

Man of the House: Property, Patriarchy, and Masculine Dispossession in *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond

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Abstract—Matthew Desmond's ethnographic study *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016) illuminates the devastating effects of housing instability on America's urban poor, yet its gendered dimensions remain underexplored in scholarly discourse. This article examines how eviction operates as a site of masculine dispossession, systematically undermining working-class men's ability to fulfill traditional provider roles while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal structures that harm both men and women. Through close analysis of Desmond's male subjects—particularly Scott, Lamar, and Ned—this study applies R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Michael Kimmel's concept of "aggrieved entitlement" to reveal how eviction destabilizes masculine identity tied to property ownership, economic provision, and domestic authority. The article argues that eviction creates a crisis of working-class masculinity that manifests in three interrelated ways: the collapse of the provider role, the spatial displacement that severs men from domestic authority, and the transformation of masculine agency into what I term "dispossession performance"—futile attempts to enact traditional masculine prerogatives without the economic foundation to sustain them. By examining eviction through the lens of critical masculinity studies, this analysis demonstrates how housing precarity exposes the fragility of hegemonic masculine ideals while revealing the material conditions necessary for their maintenance. Furthermore, it explores how racialized capitalism deliberately structures this dispossession differently across lines of race and class, creating what Kimberlé Crenshaw terms "intersectional" experiences of marginalization. This research contributes to conversations in gender studies, urban sociology, and poverty studies by centering the rarely examined relationship between housing instability and masculine identity formation, ultimately arguing that any comprehensive solution to the eviction crisis must address its gendered consequences.

Index Terms—masculinity studies, eviction, housing precarity, hegemonic masculinity, economic identity, intersectionality, urban poverty, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

"I am a man," Lamar declares to Matthew Desmond, even as his disability, poverty, and housing instability systematically deny him the ability to perform what American culture defines as manhood (Desmond 95). This poignant assertion captures a central tension in *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*: the devastating collision between culturally prescribed masculine identity and the material impossibility of achieving it under conditions of extreme economic precarity. While Desmond's Pulitzer Prize-winning ethnography has justly received acclaim for exposing America's eviction crisis, particularly its disproportionate impact on poor women of color, the text simultaneously reveals a less-examined phenomenon—the systematic dispossession of working-class masculinity through housing instability.

This article examines how eviction operates as a mechanism of masculine undoing, stripping men of the material foundations—property, employment, domestic authority—upon which hegemonic masculinity depends. Drawing on R.W. Connell's foundational theory of hegemonic masculinity and Michael Kimmel's analysis of economic manhood, I argue that *Evicted* documents not merely housing loss but the collapse of what sociologist Michael Schwalbe calls "the masculine self as a viable social project" (Schwalbe 45). The men in Desmond's study—predominantly Black, poor, and marginalized—occupy what Connell terms "marginalized masculinity," simultaneously subject to patriarchal expectations they cannot fulfill and

excluded from the economic resources that make traditional manhood attainable (Connell 80-81).

The significance of this analysis extends beyond literary criticism. Understanding eviction's gendered dimensions illuminates how contemporary American capitalism produces what I call "dispossessive masculinity"—a condition wherein men retain patriarchal expectations and entitlements while losing the economic means to enact them. This contradiction generates profound consequences: family instability, interpersonal violence, substance abuse, and the reproduction of poverty across generations. By examining Desmond's ethnographic portraits through the lens of critical masculinity studies, this article contributes to ongoing conversations about gender, poverty, and housing justice while challenging scholars to recognize how structural violence operates through—not merely alongside—gender systems.

II. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND THE PROVIDER IMPERATIVE

To understand eviction's impact on masculine identity, we must first establish the cultural scaffolding of American manhood. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). In contemporary American society, hegemonic masculinity clusters around several key attributes: economic provision, heterosexuality, physical strength, emotional stoicism, authority within the domestic sphere, and property ownership.

Michael Kimmel, in *Manhood in America*, traces how American masculine identity has historically centered on economic self-sufficiency and the provider role. "To be a man," Kimmel argues, "one must be a success in the market" (Kimmel 5). This equation of manhood with economic achievement creates what he terms "marketplace manhood"—an identity perpetually requiring validation through financial success, property accumulation, and the ability to support dependents (Kimmel 13). The American Dream itself functions as a masculine narrative: individual achievement, home ownership,

upward mobility, and the establishment of patriarchal household authority.

