

# PROPERTY AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES

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## Introduction

Many of us broadly identify groups of people in certain times and places with particular property regimes. Consider the association of communist Soviet Union or China with collective or central control of land; Indigenous peoples of the Americas with the sharing of life, health and spirituality through land; white colonial and contemporary settlers of the capitalist United States with the individual control and financial value of land; and Africans uprooted, transported and enslaved in the Americas, dispossessed and treated as property themselves. In each of these examples, observers connect identities of race, nationality, time and place with particular property rules about land. But we do not just identify others, we also *identify ourselves* through how we treat property. Here, I explore how each of us might talk, think and act about property in ways that cement larger social identities.

This chapter examines how people form collective identities through land, and how we treat it as property. We learn to associate certain kinds of practices with certain kinds of people. We establish belonging to multiple identity dimensions through property practices: not only national, racial and ethnic identities, but also gender, sexuality, regional and professional identities.

I illustrate my arguments about property and identity by discussing a group of professional petroleum 'land agents' or 'land managers', or, as abbreviated, 'landmen'. In the United States, where underground property rights are often privately owned, landmen are responsible for acquiring the rights to underground minerals – such as coal, uranium, oil and gas – for others who want to extract them. Petroleum landmen try to lease or buy oil-and-gas rights at the behest of producers or speculators interested in investing. The landmen I observed mostly worked on a contract basis in and around North Dakota in the United States to secure deals in the 2000s and 2010s, just before and during a fracking boom there.

Petroleum landmen of the North Dakota region construct a collective identity around their profession and, at the same time, around broader distinctions of race, class, gender, sexuality and region. In its simplest terms, the intersectional identity they enact is of white, middle-class Western heterosexual masculinity.

## Property and identity

With the example of American petroleum landmen, I am arguing that people across the world establish multiple group identities in their repeated encounters with property. Sociologist W. E.

B. Du Bois (1989 [1903]) and geographer Doreen Massey (2013) both theorised about property and multiple identities in this way. I show how people do this identity-building work as they come together, take action and tell stories related to property – or ‘practise’ property (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). As they practise property, they come to associate certain practices with particular groups, and thus build their collective identities.

My focus on property and identity builds on strands of scholarship from philosophers, historians, sociologists and law professors who have long attributed the formation of individual and collective identities to private property in liberal capitalist regimes such as the United States. Some of that scholarship imagines the consequences of ownership from the subject position of the owner: an owner’s attachment and access to a thing or place, and expectations of the stability of that access, imbue a sense of individuality (Goffman 1961) and community (Radin 1996, 1982). Other scholarships address how collective identities emerge from systematically unequal positions in the same private property regime. When groups are systematically denied access, possession or even the rights to have ownership, they come to be associated with objectification, dispossession and wildness – as has been the case with black and Indigenous peoples in the United States (Harris 1993; Shoemaker 2021; Pateman and Mills 2007). Others build their identities around their privileged positions with respect to property.

Here, I examine how landmen practise a kind of white masculinity and, in so doing, add to scholarship on how privileged identities are built on the shoulders of property. In the United States, possession and ownership of land have long been central to privileged characteristics: being American and white (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Harris 1993; Pierce 2016); civility and sovereignty (Pateman and Mills 2007); the patriarchal nuclear family (Choo and Ferree 2010, 144; Collins 1998); and specific expressions of masculinity through the power and control that private property offers (Connell and Wood 2005; Cooper 2016; Moodie 1994; Anahita and Mix 2006).

With my example of landmen, I also argue that people can do identity work specifically through how they monetise land. With this approach, I join the company of economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2005, 1994) and geographer Doreen Massey (2013; Massey et al. 2018), who both connect economic actions to social relations and identity-building. In this chapter, and in my previous work (Becher 2014), I challenge dominant writings about property in many disciplines, which posits a strictly dialectical relationship between identity and property’s economic value. This line of scholarship assumes that becoming an object of exchange inhibits attachments to whatever is treated as property. From this perspective, when land or a building becomes a ‘commodity’ – an object valuable only for the monetary profit it brings on exchange – the sense of personal and community identity associated with it diminishes. A commodity is fungible rather than particular, the source of profit rather than of other kinds of value. Much of this scholarship builds on a Marxist tradition that is critical of how private property induces the exchange of land and labour for money and contrasts property’s ‘exchange value’ – money – with its ‘use value’, such as shelter, memories and community (Logan and Molotch 1987; Harvey 2005).

