direct violence) to extract a greater surplus, to more specifically orienting their land holdings for profit and accumulation due to market pressure (Wood, 2017). During this period, landlords moved to eliminate overlapping use rights and instead relied on wage labour and economic leases, thereby altering the feudal landlord-tenant relationship (Wood, 2017). Tenants effectively became restructured as a wage-earning class, losing direct control over the means of their social reproduction via the disappearance of use-rights to land, yet many direct and indirect powers claimed by landlords remained. Accordingly, the landlord-tenant relationship began to take on a more familiar context, with non-owners increasingly limited in their ‘rights’ to land and dependent on wages to secure access.

While the application of adjectives such as greedy, unfeeling and evil to individual landlords is of course debatable, what remains true is that the central aspect of the landlord-tenant relationship is built on the exploitation of tenants by landlords for monetary benefits (Kerrigan & Wachsmuth, 2023). As Kerrigan & Wachsmuth (2023) argue, the landlord-tenant dynamic can be seen as a class relation similar to that of capitalist and worker or lord and serf, all of which are characterized by the exploitation of one group by the other, the antagonism of opposing interests, and mutual dependence between the parties.

Given the traditional emphasis on private property rights in capitalist countries, this class power is conferred by the State, giving landlords significant power to control the lives of their tenants, not unlike the case of lords and serfs in feudal Europe. The comparative media valorization of landlords’ (legal) right to profit and govern their property as opposed to tenants’ (philosophical or moral) right to housing (Kerrigan, 2022) can be seen in the legal structuring of this relationship. In many jurisdictions landlords have a legal basis to implement clauses forbidding guests, pets, and requiring onerous upfront deposits. And in cases where landlords can and do wield additional power, albeit technically or fully illegal, they do so often with implicit state support or limited repercussions. One example is the expansion of property technology (‘prop tech’), which landlords can and do use to monitor

tenants' comings and goings and even lock them out of their homes. In some extreme cases that have been documented, landlords use their relative power to demand sexual services (Tester, 2008; Aviles, 2020; Zraick, 2021).

Most jurisdictions across Anglo-American countries allow landlords to terminate tenancies without cause including in Australia, New Zealand, most of the United Kingdom and the United States, and some Canadian provinces (Martin et al., 2018). Even in cities, provinces and states with stronger tenant protections, landlords are typically able to repossess units 'for own use' or, as in California, if they simply want to leave the business of land-lording through what is known as the Ellis Act (Maharawl & McElroy, 2018). The power to control another's shelter is immense; it can be and often is employed for financial gain, but also in arbitrary and retaliatory ways.

The coherence of the landlord class is invertedly recognized by proponents of changing the term 'landlord.' Both legislative proposals, as well as Valdez (2021a), Yamen et al (2021) and Tsai (2023) argue that the term landlord should be changed for all landlords. This argument for undifferentiated change of terminology is despite key aspects of Valdez (2021a), Yamen et al. (2021) and Tsai (2023)'s arguments to change the term resting on a differentiation of 'small' or 'mom-and-pop' landlords from other landlords. This lack of classification or regulatory differentiation reflects the reality outlined in Kerrigan & Wachsmuth (2023) that the landlord-tenant relationship primarily remains a class-based relation where the fundamental class structure is landlord and tenant instead of any intra class dividing categories (for example 'small' vs. corporate landlords). While some interclass conflicts and differences may exist, landlords are overwhelmingly and collectively motivated to maximize financial returns and control over their properties.

### ***Landlords – lords over land***

When landlords and their proponents argue they are not like the landlords of old, they tend to be referencing the feudal and agricultural origins of the term. For examples of this argument see the initial text of California's AB 2503, Yamen et al. (2020) or Lehrer (1990). Typically, this argument conjures images of estate homes like those from *Downton Abbey*, or going even further back, historical images of nobles with serfs and indentured farmers. It is reasonable to infer that the bungalow down the street or the low-rise apartment complex downtown are very different contexts. As such, proponents of replacing 'landlord' tend to abstract away the unique aspects of property ownership and rent relations, portraying landlords and tenants as entering into a simple commercial transaction, like buying and selling a slice of pizza. For example, the original proposed text of California's AB 2503 (26)(f) argued that 'a rental agreement is a contract for tenancy by which one person provides a service to another person.' This is intentional, as both Yamen et al. (2020) and Lehrer (1990) start by pointing out that the landlord-tenant relation is not the same as under the feudal mode of production, and then claim that therefore landlords should no longer be subject to regulations such as rent control.