However, as Connell emphasizes, hegemonic masculinity operates as an ideal that few men fully embody. Most men occupy what she calls "complicit masculinity"—they benefit from patriarchal dividends without fully enacting hegemonic norms (Connell 79). Yet for men marginalized by race, class, or other factors, even complicit masculinity remains inaccessible. Poor Black men like those in *Evicted* face what Connell terms "marginalized masculinity": they are held to hegemonic standards while systematically denied the resources—employment, education, capital—necessary to achieve them (Connell 80-81).

This theoretical framework illuminates a crucial dimension of *Evicted*: the text documents not only housing instability but the impossibility of achieving masculine legitimacy under conditions of racialized poverty. When Lamar insists "I am a man" despite living in a roach-infested trailer with amputated legs and no employment prospects, he articulates both his claim to masculine identity and the social forces that deny it (Desmond 95). His assertion becomes simultaneously defiant and tragic—a performance of manhood without the stage, props, or audience that would validate it.

III. MAN OF THE HOUSE": PROPERTY AND PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

The phrase "man of the house" encodes a fundamental connection between masculine identity, property, and domestic authority. To be "man of the house" implies ownership—both of the physical structure and of the social relationships within it. Property ownership has historically constituted a cornerstone of American citizenship and masculine legitimacy. As Cheryl Harris argues in "Whiteness as Property," property rights have been instrumental in constructing both racial and gender hierarchies, with white male property ownership conferring full citizenship and patriarchal authority (Harris 1716). Desmond's ethnography reveals how eviction systematically denies men this foundational element of masculine identity. Consider Scott, the white former nurse whose heroin addiction leads to eviction from multiple properties. Scott's narrative arc traces a descent from relative stability—employment,

housing, romantic partnership—into profound dispossession. Initially, Scott maintains vestiges of masculine authority: he makes decisions about housing, manages finances (however poorly), and positions himself as protector to his girlfriend Teddy (Desmond 28-33). Yet as evictions multiply and addiction intensifies, Scott loses not only housing but the very capacity to function as "man of the house."

The trailer park where Scott initially lives represents an already-degraded form of property—not ownership but precarious tenancy in substandard housing. Yet even this diminished form of domestic space allows Scott to perform certain masculine prerogatives. He controls entry and exit, makes decisions about the space, and exercises authority over Teddy. Eviction strips away even these reduced masculine privileges. Post-eviction, Scott becomes chronically homeless, sleeping in abandoned buildings, friends' couches, or the street. This spatial displacement fundamentally undermines masculine identity in multiple ways.

First, homelessness eliminates the private domestic sphere where patriarchal authority traditionally operates. Without a home, Scott cannot be "man of the house" because there is no house. Second, homelessness subjects Scott to constant surveillance and control by police, shelters, and social services—institutions that feminize and infantilize him by denying his autonomy. Third, homelessness destroys Scott's relationship with Teddy, who eventually leaves him. Unable to provide housing or protection, Scott loses his claim to heterosexual masculine legitimacy.

Lamar's experience further illustrates how eviction operates as masculine dispossession. As a double amputee receiving disability payments, Lamar occupies an already-marginalized masculine position. Disability studies scholars have extensively documented how physical impairment—particularly loss of mobility and work capacity—undermines hegemonic masculine identity predicated on bodily strength and economic productivity (Shuttleworth et al. 174). Yet despite his disability, Lamar initially maintains a form of masculine authority through his role as tenant and through his relationship with Larraine, his landlord who becomes a friend and quasi-romantic interest.

When Lamar's trailer burns down—an incident Desmond suggests may have been deliberate—Lamar

loses more than shelter. He loses the material foundation for masculine self-determination. Post-fire, Lamar becomes utterly dependent on others: on Larraine for temporary housing, on shelters, on the mercy of a housing system stacked against poor disabled Black men. This dependence directly contradicts hegemonic masculine ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Lamar's repeated insistence on his manhood—"I am a man"—reveals his awareness that social forces systematically deny him masculine legitimacy (Desmond 95).

IV. ECONOMIC FAILURE AND THE CRISIS OF PROVISION

If property provides the spatial foundation for masculine authority, employment provides its economic foundation. The provider role—man as breadwinner—has constituted perhaps the most durable element of American masculine identity across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even as women's labor force participation has increased dramatically, cultural expectations that men should provide financially for dependents persist (Townsend 46). For working-class men, the provider role often represents the primary available masculine achievement, compensating for their exclusion from professional status or wealth accumulation.

