In early January 2002, a fire destroyed a slum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, displacing approximately 16,000 people. The slum was situated on “prime” riverfront land, some of which was owned by Theng Bunma, a politically powerful Cambodian businessman. Several days after the first fire, some men were witnessed propelling Molotov cocktails into another Phnom Penh slum, leading to the destruction of over 1,000 additional homes populated, in this case, by mainly Vietnamese people. Not coincidentally, the fires cleared space to be used in an urban “revitalisation program” that is associated with government ambitions to reclaim Phnom Penh’s historical reputation as one of Southeast Asia’s grandest cities (Kazmin, 2002).

In the context of the historically unprecedented growth of cities around the world (especially in tropical regions), forced evictions and associated forms of displacement such as those witnessed in Phnom Penh have emerged as a key form of social disruption. The practice of forced eviction may be defined as the removal of people from their homes or lands against their will, directly or indirectly attributable to the state. It is a widespread practice affecting persons in both developed and developing countries. Tropical cities, in particular, are the sites for thousands of forced evictions on an annual basis. However, while forced evictions are generating serious social tensions, there is a surprising lack of analysis as to the causes and consequences of the process, as well as the associated development of policies that might inhibit the process.

Forced evictions can always be attributed to specific decisions, legislation or policies of states or the failure of states to intervene to halt forced evictions by third parties. Governments are often actively involved in the physical removal of people from their homes. International agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are also agents in the practice of forced eviction. The ADB, for example, has funded large-scale infrastructure projects in Chinese cities such as Shanghai; projects that are built on land that was formerly used for housing (Olds, 2001: 194–195). Similarly, the World Bank’s position is, essentially, that involuntary resettlement is often an unavoidable aspect of many urban development projects and, as the world’s urban population increases, the volume of people who must be displaced in the name of progress is sure to grow. Although the Bank is beginning – albeit with great hesitancy – to examine human rights issues in the context of project loans, it remains a major player in the global eviction dynamic.

In summary, forced eviction prohibits an individual or group from living in a particular house, residence or place, and requires the movement of the individual or group to other areas. Forced eviction is similar in meaning and at times synonymous with terms such as
displacement, ethnic cleansing, expulsion, forced removals, house demolition, land expropriation, population transfer, relocation, resettlement and slum clearance.

The causes of forced eviction are many and varied. Large-scale forced evictions conducted or tolerated by governments are carried out in a variety of circumstances and for a number of different reasons. The list below outlines some of the more common rationale for forced eviction by which many states legitimise their actions:

• development and infrastructure projects (e.g. construction of dams and other energy projects);
• prestigious international events (e.g. Olympics);
• urban redevelopment or city beautification projects;
• conflict over land rights;
• the removal or reduction of housing subsidies for low-income groups;
• forced population transfers and forced relocations in the context of armed conflict;
• separation of ethnic or racial groups;
• refugee movements; and
• reclaiming public land.

The similarities in the cases of forced eviction that the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (see COHRE, 1999) has documented present a picture of harassment, violence, lack of reasonable compensation and households torn from their means of livelihood. In its most recent report, Global Forced Eviction Survey No. 8, COHRE (2002) outlines eviction cases in 63 countries and affecting nearly four million people. COHRE is not alone in its attention to evictions. Everett (2001), for instance, provides a detailed historical analysis of the often devastating social effects of forced evictions in Bogotá, Colombia. Similarly, the documentary film On Borrowed Land (Westfall, 1990), set in Manila during the Aquino presidency, profiles the intersection of forced evictions with political violence and, ultimately, the murder of a community leader who represented the urban poor. The Bogotá and Manila cases reinforce the point that the justification used by governments to legitimise their acts of forced eviction can never excuse the violations of others’ civil and political rights. As stated in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993: “While development facilitates the enjoyment of human rights, the lack of development may not be invoked to justify the abridgement of internationally recognised human rights” (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu5/ wchr.htm>). While development projects or urban development policies are important, it is equally important that communities and individuals have a right to be protected against “arbitrary or unlawful interference” with their homes. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in General Comment No. 7 (1997, para 17, at <http://www.cohre.org>) states that no matter the cause, “Evictions should not result in rendering individuals homeless or vulnerable to the violation of other human rights” (see also Leckie, 1999). This General Comment is but one of the numerous international standards now heavily regulating the practice of forced evictions and treating this practice as a clear violation of human rights (COHRE, 1999).

In the context of increasing numbers of forced evictions around the world, and especially in rapidly developing cities of the South (including in the tropical world), we have assembled a special issue that focuses exclusively on forced evictions. The purpose of this special issue of the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography is to highlight various dynamics associated with forced eviction and related displacement processes in tropical cities. The intention is to profile research on
processes that receive little analytical attention, yet which have a huge impact on people’s lives throughout metropolitan areas in tropical Asia, Africa and Latin America. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the enhancement of debate about the forces and impacts associated with forced evictions. We also hope to engender further discussion about what can be done to inhibit or lessen forced evictions, given the myriad of negative impacts generated in the process. This Special Issue should be viewed as a complement to a series of articles that have emerged over the last several years (e.g. Everett, 2001) on forced evictions in a variety of geographical contexts, as well policy and programme initiatives directed by agencies and institutions such as the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements’ Global Campaign for Secure Tenure (<http://www.unchs.org/tenure/>) and COHRE’s ongoing campaign against forced evictions and for housing rights.