I argue, however, that for some, the process of cementing group identities through property is deeply involved with – rather than thwarted by – its commodification. For them, the work of identity-building and commodification occur simultaneously and even depend on one another. Those whose jobs require that they treat land as a commodity – investors, developers and brokers – are illustrative, for commodification is central to their work. Property brokers, for example, commodify the land by seeking monetary transactions for it and, when they are successful, they secure the consent of property owners to this commodification process. This chapter explores how one group of brokers creates a collective identity around its work to accomplish that exchange.

### A professional identity at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, class and region

A few minutes of my research begin to illustrate the chapter's main ideas. As I walk into Boots Bar and Grill's patio area in Medora, North Dakota, I pass dozens of people laughing, talking and drinking almost exclusively out of Bud Light's brown bottles with shiny white-and-blue labels. My research into the world of oil's property rights led me to the 2014 gathering of North Dakota's petroleum landmen. Here, they were relaxing at the main dinner of their state association's annual meeting (and golf tournament).

I get in the bar line and strike up a conversation with Chip, a landman in his late 20s with a sunburned red face. Around me, I see more white men, still in their baseball caps and shorts from the day's golf tournament.

At this event, over a hundred landmen are congregating and, I argue, confirming cultures of professional practice – a professional identity. They are sharing the professional group's particular habits and symbols. They see each other's appearance, dress, drinks and body language – which for many are quite similar. They share stories about work and watch each other's reactions. They often laugh, recoil and smile at the same moments in these stories. In these interactions, landmen develop impressions, conventions and rituals that they come to associate with landmen. As landmen acknowledge these conventions (even if they do not personally adhere to them), many develop pride or, if not pride, at least a sense of belonging to the professional group. During these interactions, landmen are 'doing' identity by performing it (West and Zimmerman 1987) or by watching it being performed and understanding it as such.

These landmen's professional identity distinguishes gender, sexuality, race, class and region. I quickly notice visible signals of a Western, American, white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity. I see people who look to me almost exclusively like white men, based on mostly physical appearance (such as skin, hair and dress), body language and speech. Only a few people appear to me as white women and even fewer as men and women of colour. By their dress and talk and what I know of their income, wealth and education, I think they are mostly middle class, but some quite wealthy, and many from working-class origins.

This environment radiates a *masculinity* – not just an overabundance of men (that is, masculine gender, not just male sex). Consider the beer bottles. Mass media often connect men's consumption of beer and men's interactions while drinking beer to traditional forms of masculinity (Strate 1992) and male–male bonding (see Darwin 2018 for a summary). In advertising and stories, mass-produced (rather than craft) American beer, and especially the Anheuser-Busch brands, such as Budweiser, tend to signal a classed – working class or middle class – masculinity. In addition, we know that workplaces often involve masculinity performances (Berdahl et al. 2018) and, in particular, working the land has been central to masculinities (Brandth 1995; Peter et al. 2000).

The landmen are doing a particular kind of masculinity that is sexualised, raced, classed and located. Intersectionality perspectives on identity tell us that multiple dimensions of identity are enacted simultaneously (Choo and Ferree 2010). Masculinity studies have shown how people perform multiple masculinities in the same context and that these forms of masculinity change over time (Brandth and Haugen 2005). Scholars have dubbed 'hegemonic masculinity' as the version that tends to be more powerful and secures consent from others (Connell 2020; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Even when this hegemonic masculinity is not the most commonly performed, its power endures through storytelling and other symbolic representations that glorify it. In many places, this hegemonic masculinity overlaps with gender norms considered traditional for white, middle- and upper-class heterosexual Americans.