In his examination of the turn toward a rentier (here referring to ‘an economic actor who receives [...] rent *purely by virtue of controlling something valuable*’ p. xvi) economy in the United Kingdom, Brett Christophers argues explicitly that because of vast increases in the value of land (rather than the physical structure) of residential property, ‘the label “landlord” [is] more and more appropriate as time goes by’ (Christophers, 2020, p. 332). The source of landlord rent therefore is not as much in the structure, whose impact is small, but in the fact that they control access to a piece of land. For example, in the UK context Christophers (2020, p. 331) notes that for renters a century ago ‘the asset they were paying to let was almost exclusively the house itself’, whereas as of 2020 the land underneath represented approximately 70% of the asset’s total value. While the statistical categories have changed, the importance of land rentiers has only continued to increase (Christophers, 2020). As such, it is truly through the control of land that landlords are able to derive their income. Being ‘the lord of the land’, so to speak, gives them the power to extract wealth.

Even in contexts where land is comparatively cheap, property ownership conveys material benefits and privileges in society more broadly, not unlike the social dynamics between lords and serfs in feudal times. Originally property ownership was tied directly to ones’ ‘full citizenship’ including, but not limited to, voting rights across much of the Anglo-American sphere (Blomley, 2004; Krueckeberg, 2013; Perin, 1977). While no longer formally connected, property ownership remains linked to ideas of full citizenship and participation in one’s neighborhood, and relates to a material bundle of power promoted and protected by the State. As Blomley (2004, p. 89) writes: ‘It follows, then, that those who do not own property (or, more importantly, those who are imagined as nonowners) are not only incomplete citizens, but partial or deformed subjects.’

Explicitly argued by Valdez (2021b) in a business publication opinion piece, and based on their focus on feudal social relations, landlords and their proponents would likely argue that unlike the serf, the tenant in this contemporary scenario has the freedom to choose a different house or apartment to rent in their city, or to ‘transcend’ their renter status by purchasing a home. Such an image plays into normative associations of renting as a transitory and temporally bounded ‘wacky time of life’ on the ladder to property ownership (McElroy, 2019; Forrest & Hirayama, 2015; Perin, 1977). What this temporal portrayal of renting neglects to note is the increasing difficulty for many to afford to purchase housing at any point in their lives, and the lack of alternatives (such as public housing) which forces them to remain reliant on private landlords or risk becoming homeless, a literal threat to survival. The true freedom of course rests with landlords, who can simply sell their residential property and invest their money elsewhere. In this way, drawing the comparison to feudal peasants, today’s tenants are largely dependent on landlords for the means to socially reproduce themselves as a class (Kerrigan & Wachsmuth, 2023), or in other words, to survive. Passing from one tenancy situation to the next does little to change the underlying relation of exploitation and domination that characterizes landlords and tenants.

This imaginary that presents renters as transitory non-subjects and landlords as valorized property-owning actors reflects the political conditions across the majority of Anglo-American countries. Landlords are portrayed as rational actors by popular media

(Kerrigan, 2022) and tend to be treated deferentially by politicians across the mainstream political spectrum.

### **Landlord – lack of work**

Pointing to landlords' 'passive income' and lack of work isn't a new phenomenon. Brett Christophers quotes classical economist and philosopher Stuart Mill, pointing out that 'landowners, become enriched simply through the "ordinary progress of a society...independently of any trouble or outlay incurred by themselves. They grow richer, as it were, in their sleep, without working, risking or economizing. What claim have they, on the general principle of social justice, to this accession of riches?"' (2020, p. 350). Similarly, classical economist Adam Smith argued that 'as soon as the land of any country has all become private property, the landlords—like all other men—love to reap where they never sowed, and demand a rent even for their land's natural product' (1976, p. 67).

While Valdez and other landlord proponents publicly argue that being a landlord is in fact work, in order to explicitly differentiate themselves from 'lords' of the feudal era, one of the phrases most closely associated with 'property investment' or 'housing hacking' – typically referring to a situation where the landlord lives on site and has their housing costs paid for by the tenant – is 'passive income'. For example, a CNBC headline about a young landlord states: 'This 32-year-old grosses \$431,000 a year from his real estate investments – while traveling and living in a converted van' (Alabaum, 2022), and goes on to quote the landlord saying: 'After paying my mortgages, property taxes, property management and maintenance fees, I earn about \$6,000 per month in passive income from my real estate portfolio [...] The main goal of my real estate portfolio is to become 100% financially independent, or to cover all my expenses *without working*, even with future expenses taken into account [emphasis added].' Similarly, Lady Landlords, a social media community that the founder morphed into a landlord influencer marketing platform, combines 'girl boss' rhetoric and promises of financial independence and advice on 'how you can manage your properties while sipping Margaritas [sic] in Bali' (Nova, 2023). Like Nova, Alabaum's account is tied to a marketing campaign, in the case of Alabaum specifically for Roofstock, which is a platform/website that facilitates property investment. The pitch to own rental property as a means to accumulate 'passive income' is a mainstay in promotional and real estate literature more broadly. Homes are advertised as 'turn-key' investment properties (suggesting the only work needed to be done to get them ready for renting is 'turning the key'). Landlords are explicitly talking out of both sides of their mouths depending on their intended audience, either arguing what they do is hard work deserving of recognition or positioning landlordism as a way to cease having to work altogether.