The first paper of the special issue outlines, in overview form, the scale and nature of forced evictions in Kenyan cities. Kefa M. Otiso embeds the discussion in a general analysis of Kenya’s political economy, especially the inequitable landownership structure. Drawing upon secondary sources, Otiso’s paper is valuable in that it delineates a very clear context for more detailed analyses of forced evictions in Kenyan cities, as well as providing insights on why it is important for all analyses to pay attention to broader political structures. Otiso’s paper is also placed at the front of this Special Issue as he provides a useful general discussion on the issue of forced evictions and displacement processes in “developing country” contexts.

While not explicit, Otiso foreshadows two broader themes in this Special Issue. The first is what might be understood as a “moral geography” (see Driver, 1988) through which marginal people and places are rendered in need of development/destruction on account of their supposedly unsanitary conditions or lack of public hygiene. In the Kenyan context that Otiso considers, as elsewhere in the tropical world, there is a genealogy that extends back to colonial development and planning. In his work on “excremental colonialism” in the Philippines, Anderson (1995:641) noted how American colonial health officers in the early twentieth century turned their new tropical frontier into a desolate human waste-land, imagining everything “brownwashed” with a thin film of germs. Thus constituted, the tropical environment called for massive, ceaseless disinfection.

As is evident from other papers in the volume – notably those by Paul Barter (on the Klang Valley in Malaysia) and by Stephen Dobbs (on Singapore) – the will to spatial purification has persisted and even heightened in modernising tropical states. Worse, the moral panic that is engendered by “slums” as eyesores in increasingly globally image-conscious cities means that current rounds of “disinfection” are oriented less at moral and/or environmental rehabilitation than at simple eviction out of site/sight (see also Bunnell, 2002).

These moral geographies connect with a second broad theme signalled by Otiso’s paper, namely, the politics of eviction. Otiso and, especially, Sujata Ramachandran, provide critical insights on the political manoeuvring that leads to the “othering” of people and places. Ramachandran, for example, highlights how Sangh Parivar (a collective of Hindu Rightist organisations) made the dangers of unsanctioned immigration by growing numbers of poverty-stricken Bangladeshi Muslim peasants their new political strategy, leading to those immigrants’ removal from slums in New Delhi. The discursive and material are intertwined in these cases, leading to the socio-spatial demarcation that foreshadows all forced evictions. In other words, the eviction process is almost always legitimised via the political stigmatisation of certain people and certain places.
The politics and the political economy of eviction are also clearly emphasised by Paul Barter, an academic and a non-governmental organisation (NGO) activist. Barter focuses on the rarely examined linkage between transport and forced evictions. As Barter notes, it is increasingly common for cities to position themselves globally via the provision of transport infrastructure needed for connections outside, such as airports, as well as to facilitate movement within. This structural imperative to connect to the “global space of flows” (Castells, 1996) has led to large-scale forced evictions in tropical and other cities (especially in Asia; see, for example, Olds, 2001). Yet again, the process of eviction is linked to the naming and labelling of groups. The theme of labelling and naming is probably taken the furthest by Stephen Dobbs in the case of the lightermen who transported goods along the Singapore River. His paper situates the relocation of the lighterage industry and river redevelopment and restoration within the broader economic and social agendas of the Singapore government. This modernist agenda led to the erasure of citizens who seemingly (according to the Singaporean state) had no future in the “modern” city.

Dobbs’ contribution, and its focus on the victims of the state-driven “modernisation” process, is a valuable complement to that of Alan Smart. Based upon a long period of ethnographic work in Hong Kong, Smart’s paper focuses upon the governmental agents associated with driving the eviction process, rather than the “victims” of the process. As we noted above, it is critically important to think about the eviction process from a wide variety of perspectives, including that of the state, the primary agent shaping the eviction process. Yet Smart’s paper also reminds us that “authorities” themselves should not be assumed to constitute a unified and coherent “state power” (see also Bunnell, 2002). The state is a complicated and ever-changing complex of institutions. Moreover, geography matters, with significant differences in state formation across space. This point is clearly noticeable when digesting all of the papers in this Special Issue and is also worth keeping in mind when devising practical strategies to resist forced evictions in any specific city. In other words, the potential for negotiation and the shaping of outcomes in the eviction process is variable and ever changing. Community groups and NGOs need to be flexible and strategic in the formation of their anti-eviction strategies.

Finally, it is worth taking note of the variety of research methods and foci in this series of papers on forced evictions. Smart’s paper has important connections and differences when compared with Dobbs’, for example. Both are derived via ethnographic work in the tropical city, but they differ in focus, as alluded to above. Graeme Bristol’s paper is also ethnographic, though his focus is on young girls who are displaced from homes in the massive Klong Toey slum in Bangkok, Thailand. What is innovative about Bristol’s paper is its focus on the social aspirations and lived spaces that, very often, the abandoned must cope with. Rather than presenting a paper of despair, Bristol (a trained architect and currently teaching architecture) focuses on the process whereby children potentially gain some control over their habitat. Bristol’s narrative departs from conventions of academic writing and serves to drop the reader into the middle of a process that generates both hope and also a measured amount of anxiety. His paper reminds us that the process of eviction intersects with a range of other social, cultural, economic and political dynamics. In such a context, it is clearly important to support a wide variety of forms of analysis, and a wide variety of anti-eviction strategies. Alternative urban futures – futures that recognise the human right to housing – can only be achieved if we work at a range of different levels.

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