Evicted documents how unstable low-wage employment makes the provider role increasingly untenable for poor men. The men in Desmond's study cycle through temporary jobs, under-the-table work, disability payments, and unemployment. None achieve the stable employment necessary to consistently provide for themselves, much less dependents. This employment precarity directly undermines masculine identity in multiple ways.

Consider again Lamar, who cannot work due to his amputations. His disability payments provide minimal income insufficient for decent housing. Lamar occasionally earns money through informal economy activities—collecting scrap metal, for instance—but these hustles yield marginal returns and cannot support anyone beyond himself (Desmond 89-92). His inability to work, caused by a workplace accident, strips him of the primary avenue through which American men validate masculine identity. Moreover, the accident itself reveals how working-class men's bodies become expendable

under capitalism—used up and discarded when no longer profitable.

The connection between employment and housing creates a vicious cycle particularly devastating for men socialized to view work as definitional to manhood. Eviction makes employment nearly impossible: homeless men cannot maintain hygiene for job interviews, lack addresses for applications, miss shifts due to transportation difficulties, and suffer the psychological trauma that undermines work capacity. Simultaneously, unemployment precipitates eviction as men cannot pay rent. This reciprocal causation means that housing instability and economic failure mutually reinforce, trapping men in conditions where masculine achievement becomes impossible.

Ned, another of Desmond's subjects, exemplifies this trap. An older Black man with health problems and limited education, Ned survives through a combination of disability payments, occasional odd jobs, and informal exchanges (Desmond 154-158). He lacks both stable housing and stable employment. Ned's narrative reveals how aging compounds masculine dispossession for poor men. In youth, physical strength and stamina might compensate for limited education or employment options; in older age, declining health eliminates even manual labor opportunities. Ned faces a future of permanent economic marginality with no prospect of achieving provider status.

The men's inability to provide generates profound psychological consequences. Michael Kimmel documents how economic failure produces what he calls "aggrieved entitlement"—a toxic combination of masculine expectations and the inability to fulfill them, often manifesting in anger, violence, or substance abuse (Kimmel, *Angry White Men* 23). While Kimmel focuses primarily on white men, similar dynamics affect poor Black men who face both class and racial barriers to masculine achievement. The frustration of legitimate masculine aspirations—employment, housing, family stability—can produce destructive behaviors that further undermine men's lives and harm those around them.

Dispossession Performance: Masculinity Without Material Foundation

Unable to achieve hegemonic masculinity through legitimate means—property ownership, employment, provision—the men in *Evicted* nonetheless continue

performing masculine identity through what I term "dispossession performance": enacting traditional masculine prerogatives despite lacking the material foundation to sustain them. This concept extends Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity into the realm of economic dispossession. Butler argues that gender identity emerges through repeated stylized performances rather than expressing an inner essence (Butler 33). Dispossession performance describes how evicted men continue performing masculinity even as material conditions render these performances increasingly futile and destructive.

Scott exemplifies this phenomenon. Throughout his descent into chronic homelessness, Scott maintains certain masculine performances: he makes decisions (however disastrous), maintains heterosexual relationships (however dysfunctional), and asserts authority (however unrecognized). After losing housing, Scott tells Teddy where they will go, what they will do, how they will survive—continuing to perform decision-making authority even as circumstances reveal his utter powerlessness (Desmond 176-179). These performances become simultaneously pathetic and poignant, revealing both Scott's investment in masculine identity and its complete disconnection from material reality.

Dispossession performance also manifests in how evicted men relate to women. Several men in *Evicted* maintain relationships with women who actually possess more stability or resources—yet men continue positioning themselves as providers or protectors. This dynamic appears in Lamar's relationship with Lorraine, where Lamar's masculine self-conception as helper and protector contradicts the reality that Lorraine provides him shelter (Desmond 112-115). The men's continued performance of masculine authority despite obvious dependence reveals how deeply internalized hegemonic ideals are, persisting even when utterly at odds with actual social relations.

Substance abuse functions as another form of dispossession performance. Scott's heroin addiction simultaneously destroys his life and provides temporary escape from the unbearable tension between masculine expectations and achieved reality. Addiction allows Scott to temporarily "not care" about his failure to achieve manhood—yet this escape mechanism itself undermines any remaining capacity for masculine achievement. The cruel irony

is that substance abuse, while offering momentary relief from masculine inadequacy, ensures permanent exclusion from hegemonic masculinity.