Landmen's embrace of a hegemonic masculinity lies at the heart of their work and of the axis on which their identity work relies: private property. Their primary job responsibility is that of gaining control – a key idea and practice in dominant masculinities (Schnurr and Holmes 2009). In an interview with me, a North Dakota landman described the centrality of landmen's focus on gaining control through property. He used the example of Aubrey McClendon, one of the industry's big men in Texas profiled in *The Frackers* (Zuckerman 2013), and said that 'Aubrey McClendon was a landman ... he treated [oil and gas] from a landman's standpoint which was control the land and once you have the land, you've got the control'.

### Demographics and other early signals of identity

The landman profession's demographics and its members' statements and silences provide initial evidence that they are doing a white, Western, middle-class heterosexual masculinity. This profession has existed in the United States for over a century and has long been decidedly dominated by men. Women have increased their participation in the profession, from very few through the 1950s and 1960s to 10% in the 1980s to 25% by 2007, which has since been holding steady (Aven Jr. 1991, 2008, 2012; Data Point Consulting, LLC 2020).

The American Association of Petroleum Landmen (AAPL) and many individual landmen present the profession as attempting to include women, while acknowledging its present and past male domination. The AAPL magazine regularly publishes articles on inequalities in gender representation and wages and has reported on leadership's acceptance of women as landmen (American Association of Petroleum Landmen 1985). The widespread use of the title 'landman' reinforces the profession's masculinity – and its women embrace the term. Even if originally an abbreviation for 'land management', 'landman' is rarely heard that way. The women I spoke to during my research in 2014 and 2015 referred to themselves as 'landmen'. An AAPL story, admittedly from decades ago, reported that a leading woman landman 'has no objections' to the title. The article quotes her: 'I think [other] terms [like land manager] sound corny. We are landmen ... That is a generic term. I think it sounds better, and all of the females in our department [at Mobil] prefer it' (American Association of Petroleum Landmen 1985, 39–40).

Race and sexuality are rarely explicitly discussed, and this is evidence of whiteness and heteronormativity. Landmen talked a lot about the 'wives' of landmen in general – betraying their assumptions of both landmen's male sex and their heterosexuality. Many asked me personally if I was married or had a husband or boyfriend; I did not notice any signals that they would be open to hearing that I was married to a woman. Race is addressed even less explicitly than gender or sexuality. Unlike gender, information on race is not reported in the AAPL's regular surveys, nor is it a topic in the association's magazine articles. In my interviews, I observed skin colour as white in almost every case. I did not generally ask explicitly about gender or race unless prompted. Race came up in my interviews and observations most often when landmen were referring to tribal land and minerals and Indian law. I understand whiteness as mostly persisting as an unmarked and unacknowledged category. Research on whiteness confirms that its power often resides in this unmarked presence, in the silence surrounding it (McDermott and Samson 2005; Nayak 2007; Levine-Rasky 2011).

By objective measures available, landmen fall in the middle of America's class distribution. The mean and median incomes of landmen rest well within most income-based measures of the middle class (Reeves, Guyot and Krause 2018), perhaps on the high end. (I discuss data on income in more detail later in this chapter.) Landmen's education levels are concentrated in the middle: a higher percentage than the national average had earned a bachelor's degree, and

a smaller percentage than the national averages had lower or higher levels of education (Aven Jr. 2012).

Finally, a significant dimension of identity formation here relates to location. Landmen consider themselves to be rooted in 'oil country', an archipelago of high oil-producing regions. In 2020, North Dakota was second only to Texas in its percentage of US oil production: five states accounted for 71% of US production in 2020, with Texas leading at 43%, North Dakota at 10% and New Mexico at 9% (Oklahoma and Colorado were at 4% each) (US Energy Information Administration 2020).

The more specific belonging to North Dakota and the Western region is also important to landmen. North Dakota is in the American West and the Great Plains, often associated with Europeans settling on homesteads, not colonised until the nineteenth century, and still ripe with 'frontier' sensibilities and many Native American peoples and reservations.