This speaks to the type of work landlords are now conceptualized as doing, both by themselves and more broadly by policymakers and regulators. In an earlier analysis of discursive constructions of landlords, I found that landlords were not in fact commonly associated with blue-collar labor, such as repairing or building, as had often been described in older studies (see Krohn et al., 1977). Instead, I determined that stereotypes of landlords

‘...closely approximate Connell’s (1987: 181) conception of the new professional masculinity relying on a “combination of theoretical knowledge with technical expertise...”’ (Kerrigan, 2022, p. 16). As such, I concluded that ‘the landlord has largely been remade from the figure who occasionally repairs your home or acts to improve its use values, paralleling the general remaking of the home away from its use-values to primarily an object of financial exchange’ (Kerrigan, 2022, p. 16). In this case, the image of the landlord is further removed from actual direct work, and more closely associated with the abstracted labor of ‘sweating assets.’

The idea that landlords do not in fact engage in ‘real work’ is further reinforced by landlords’ propensity to demand tenant labor to improve their assets which was made clear in my interviews with tenant advocates, organizers and tenants themselves. Landlords often write contractual requirements into their leases to be able to call upon tenants for their labor, such as in the case of property maintenance or lawn care. Thanks to the power inequalities discussed in the previous section and, particularly, the threat of non-renewal or eviction, these clauses are legal in some jurisdictions and illegal but enforceable in others. Tenants tend to be expected to make their homes ready for sale and to arrange realtor visits, even when they are being evicted (Wachsmuth et al., 2023). In effect, the work that landlords often do perform is reduced to coordinating the labor of others, be it the free labor of their tenants or the paid labor of plumbers, roofers and other maintenance workers. In either case they directly financially benefit from this labor through improvements made to their assets. In the most extreme cases, landlords will hire a property manager or invest in firms such as REITs. Here, landlords perform no work, and instead they benefit from rising property values while collecting a regular income stream. Either way, landlords do not engage in productive work; if there is a problem in a rental property, either the occupant must perform that labor themselves or call someone else to do so. The landlord simply interjects themselves into the process when necessary, essentially passing all responsibility onto the tenant, either to ask for permission to make necessary changes to a property, or to be reimbursed, or to coordinate a repair. In this way, the landlord-tenant relationship, particularly regarding work done to a property, is far closer to its feudal origins than the modern conception of a simple commodity transaction, such as buying a pizza.

### **Proposed alternative terminology to landlord and why landlord remains the best fit**

Many alternatives to landlord have been proposed or are used to some extent, including ‘rental housing provider’ or ‘lessor.’ Frequently these alternatives completely erase the figure of the tenant, particularly terms such as ‘investor’ or ‘property owner’, or references to the housing unit itself as a ‘mortgage helper’ (Kerrigan, 2022; Holmer, 2016). ‘Mortgage helper’ in particular points to how it is in fact the tenant helping to provide housing for the landlord, as opposed to the landlord providing housing for the tenant. One suggestion, ‘rental host,’ feels particularly clumsy given short-term rentals’ impact on the long-term rental market, and which Tsai (2023: 985) who proposes it, champions because its ‘... a more friendly term used by Airbnb.’ Less frequently, landlords argue that ‘tenant’ needs replacing too, with alternatives such as ‘tenant-partner’ (Holmer, 2016) or ‘resident’ (Valdez, 2021a) proposed.

All these alternative terms ultimately benefit landlords because they erase the historically negative connotations associated with the term landlord, blur the landlord-tenant relationship at the heart of rental housing, and serve to discursively eliminate or diminish the power disparity between landlords and tenants. The most common alternatives proposed or currently in use in different contexts include ‘rental housing provider’, ‘property owner’, ‘investor’ and ‘lessor’; therefore, those will be the terms discussed below.