Violence represents perhaps the most destructive form of dispossessive performance. While Desmond's text contains relatively little explicit violence, the threat of masculine violence haunts the narrative. Evicted men, stripped of legitimate avenues for masculine validation, sometimes resort to violence as a final assertion of masculine power. This violence rarely improves men's circumstances and often worsens them—criminal records further excluding men from employment and housing. Yet violence offers a perverse form of masculine performance: the ability to physically dominate others becomes a last resort for men who cannot economically dominate, own property, or provide.

V. INTERSECTIONALITY AND RACIALIZED MASCULINE DISPOSSESSION

Thus far, this analysis has examined how eviction undermines masculine identity generally. However, we must recognize that this process operates differently based on race. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality—the recognition that social identities like race, class, and gender interact to produce unique experiences of oppression—provides essential framework for understanding the racialized dimensions of masculine dispossession (Crenshaw 1241).

The majority of men in *Evicted* are Black, and their experiences of masculine dispossession cannot be separated from histories of racist exclusion. American society has systematically denied Black men access to hegemonic masculinity through slavery, Jim Crow, employment discrimination, mass incarceration, and ongoing structural racism. As scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have documented, Black masculinity has been constructed as simultaneously hyper-masculine (dangerous, violent, hypersexual) and emasculated (economically impotent, socially subordinated) (hooks 89; Collins 159).

This contradictory positioning creates unique vulnerabilities. Black men face heightened expectations of masculine economic provision—both from their communities and from themselves—while systematically denied pathways to achieve it. The

consequences are devastating. Lamar and Ned, both older Black men, have spent entire lives unable to achieve the provider masculinity their socialization demanded. Their masculine dispossession is not a temporary crisis but a permanent condition structured by racialized capitalism.

Moreover, Black masculine dispossession carries different social meanings than white masculine dispossession. When Scott, a white man, experiences eviction and homelessness, he represents individual failure—bad choices, addiction, personal pathology. When Lamar or Ned experience identical conditions, racist ideology attributes their circumstances to racial deficiency, reinforcing stereotypes about Black male irresponsibility, laziness, or criminality. This racist attribution adds an additional burden: Black men experiencing masculine dispossession face not only personal shame but also the knowledge that their individual failure will be read as racial confirmation.

The intersection of race and gender also shapes how evicted men relate to women in their communities. Black feminist scholars have long noted the particular pressures Black men face regarding manhood and the sometimes-destructive consequences. bell hooks argues that "many black men who express contempt for black women are merely articulating in a sexist way their rage at not being able to realize their patriarchal dreams" (hooks 94). While hooks focuses primarily on interpersonal dynamics, her insight applies equally to structural dynamics: racialized exclusion from hegemonic masculinity can produce destructive gender politics within Black communities.

Additionally, we must recognize how the white property-owning class exploits these racialized dynamics. Landlords in *Evicted*—including Sherrena and Tobin—profit directly from poor Black men's inability to secure stable housing. The trailer parks and deteriorating rental properties they own extract wealth from residents who have no alternatives. This economic exploitation has gendered dimensions: it relies on the systematic exclusion of Black men from property ownership, stable employment, and masculine economic achievement. In this sense, racialized capitalism deliberately produces masculine dispossession as a profit-generating mechanism.

VI. CONSEQUENCES: FAMILY INSTABILITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

The masculine dispossession documented in *Evicted* generates profound consequences extending beyond individual men to families and communities. When men cannot fulfill provider roles or maintain stable housing, family structures become destabilized. Children lose fathers not through choice but through economic necessity; romantic partnerships dissolve under the pressure of housing precarity; extended family networks become strained as individuals cycle through temporary shelters.

Consider the children who briefly appear in *Evicted*'s narratives. They witness their fathers' helplessness, dependence, and defeat—images that shape their own gender socialization. Boys learn that manhood means perpetual failure; girls learn to expect male unreliability. These lessons reproduce gendered poverty across generations. Sociologist Kathryn Edin's research on low-income fathers demonstrates how economic inability to provide often leads men to withdraw from children's lives, not from lack of care but from shame at masculine failure (Edin and Nelson 189). The men in *Evicted* risk similar withdrawal, creating father absence that perpetuates cycles of poverty and masculine dispossession.