In this section, I have offered some evidence that the landmen I studied identify themselves – as a group – at a particular intersectional identity: as male, heterosexual, white, middle class and of a particularly Western oil country. The rest of the chapter demonstrates how this intersectional identity is more than the sum of many individuals; it is produced and performed as a collection of shared, well-known group practices.

### **Friendly competition**

The landmen engage in fierce but friendly competition to make deals. Playful competition like this is familiar to masculinity scholars (Berdahl et al. 2018), and this is one way that I see landmen 'doing' masculinity as part of their profession.

At the annual dinner for North Dakota's landmen, I sit with men who share their wild amusement with their stories of fierce, and friendly, competition with each other. One man laughs himself silly talking about once literally running a friend off the road to get to a prospect first. One of my interviewees said simply, 'You are competitors – but you're kind of friends also.'

Most of the time, the race to a prospect is not an actual road race. Rather, competition materialises as landmen hide and steal private information about who is leasing where, and for how much. Landmen understand secrecy as paramount. For instance, they are not supposed to tell anyone what county or even what state they are working in. This information is the key to getting to the property owner first and, it is hoped, getting a deal without any competition.

Many landmen are also instructed not to talk about which investor or oil company they are leasing for – even to the property owners from whom they are trying to lease. To make sure they won't tell, brokers sometimes hide this information from the landmen. One broker laughed as he recounted how a major oil company paid a price for doing this. The company used two different brokers, who didn't know who each other was, and whose lease agents didn't know what company they were ultimately working for. As a result, the two brokers competed for the same leases and, he said, 'It was quite comical to watch them run their own prices up'.

One interviewee told me that landmen are 'all so secretive' and they are understood to engage in reconnaissance to get the information they want. They spy on other landmen while doing research in county recorders' offices to see which parcels they are researching. Even the simplest observations about which landmen they see in which county's courthouses, hotels, bars or restaurants can reveal where a company wants to buy rights. At the annual gathering, my table bursts into laughter as one landman recalls stealing paperwork left behind by other landmen in hotel trashcans, and many nod.

A younger-generation landman happily told me 'funny stories' from 'back in the day' about landmen chatting up oil-and-gas workers at bars to find out where rigs were going next. Or a

landman acting as a 'spy' by sitting on a hilltop with binoculars to count pipes going down a well during a drilling operation to learn how deep a competitor was going – crucial information for leasing. Many say that such 'industrial espionage' was more common decades ago.

Landmen today still like to think of their jobs as fiercely competitive, and fun and interesting for being so – even if the information stealing is much rarer now. Now, this secrecy may be more tradition and ritual than actual effective practice. One landman told me, 'It's confidential information but everybody knows what everybody's doing anyway'. Even so, the information hiding continues: 'this landman thing is ... everybody gets together and has a beer and nobody really says exactly where they're leasing or what they're up to'.

### **Making big money**

Landmen often say that the promise of big money initially attracted them to the work and keeps them doing it. 'There's a lot of guys that jump in real quick because they hear the money is really good and they can make a fast buck', as one landman put it. They also acknowledge the high risk attached to their wages and the money they try to secure for property owners. Although landmen do not necessarily talk about gender when they talk about this risky money, hegemonic masculinity is generally associated with being a breadwinner (Connell 2020; Novikova et al. 2005) and with taking risks for big profits (Enloe 1990; Fisher 2012; Goede 2005; Guthey 2001; Tsing 2005). Thus, I interpret landmen's thirst for big money at high risk as a masculinity performance.

No matter that most landmen never get rich, and nor do most mineral owners who lease their oil rights. Research on other communities performing hegemonic masculinities similarly shows that qualities respected need not be common; instead, they need to be held up as ideal. This is often done through the telling of stories and otherwise focusing attention on those few who represent the desired quality (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 846).

