

# BEYOND PROPERTY

OVER  
THE LEVEE

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UNDER  
THE PLOW

AN EXPERIENTIAL CURRICULUM

Property subtends the Anthropocene. Modern European property theory rests on colonization and chattel slavery—inseparable institutions that bound far-flung continents, ecologies, and people in brutally unequal relations. Property-thought and an ideology of improvement suffuse Western subjectivity. The imagined political community of liberal democracies is still marked by a tradition limiting full citizenship to property-owning, self-possessive individuals. This same ideology can be traced across such disparate phenomena as HGTV reality shows, middle-class health and wellness fads, the “stand your ground” laws that cost Trayvon Martin his life, and opposition to regulations that might stave off climate catastrophe. In the Anthropocene, what Black Panther Huey P. Newton called “survival pending revolution” demands moving beyond the stranglehold of property-thought to embody more porous and accountable ways of relating to land, people, more-than-human beings, and ourselves.

Owning property (rather than being owned as property) has long constituted both “full” citizenship and humanity in liberal democracies, especially those of North America. It is therefore challenging to design prompts that speak both to and across the very race, gender, dis/ability, and species categories violently reinforced by property logics. Can practices of sensing help to grasp and redirect the differential operation of property across different spaces and bodies?

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# Interrogating Property's Infrastructures I

BEYOND PROPERTY

Examine the structure you inhabit. Look carefully at what (and who) comes in and out. No matter the material of the roof, walls, and floor, perforations in the structure's outer shell allow the exchange of living beings, matter, waste, and energy. Where do these enter and exit your dwelling, and through what means? What enables matter and energy to pass: cracks or crevices, doors and windows, plastic or copper pipes, insulated wires, lead-acid batteries? Where do these materials come from? Who makes them, and who bears that cost?

Moving beyond the physical interface of your home, consider the material systems that enable the exchange of matter, waste, and energy. These systems—water, power, sewage—connect the structure where you reside to other structures, other properties. How do these systems function? Where do they operate? Who owns them? How are they governed?

Consider the intangible systems that allow you to inhabit this structure. Do others assume your right of occupancy, or do they question if you “belong?” Do you pay a landlord or a bank for the right to live here? If you don't, what social infrastructures enable—or jeopardize—your presence? What systems must be activated to remove you from this structure? To what degree can you imagine that happening? What makes it imaginable, or not?



# **Interrogating Property's Infrastructures II**

Research the ownership history of the land you inhabit. Resist the temptation to do this online. Instead, visit the government office where property records are archived. Where is it located? What does the building look like? What is it made of? What other buildings are near it?

Find an entrance accessible to you. Note where it is in relation to the building. Who do you see inside, and how are they interacting?

Locate the land records office. Ask about the plot of land that you reside on. Who is working in the office, and how do they receive your request?

As you look through the records, notice their weight, material, color, and odor. Observe changes in the type or script used to record land. Note the space occupied by the cumulative records of the ownership of space.

Can you determine when the land you reside on first become property? Whose authority made it so? What obstacles do you encounter in reconstructing the record? What had already happened before the land became property at all?



# **Interrogating Property's Infrastructures III**

Consider the governance of the land where you live. More than the law, governance encompasses the norms, processes, and assumptions that shape who does (and who doesn't) have a voice in using and making decisions about land. This may include a diverse array of actors, including vermin, pets, endangered species, landlords, neighbors, police departments, social movements, city ordinances, state environmental laws, federal tax code, international treaties and widely held beliefs. Make a list and note how strongly each actor shapes governance of this particular piece of land. Once you are satisfied with the list, attempt to diagram the ways these actors interact and conflict to shape how the land is used in the present day.

If you go back 100, 250, or 500 years, how might this diagram look different? What present-day actors would be absent? Who would exert more influence on governance, and whose power would be diminished? What would you have to learn and unlearn to create a useful diagram?



# Cultivating Mutual Responsibility I

Consider a need that you currently have that could be met at least partially outside the market, in cooperation with the beings co-inhabiting the place where you live. Often this is food or shelter, but it might be the need for health, beauty, companionship, or help in completing a task. What can you do that would allow those beings to thrive while also meeting your own need?

Project the time required to shift relationships between these co-inhabiting beings to allow all of you to thrive. Does the time involved seem long or short? Long or short in relation to what? How willing or able are you to take the time that shifting these relationships would require? What demands on your time affect your ability and willingness to wait? Who or what is placing them?



## Cultivating Mutual Responsibility II

Learn about a need shared by the place where you live and the other beings that co-inhabit it. For this particular exercise, this need should NOT be shared by you and may exceed or even appear to conflict with your desires. Take the time to learn as much as you can about this need through observation, relationship-building, and conversation as well as formal research.