### **Rental housing provider**

Rental housing provider suggests a neutral or even benevolent position, centering a landlord’s role in ‘providing’ housing to those in need. Effectively, private landlords attempt to obfuscate the nature of their businesses by utilizing a term more typically associated with the non-profit sector. Landlords take advantage of state-sanctioned power to camp on (or possess) a key infrastructure of survival and social reproduction and sweat it for profit. There is nothing benevolent about private landlordism. The actors essential to housing provision are not landlords, but rather the workers who construct and maintain housing structures.

Even the non-profit housing sector has many characteristics that limit the ‘benevolence’ implied by the term ‘housing provider’. While beyond the scope of this study, non-profit landlords wield many of the same powers as private sector landlords vis-à-vis tenants, and they frequently levy constraints, such as restricting significant others from co-habiting and discriminating against those with criminal histories.

### **Property owner**

‘Property owner’ is frequently used as a synonym for landlord, but it is not without its own problems. The term ‘landlord’ conveys rights and more importantly responsibilities to tenants in ways that ‘property owner’ does not. Property owner only hints at or conveys the general bundle of legal rights associated with property, effectively erasing the tenant from the equation. The use of ‘property owner’ is already causing regulatory issues, the most salient being the complications created by fractional ownership, which can be seen across different scales of ‘landlord’. These scales of ‘landlord’ can range from split ownership of a rental unit, to a unit’s division across numerous individuals via specific property platforms (such as the UK’s cahootz) to the cases of some REITs and major transitional landlords where ownership is further diffused across thousands of shareholders and even pension holders. How can ‘property owners’ be held accountable in this scenario? Do the ‘property owners’ (or pension holders) have agency over the managing of units in this scenario? Furthermore, treating landlords exclusively as property owners can open up potential avenues for evasion of existing regulations. For example, in Toronto, Canada, a fractional property owner (of just one percent of a home), attempted to evict existing tenants under an ‘own use’ provision. Eventually the tenant left without a legal ruling on the specific validity of an ‘own-use eviction’ based on fractional ownership (Mathieu, 2020).



### **Investor**

Frequently, those who would otherwise be known as ‘landlords’ are referred to as ‘investors’ (Kerrigan, 2022). ‘Investor’ is a term that typically suggests an element of wealth creation and innovation. An investor might be seen as someone providing funding for someone else’s new technology, making a production line more efficient, for example. Christophers (2020, p. 24) argues that trying to reframe the image of the investor as ‘one of wealth creation versus wealth extraction’ is a relatively common move among many types of rentiers. The author furthermore ties this type of investment closely to passive wealth extraction. ‘Investor’ also suggests a certain kind of rationality, with landlord decisions being portrayed as strictly economically motivated, and therefore inherently ‘rational’ despite, as Kerrigan (2022) notes, clear contradictions between stated motivations and actual decisions surrounding policy conflicts like rent control. The term ‘investor’ represents a bad fit for landlords, as it again hides the key relational aspect of landlordism and tends to convey ideas of economic rationality and wealth creation.

### **Lessor and Lessee**

‘Lessor’ and ‘lessee’ are technically correct terms, and somewhat reflect terminology used in other countries and languages, such as the German *vermieter/mieterverein* which effectively directly translates to renter/rentee. What ‘lessor’ and ‘lessee’ fail to encompass is the specific power dynamic and historical relevance of the term landlord, as well as the unique relational aspect of control over another’s ability to survive. Instead, ‘lessor’ and ‘lessee’ emphasize a simple transactional relationship that falls short of representing the complexities discussed in this paper.

### **The term ‘landlord’ and its ongoing relevance to tenant organizing**

Valdez (2021a) argues the only people interested in maintaining the term ‘landlord’ are ‘groups that benefit from evictions, like attorneys who represent defendants in such actions,’ adding that ‘they like the notion that their client [sic] is like a feudal “tenant,” bound to the land and subject to the whim of a lord.’ While there are many problematic elements in Valdez’s assertions, notably the fact that those who actually benefit most from evictions are those who initiate them (landlords), he does understand the importance of maintaining the connection between the historical understanding and the contemporary moment. The only ones who stand to benefit from (and are therefore interested in) getting rid of the term ‘landlord’ are landlords and their lobbyists, in their efforts to remove from public discourse and view the unequal relations between landlords and tenants.

On the other side of the argument, using the term ‘landlord’ buttresses developing tenant power because of its historical connotations and the figure of the landlord as a concrete point for tenants to organize around. The direct relationship between landlords and tenants and the material impact landlords have on tenants’ lives create a knowable target for

tenants to organize against (Piven & Cloward, 1977) and build on successful historical organizing efforts.