### **Money for landmen**

At the annual North Dakota bash for landmen, my new young acquaintances display their reverence for those who have made it rich. As they settle at their tables, they look out across the sea of people around them and lift their index fingers from their beer bottles to point to the ones who grab their attention, and who they say should grab mine. They describe them as self-made multimillionaires, and I later learn that they own airplanes and a famous racehorse, and get written about in the *New York Times*. These people are friends with, and of the same ilk as, other more famous oilmen, such as Aubrey McClendon of Chesapeake Energy. My new young buddies look up to these multimillionaires with starry eyes, out of respect and out of hope, for some, that they will offer them wisdom and opportunities to follow in their footsteps.

Landmen have a long history of investing in mineral rights and leases themselves. Many of the older men my companions point out now own their own brokerages and employ other landmen. They made their fortunes by speculating on buying oil rights decades ago. There are stories of more recent individual rises to riches, but these are rare. One of the men at the North Dakota dinner made it by being one of the few who had a sense that the 'Bakken play' that showered North Dakota with oil was coming in the early 2000s, and he bought up thousands of leases cheaply in anticipation.

Most independent landmen today earn only daily wages and few own oil-and-gas rights themselves. And still, their high, but volatile, incomes help maintain the sense that their work promises big pay-offs with big risks. Landmen earn much more than the average American



worker overall and at almost every education level. In 2010, landmen reported an average salary of \$125,000 nationally, compared to \$67,000 for the average male full-time worker. Landmen who have high school or two-year associate degrees make over twice as much as their national counterparts (again, measured conservatively as male, full-time workers), and landmen with bachelor's degrees make about 50% more than their national counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Landmen know well that such high rewards come at a high risk – their employment is precarious. They talk constantly about the likelihood of losing work when oil markets bust. One landman told me that he loves to see wells pumping in the area where he is working because ‘when you’re actually looking at oil wells that are coming in that are producing ... that’s really great because you know ... you’re not gonna lose your house’. Field landmen working in North Dakota are mostly independent contractors with brokers, who themselves are contracting with oil producers and investors. Moreover, landmen’s work is at what is called the most ‘upstream’ end of the oil-extraction process. This means that it is the first work to shut down when the industry’s money tightens.

In fact, when landmen look around at their colleagues’ ages, they see evidence of their employment’s precarity. They notice a glaring absence of people of a certain generation – those who would have entered the field in the 1980s and 1990s, when the oil industry was lagging and most landmen were laid off. And, for the next 20 years, there was almost nothing happening to draw new entrants. The AAPL’s national survey data confirm this common impression (Aven Jr. 2012).

### ***Money for mineral owners***

Landmen consider risky money to be a part of their business with mineral owners as well. As landmen see it, mineral owners stand to earn a great amount of money from their deals. A seasoned and successful landman told me that he puts the lease in front of owners with a pen and tells them that it is their ‘chance to get rich’. He is probably extreme, but many find the act of ‘giving’ them money to be extremely rewarding. One told me:

After everything was all done and paid, she [the owner] called me back one day and she wanted to call and thank me ... she started crying on the phone, ‘This is the most money I’ve ever had in my life’. I said, ‘Okay, this will work for me’.

As with landmen’s earnings, the promise of money to mineral owners is precarious. They, too, are beholden to the oil industry’s uncertainties, and even more so to the uncertainties of their particular locations. Indeed, on the one hand, many landmen promise money as a carrot. On the other, they use the money’s high risk as a stick to pressure owners to take their deal: they remind hesitant owners that it might be a long time before anyone else is interested in their oil rights. They even threaten that their offer might expire any time their employer changes their mind. One farming couple in eastern Montana told me that one of the “two standard lies of an oil man [landman is] ‘got to do it now, we’re not coming back, so you better lease with us now’”.

Whether or not they pressure owners, landmen often discuss this risk–reward connection as being part of the business, driven by the volatility of global oil prices, by the unpredictability of the particular place’s geology, and by uncertainties about other players in the business.

### **Providing money for the weak**

When landmen talk about what they love about their jobs, many of them refer to getting an owner money. But not just any owner. They show particular pride when that money helped a ‘weaker’

person, usually a woman. I interpret this paternalist outlook as another way that landmen perform masculinity, for paternalism is associated with masculinity in many other contexts (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Estevan-Reina, de Lemus and Megías 2020; Kerfoot and Knights 1993).

