

**Enchanted Commons and Politics of Possession:
A Reading of Jorge Thielen Armand's *La Soledad* (Venezuela, 2016)**

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The notion of “the common” and its political forms has been the focus of major political and theoretical discussions, especially among Marxist, Post-Marxist, and feminist scholars. Drawing from French philosophers Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot’s formulation of the concept, we may define the common as the political principle that is present in practices of mutual aid and solidarity; sharing resources; de-privatizing spaces; undoing the conventional separation between public and private; and collectively managing the reproduction of life and work—as opposed to competition and individual gain, which are values associated to the logic of neoliberalism. In short, the common is present in worker’s councils and mutual aid organizations as well as in caretaking arrangements between neighbors. Moreover, much of the existing literature on the common sees the concept as central to the study of collective resistances against dispossession by transnational capital, especially across the Third World; simultaneously, it lies at the base of an ongoing debate about intellectual property and the constitution of “knowledge commons.”

In Latin America, the common was at the forefront of the discourse of many of the so-called “Pink Tide,” progressive governments of the 2000s. Following the decline of many of those regimes, notions of the common (*lo común*) have been strongly

mobilized by agents that situate themselves outside of the state, most visibly by feminist and indigenous movements, to support their claims. In the case of Venezuela, however, language of the common has been and continues to be frequently deployed by the political project in power since 1999, known as the Bolivarian Revolution. In the mid-2000s, President Hugo Chávez established a political horizon that he called the “Communal State.” This project—that, in his view, would eventually replace the existing State—was premised on a constituted “Communal Power.” The organisms of the Communal Power are councils, communes, and worker’s cooperatives that have mostly depended financially on the central government. This dependency on state funding has complicated the formation of autonomous links between organisms of the common and the state, often resulting in clientelism. In 2013, nearly a decade after this inaugural moment of *lo comunal* within the Venezuelan state, an acute economic crisis brought on by rampant corruption and plummeting oil prices seized the country and subjected all sectors of society—especially the working classes—to severe precarization. Nearly another decade later, with the crisis still raging and exacerbated by U.S.-imposed sanctions, many invocations of the common seem to come most loudly from below and outside of what has been delimited as “Communal Power,” where a state that often uses the rhetoric of *lo comunal* has failed to fulfill its promises. Interpretations and reflections on the common are also present in recent cultural products, like films and works of visual and performance art. Given this trajectory, an analysis of contemporary Venezuelan issues allows us to launch a critique of what the common can mean today.

How is the common imagined in Venezuela today, nearly two decades after this terminology entered the day-to-day political vocabulary? In this article, I look beyond the state-centric paradigm that dominates inquiries about the common in the Venezuelan context by investigating how it is imagined and represented outside of state-adjacent practices. In the following pages, I will argue that Jorge Thielen Armand’s *La Soledad* (2016), a film shot in *cinema-verité* style in Caracas, portrays an ambiguous form of tenancy that destabilizes the conventional idea of private property ownership and stages a conflict between notions of private and common that bear upon the state of housing access in present-day Venezuela. I will also show that the film articulates this conflict by invoking an imaginary of enchantment entwined with notions of possession in the spiritual sense (suggesting the presence of an entity within another), and insofar as possession suggests a type of relationship different from property. As cultural artifacts articulate, to paraphrase Georges Didi-Huberman, “symptoms” of their time,

I contend that we may look to contemporary artistic production for points of access into a specific imaginary of the common in Venezuela. This film offers one such gateway.

La Soledad is a slow-paced story about the daily life of a working-class family living in the ruins of a colonial mansion named La Soledad in an upper-class neighborhood of Caracas. The film focuses on José López, a young construction worker who lives with his grandmother Rosina, his girlfriend Marley, and his daughter Adrializ. The conflict at the core of the film is related to a question of property: the protagonists are not titleholders of the old house they live in, but they cannot be considered squatters either—one of them, at least, has been authorized by the owners to inhabit the house. The characters care for the house and use it as their own but are powerless when confronted with the owners' decision to demolish it.

A “docu-fiction” feature, *La Soledad* stars non-actors who mostly go by their real names, and its setting is a house that belongs, in real life, to the director Jorge Thielen Armand's family. We find out early on that the grandmother, Rosina, worked as a live-in maid in the mansion for many years. We are never told why the house has been vacated at the moment portrayed in the film, but we do find out through one of the owners, who appears briefly, that Rosina had been granted special permission to live in the house on her own. Consequently, the house is marked by Rosina's life-long labor, and its conditions of decay allude to what anthropologist Ann Stoler has called the “ruins of an imperial formation” (2013, 8-9). As many studies have shown, the role of the traditional live-in maid is mainly undertaken by migrant, poor, uneducated, and often indigenous or black women in Latin America; therefore, the colonial roots of domestic work are palpable in its racialization. Rosina's living conditions in the film are the tangible aftermath of that labor relationship, its *ruin*, which entails an ongoing symbolic ruination of the space.