Similarities can be drawn to other discursive debates in housing organizing. Notably writer Julian Park (2019) calls for replacing the slogan ‘decommodify housing’ with ‘abolish rent’. Park favors ‘abolish rent’ because of its direct connection to existing tactics, the immediate centrality of rent reduction as a way to benefit tenants’ quality of life, and the fact that it is also ultimately a call to decommodify housing. In contrast, Park argues calls for decommodification of housing obscure immediate tactics and relations in housing because of the long-term horizon necessitated by a decommodification of housing and lack of clarity on how to achieve it. Parallels can be drawn with the previous discussion around the historical connotations surrounding the term ‘landlord’, which immediately conveys the antagonism at the heart of landlord-tenant relations. Unlike ‘decommodify housing’, which still points to the key underlying tension of housing as a basic need and as a commodified good, alternative terms like ‘rental housing provider’ serve to completely eject the core contestations over housing and more broadly the politicization of landlord-tenant relations.

Finally, it is important to note that tenants and tenant organizers do not seem to be using the landlords’ chosen nomenclature. In September 2023, when the Berkeley Tenant Union rallied for tenant power as the Berkeley Property Owners Association hosted a party celebrating the end of the eviction moratorium, tenants correctly referred to their counterparts as ‘landlords’ (Lehman & Mauhay-Moore, 2023). FTC Manning (2021, p.228), responding to Engels’ dismissal of housing struggles in the ‘Housing Question’, points out that housing struggles waged by proletarians of old [19<sup>th</sup> century] are ‘*land-based* struggles, analogous to the struggles waged by peasants over rural land.’ Organizing for the right to housing today reflects these housing and land struggles of the past, and maintaining the term ‘landlord’ facilitates this accurate understanding of history and the struggles we continue to be a part of. To discard the term ‘landlord’ is to discard years of successful tenant organizing and campaigns that have helped illuminate the exploitative relationship that is the core of landlord-tenant relations.

## **Conclusion**

*“Naming isn’t always a metonymic process,” Delaney writes. That is, a name doesn’t tell you what something is so much as it connects the phenomenon/idea to something else.’ (Acker, 1996, p. ix)*

The core argument of the movement to replace ‘landlord’ rests on the idea that it is an outdated term. In this paper I argue that it fundamentally isn’t. What proponents of the rebrand get right is that ‘landlord’ as a term reflects its feudal origins, but I show that these origins are still present in the social relations of property today. The movement to rebrand reflects broader trends of trying to move past ongoing injustices in the social relations of property by erasing evidence of their historical connections rather than the injustices themselves, as noted by geographer Anne Bonds in relation to the removal of racist restrictive covenants from property deeds (Lynch, 2023). Renaming ‘landlords’ something

more ostensibly neutral won't erase the ongoing inequalities of landlord-tenant relations, just their connections to past struggles.

Arguably contestation over terminology becomes increasingly important as fractional ownership platforms and schemes allow partial ownership of someone else's home, and pension funds pour money into REITs and other massive firms profiting off residential real estate. Landlordism has been linked to concepts of 'asset-based' welfare and social Keynesianism, reflecting the sentiment that becoming a landlord is a legitimate way to make up for falling real wages. A proliferation of property technology has served to automatize landlord tasks and processes, and reduce face-to-face landlord-tenant interactions (Fields, 2022). These changes suggest the importance of tenants and militant scholars working together to more accurately conceptualize 'landlord' to better encompass and account for today's realities.

Again, the term 'landlord' remains essential to understanding the social relations surrounding housing. 'Landlord' connects the ongoing conflicts and power dynamics of private rental housing to its historical origins and related contestations at the intersections between property and class. The movement to rebrand landlords only serves landlords themselves, as it further obfuscates the central pillars of the landlord-tenant relation, notably the exploitation and control of tenants by landlords and the antagonism between landlords and tenants over housing as a site of social reproduction versus financial profit. The project to rebrand landlords resembles platform economy initiatives where 'contractor' and 'home-sharer' helped facilitate regulatory evasion, and points to the material stakes and the need to resist this effort. 'Landlord' and the historical baggage appropriately conveyed by the term provide organizers with an already understood and essential concept, signaling the ongoing valorization of private property in our legal and policy contexts, and conveying the inequality in this key social relation.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Robin Basalaev-Binder, Mikael Brunilla, Cara Chellew, Connor Cordingley, Cloé St-Hilaire and David Wachsmuth for their comments on earlier versions of this article. Additionally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and insight as well as the RHJ editorial collective.

## **Funding Details**

This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [767-2020-2798 2020].

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