Getting money for a poor woman on a family farm was the reason, one told me, 'Once a landman, always a landman'. He explained:

The job, listening to a lady cry. I've been sitting in many ma and pa farmhouses. I haven't done that for years and years. That was a part of the business that absolutely drove me crazy, loved. You'd be sitting there. You'd hand them a check for \$80,000. That's the most money these people ever had in their life. Okay, I mean, they're poor dirt farmers. They're like, and they think it's you giving it to them ... they loved you when you walked out the door.

He describes these memories as an important part of how he thinks of his job today – even though he adds that he doesn't have experiences like this anymore. In fact, the image of the western North Dakota 'dirt farmer' commonly serves as the ideal recipient of oil money for landmen there. Other lease agents spoke about their sense of the area's owners as being particularly deserving and needy – because one would expect only the hardest working and long-suffering farmers to have remained there, where the land is dry and the soil is far from rich (as compared even to eastern North Dakota):

Those farmers in the west [of North Dakota] ... they worked their butts off, and they just didn't get the income that you do on the eastern side. So, it was really fun when you could come in and offer a guy who's got half the mineral acres on his farm, and, you know, they will pay him a hundred, five-hundred, a thousand bucks an acre [as a signing bonus].

Landmen often refer not only to the hard lifestyle of local farming, but also to the farmers' rejection of conspicuous consumption. He continues:

They're so darn conservative. They don't go out and spend all their money right away. I remember one guy I leased, and he was getting about a million bucks a month ... He told me that he bought a new Lincoln. He says, 'Well, actually, not a new Lincoln. It was two years old, but it was new to me'. There's no way these guys will go out and buy a brand-new car! ... That's the fun part of being a landman.

Many landmen talk about how farmers only buy used cars and rarely buy new clothes. With their new money, perhaps they travel more or invest for their kids. But mostly, landmen say with an approving nod, outsiders would not see any evidence of their newfound riches.

Landmen also fondly shared stories of how large a difference a small sum could make, especially in geographic areas known to house struggling families and especially to widows.

Being a landman, one of my favourite stories was ... [about a woman whose] husband had died. They owned a section of land – they kept half the minerals. She said, 'I prayed the night before you called, I was behind on the taxes' ... And she said, 'I was gonna lose [my home], and I was praying that something would happen that I wouldn't have to lose it'. So I showed up, and she had a check for ... I think she got a check for 4800 bucks for ... but she was so thankful.



Landmen often clarify that *they* matter to owners receiving money because, without them, the owners would not make anything. Many mineral owners do not know what they own – until a landman finds them and tells them. One said, ‘So many people have benefited from this [oil companies and landmen]. It’s not even funny. So many people had no idea they had minerals, that we spent hours and days researching, trying to find them, tracking them down’.

Landmen say that they do more, too: they find ways to adjust the price in the owner’s favour, if and when they sense that the owner is weak. Femininity often symbolises that weakness. I heard the owners being helped referred to so often as an ‘old lady’, a ‘widow’ or a ‘grandma’ that this gendered label seems a landman’s trope. The implication is usually that these female owners will accept any deal offered. The landman’s responsibility is to protect such a person from signing herself into a bad deal.

One broker explained that landmen always encounter people who are ignorant of the leasing process and therefore vulnerable, and ‘it’s usually ... the older widows’. He went on to say that he protects them by making sure they get a decent deal, even if against his client’s wishes:

Whenever you go into an area, there’s always the easy people to lease. It’s the ones that really don’t know what the hell’s going on. It’s usually the older, a lot of the older widows and I’m sorry, I ain’t doing that to some old lady that needs this money. I’m not doing it. I ain’t doing it for you shitheads. Have a nice day. Not doing it. Not doing it.

He sounded so strong willed, in the face of a multinational oil company. I asked him if he actually told the oil company his position, and he said no. He said that he simply pays everyone the same price and tells the company that they couldn’t find any cheap leases.