Moreover, masculine dispossession's effects ripple through communities. When large proportions of men cannot achieve legitimate masculine status, alternative masculine economies emerge—often centered on underground markets, violence, or criminality. While *Evicted* does not extensively explore these dynamics, they form the backdrop of inner-city life. The systemic denial of legitimate masculine achievement pushes some men toward illegitimate alternatives, with devastating consequences for individuals and communities.

The psychological toll also deserves emphasis. Men socialized to view themselves as providers and protectors, then systematically prevented from fulfilling these roles, experience profound trauma. Desmond documents the depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and hopelessness afflicting his subjects. These psychological conditions are not merely individual pathologies but rational responses to impossible contradictions—being told you should be "man of the house" while denied any house to be man of.

VII. TOWARD GENDER-CONSCIOUS HOUSING JUSTICE

Understanding eviction's gendered dimensions carries important implications for policy and activism. Most eviction prevention efforts rightly focus on women, who face higher eviction rates and particular vulnerabilities. However, a truly comprehensive approach must also address masculine dispossession—not to prioritize men over women, but to recognize how gender systems harm everyone and must be challenged systemically.

Housing policy must acknowledge that stable housing provides more than shelter; it provides the material foundation for dignified selfhood, including gendered selfhood. For men, housing stability enables the possibility—though not guarantee—of achieving provider roles, maintaining family relationships, and constructing masculine identity not predicated on dispossession and failure. Policies ensuring housing as a human right would alleviate the impossible contradiction of expecting masculine provision while structurally denying the means to provide.

Employment policy similarly requires gender-conscious analysis. Initiatives creating stable, adequately compensated work for low-skilled workers would allow men to fulfill provider roles without requiring them to embrace harmful masculine norms. Job training, criminal justice reform, disability accommodation, and living wages all contribute to making legitimate masculine achievement possible, reducing the pressure toward destructive dispossessive performances.

However, we must be cautious about simply restoring traditional masculine privileges. The goal is not to help men "be men" in patriarchal terms but to transform gender relations such that human dignity does not require conformity to harmful gender norms. This requires cultural work alongside economic reform—challenging the equation of manhood with economic dominance, expanding acceptable masculine identities, and creating space for men to derive self-worth from sources beyond marketplace success.

Black feminist thought offers crucial guidance here. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have long argued for gender justice that centers the most marginalized while transforming oppressive

systems wholesale. Addressing eviction's impact on Black men requires simultaneously combating racism, economic exploitation, and patriarchy—recognizing these systems as interlocking rather than separate. Solutions that alleviate masculine dispossession while reinforcing racial hierarchy or male dominance accomplish little; genuine justice requires fundamental restructuring of property relations, labor markets, and gender systems.

Conclusion

Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* documents the devastating human consequences of America's affordable housing crisis. By examining this crisis through the lens of critical masculinity studies, we gain additional insight into how eviction operates as gendered dispossession—systematically undermining working-class men's ability to achieve masculine legitimacy while maintaining patriarchal expectations they cannot fulfill. The men in Desmond's study—particularly Scott, Lamar, and Ned—exemplify what I have termed "dispossessive masculinity": a condition of permanent masculine crisis wherein cultural ideals of manhood become materially unachievable.

This analysis reveals several key insights. First, housing instability constitutes not merely economic or spatial precarity but identity crisis for men socialized to understand themselves through property ownership and provider roles. Second, eviction creates dispossessive performances—futile enactments of masculine authority without material foundation—that harm both men themselves and those around them. Third, these dynamics operate through intersectional systems: race, class, and gender interact such that Black men experience distinctive forms of masculine dispossession shaped by histories of racist exclusion.

Understanding these gendered dimensions matters for scholarship, policy, and activism. Scholars must recognize how structural violence operates through gender systems, producing crises of masculine identity with profound individual and social consequences. Policymakers must design interventions that address not only housing instability's material effects but also its assault on gendered selfhood. Activists must pursue housing justice in ways that challenge patriarchal gender norms rather than simply restoring traditional masculine privileges.

Ultimately, *Evicted* reveals that America's housing crisis is simultaneously an economic crisis, a racial justice crisis, and a gender crisis. Lamar's insistence—"I am a man"—should haunt us, not because we should uncritically validate patriarchal manhood, but because we should recognize the violence of social systems that promise masculine legitimacy while structurally denying it. True housing justice requires not merely shelter but the material and cultural conditions for all people to construct dignified lives unconstrained by impossible gender contradictions. Until we achieve such justice, eviction will continue operating as masculine dispossession, destroying men's lives while reproducing the very gender hierarchies that harm us all.

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