As you learn, continually evaluate the degree to which this need is actually different from or in conflict with your need. Do you have an analogous need that might help you understand the need you identified? If the needs are truly incommensurable, which presents graver consequences for the beings experiencing it if it remains unmet?

If you conclude that the unmet needs of others exceed or are not in conflict with your own, consider how you might respond. Your inquiry will have acquainted you with efforts already underway to meet this need. How can you support the ability of co-inhabiting beings to meet their needs with progressively fewer interventions? If no effort seems to be underway, explore what you can do. But remember: others' needs are not your property.



# Observing Relationships that Exceed Property I

Go to a place that is meaningful to you. Notice what is happening immediately around you: in the soil, with the plants, the activity of insects and animals (including people), the movement of the air. Suspend your will to act. Instead, bring all your senses to the practice of observation. If this is difficult, focus on one sense at a time. Begin with the sense of touch. Slowly bring your other senses into the act of observation, concluding with your dominant sense.

Notice who and what is acting in this place. Describe, but do not label, what they seem to be doing. How do your senses register their activity? Can you tell how your presence affects what you observe?

Return to this place every day, ideally at about the same time. At the conclusion of a session, select a single word to capture your observations. In one week, you will have a sentence-length collection. In a month, a short paragraph. In a year, about three-quarters of a page. Arrange these words into stanzas for a poem or verses for a song. Or allow them to remain as they are: a journal of place as relation, not property.



# **Observing Relationships that Exceed Property II**

Contribute to an effort that facilitates the transfer of property outside the logics of the market. There are opportunities that require varying levels of commitment and espouse radically different politics, ranging from the “Little Free Library” network or “Buy Nothing” groups on social media, to community or Native land trusts, to neighborhood-based anarchist free stores and efforts to liberate abandoned or foreclosed residential buildings. The contours of your life will allow you to enter some of these more than others; seek an organic invitation, explicit or implicit. This is not something you can force.

Once you are contributing to the effort you identified, observe the relationships it cultivates. Who forms the leadership of the effort? Who are its constituencies, and how do they use its services? To what degree are users differentiated by group, in what ways, and to what ends? What beliefs about property are embedded in this effort, and to what degree do they comport with or challenge dominant beliefs in your area? Finally, how do people not involved in the effort perceive it, and to what degree do these varied perceptions influence its evolution?



# Somatics of Property I

Allow your body to assume its customary position. Focus your senses inward and notice, without judging, your default posture. How are you holding yourself in relation to the future (your front body), or to the past (your back body)? How is this position imprinted by your occupation, gender, or race, and to what degree do you embrace or resist that imprinting? Without judging, note where your body holds tension in this position. Breathe into this tension, allowing it to melt with your breath as you become malleable from the inside. Allow your spine to extend upwards such that your torso assumes its full length. Allow your shoulders to descend with the pull of gravity. Allow each breath to expand your chest to its full width. Remember this posture of dignity and allow your body to return to it if the next prompts become too intense.

Turn your mind to thoughts of property. Notice how your body responds. Do these thoughts change your pulse or your breath? Do they move your body, and if so, how? Imagine the desire for property. This desire could be abstract and cultural, or as specific as a thing that you truly want to own. Note where this desire registers, how it moves tension or relaxation through your muscles, and the way it shifts you in space.

Finally, think about your own ancestral relationships to property. Go back to your family of origin or as many generations back as you know or can imagine. Recognize that distant ancestors might position you in different and conflicting ways. Choose whichever relationship to property you feel prepared to take on in this moment. Notice where it manifests in your body: how it changes your breath, where it introduces tension, weight, direction, and, perhaps, even pain. If it feels right, allow your body to move into these sensations, assuming a series of positions that hold and respond to them. Then, allow the tensions to melt with your breath as you assume a posture of dignity again.



# Somatics of Property II

Identify a place where private property ownership is attenuated in some way. This could be an obviously public space, such as a city park or a civic building. It might be a legal attenuation: the strip of grass next to a residential street, an easement for utilities or for conservation, a driveway used by two households while technically the property of one. It might be an attenuation borne by practice alone, such as the “desire lines” pounded by hundreds of corner-cutting feet. Become aware of the visible markers of such spaces such that you can notice them as you move from place to place.

Select a particular place of attenuated property to focus on. See what you can learn about how it is governed officially (e.g. easements recorded in deeds) and unofficially (e.g. who maintains it). What can the owner of the property do or not do, precisely where, and for how long? Observe how other beings move in, across, and through this space. Take notes, sketch drawings, make photographs, or gather indexical traces of movement through a space that eludes absolute ownership.

Interpret the gestures and trajectories you have recorded through the muscles of your own body. Develop a suite of movements that can be taught to and adapted by others. Gather in the space and practice a choreography of gestures that attenuate property.