Often, landmen take advantage of their expertise and position to massage the deal in the owner’s favour, without the investor even knowing. One told me, for instance, that he once in a while exaggerates the length of a pipeline easement when calculating payments. Thus, the employer sees that the per-rod (a distance measure) limit on price was in place, but the owner and the landman knew that in reality the owner got a higher per-rod price.

Others recounted stories of initially signing low-priced leases with ‘old ladies’ and then later returning to increase the price to make it equal to what harder bargainers had subsequently negotiated. One lease buyer contrasted the ‘old grandma in California’, who deserves accommodation, with the ‘savvy’ or ‘somewhat knowledgeable farmer’, who does not. Another told me that he once felt perfectly comfortable talking an owner *out of* a protection in a lease because the owner ‘wasn’t one of those really nice guys that I felt bad for! He was arrogant to begin with and, and I figured, OK, he knew his business well enough that I didn’t need to be representing him’. In this case, the landman appeals to a confidence in the owner’s autonomy as a negotiator, not his need for protection.

Landmen say that oil-and-gas landmen’s communities have established ethics about protecting weak owners, and the local landmen know each other and enforce these rules through reputation. One explained this to me using a hypothetical (female) example. He said:

It’s kind of an ethics thing in the oil-and-gas business, where you give her the same offer. She might accept an offer for \$20 an acre, but it’s obviously an ethical thing where if you said you’re gonna pay \$500 an acre here, you offer that amount to everybody ... because you really don’t want a bad name with people where they’re afraid to work with you.

As I've shown here, landmen very often see themselves not as just getting money for their employers, but as providing for and protecting 'weak' owners they characterise as female. And, conversely, driving a hard bargain and even using power against more powerful owners is almost always described in male terms.

This paternalism is the final of three broad conventions that I have argued shape petroleum landmen's behaviour in North Dakota. All three of them – friendly competition, big money and paternalism – help landmen identify themselves as members of their profession, and these tenets appeal to broader notions of white, heterosexual masculinity.

## Conclusion

I hope that this chapter motivates us to think more about how people in all places and times form group identities around property. I also hope that it helps us think about how that identity formation may sometimes emerge as people exchange property for money. The landmen discussed here and other property brokers are, to be sure, an extreme example. They are unusually focused on property. And they are especially focused on its financial value.

Consider the much more common inhabitant of a home in the United States. It is often assumed that people build their identities around their home as they become attached to the place over time. This identity is often thought to be the opposite of, and even directly threatened by, the treatment of a home as an object for sale. And yet, I would argue that how people think about the financial value of their homes, and the purchase or rent involved, helps them construct a sense of group belonging. Perhaps most glaringly, in a highly residentially segregated United States, where people live speaks volumes about their race and class. But we need to look much more closely at the complicated and particular ways people experience their positions related to property, and how they relate those positions to their race, class, gender, sexual and other identities.

People also build collective identities as they encounter property relations outside of home. This is perhaps most obvious to people when they see those who work to protect private and public property. Employees often surveil people who attempt to access private and public roads, parks, universities, libraries and museums. And we know, at a minimum, that those employees often consider their impressions of others' race and class as they choose how to react. I hope that this chapter inspires us to look past property's 'raceless façade' (Harris 2020, 2), among its other illusory cloaks, and to investigate the many identity-building processes that involve property.

We all live, work and play on ground and in buildings treated as property. And, as we go into debt for property, pay for it, profit from it, sign onto responsibilities for it, or yearn for access to it that we do not have, we develop group identities. Even when we do not attach a sense of self to particular objects treated as property (Kreiczer-Levy 2016), we can still build our sense of belonging to groups through how we encounter property.

## Notes

- 1 Barnard College/Columbia University.

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- 2 Landmen annual earnings, compiled from an AAPL Compensation Survey about 2010 earnings, include all landmen who worked full time or wanted to work full time, compared to Current Population Survey 2010 data for full-time and year-round male workers.

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