Ann Stoler's description of the melancholic imperial gaze, which perceives ruins as “enchanted, desolate spaces,” is useful here insofar as it points to the ideological multi-valence of ruination and its implication with *enchantment*. If, as she argues, in former colonies a ruin may project the entrancing image of vanished pasts (such as the Acropolis, the Colosseum, and other monumental spaces), a decolonial critique of ruins is one that dissolves the melancholy and repositions the gaze in the structures of damage that the ruin—the imperial formation—actually sustains (2013, 9). In *La Soledad*, however, the notions of “enchantment” and “ruination” work in tandem: La Soledad is *ruined* because the physical decay of the space is overwhelming, but this ruination

doubles as a form of enchantment that does not necessarily limit itself to a property of the imperial gaze.

A 2018 collection of essays about contemporary commons by Italian feminist scholar Silvia Federici is titled *Re-Enchanting the World*. Deriving, perhaps, from Max Weber's 1918 thesis that modern scientific progress had the effect of disenchanting all areas of human experience—rendering it un-mysterious, forcing it to submit to the governance of the rational—, Federici seems to posit that capitalist accumulation is a disenchanting force. Facing this state of desolation and disillusion, she argues that the principle of the common, in organizing the “possibility of recovering the power of collectively deciding our fate on this earth,” is a force that restores a sense of enchantment in the world (2019, 8). Although Federici does not elaborate on this link between the two ideas—common and re-enchantment— I interpret her employment of the notion of the enchanted as suggesting that the common can provide an escape from the hegemonic rationality of individualism, accumulation, and competition. Therefore, this open-ended use of “enchantment” unsettles Stoler's understanding of enchantment as primordially a colonial mode of experience; on the contrary, it suggests that the emancipatory potentiality of the common is that it may release human experience from the totalizing logic of capitalism and into a new horizon of possibility. I contend that enchantment in *La Soledad* functions according to *both* meanings: the ruined/enchanted elements of the house are both remnants of a colonial past *and* enablers of an otherwise-unimaginable relationship to the house itself.

On Capitalism and Modes of (Dis)Enchantment

A genealogy of the imbrications of enchantment (and associated terms, like “magic”) and economics would lead us as far back as alchemical treatises, but we can find plenty of recent examples as well. In one of the instances of *Capital* in which Marx employs the language of the supernatural, he describes what distinguishes use value from exchange value—the distinction that turns a simple table, used for eating or working, into a commodity:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (. . .) It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. (. . .) Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as its steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other

commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was. (2001, 103)

In this way, Marx characterizes the conversion of use value into exchange value as the commodity being seized by a magical force that transforms it from an ordinary, trivial object into an enchanted, at once sensuous and supra-sensuous thing, no longer determined by what about it can be seen and touched. By pointing out this “fetishistic” character of the commodity form, Marx accuses nineteenth-century society of espousing a belief indistinguishable from “primitive” animism. What does it mean for a wooden table to turn on its own, to “stand on its head”? A metaphysical *something* animates the object and inserts it into the domain of the market, forcing it to enter a previously nonexistent equivalence with other commodities, behaving in ways completely incoherent with its nature. Notably, as Bill Brown has argued, this critique of fetishism does not entirely overcome the *doubleness* of the commodity, the fact that it *is* both material and ethereal—that its materiality *does* ultimately contain its abstractness (2003, 28). Furthermore, as Brook Henkel (2009) proposes, if according to Marx commodities are “merely definite quantities of congealed labor-time,” then the ethereal character of the commodity accounts for the “accumulation of abstract human labor . . . a collection of detached human energies, expended not to create a usable, physical object, but to lend that object its mysterious social life as exchange-value.” We might argue that the object is animated—possessed by—the energy of labor, and so the critique of fetishism ultimately exposes that the enchantment that it first sets out to dismantle is not inherently primitive or pre-modern.

The relationship between enchantment and value is neither objectively positive nor negative: the example of “standing tables” proves that even the most tangible and trivial objects can possess magical attributes. The sort of enchantment that concerns me in this chapter operates in precisely the way described by Marx, who was himself referencing the spiritist practices of his time: by seizing an object and possessing it, causing it to behave extraordinarily or to be perceived by others as following a supernatural logic. Whether the enchantment is “true” or “fake” does not preoccupy us. Rather, we are interested in the effects of the idea of enchantment: its influence on logics of consumption, production, and social reproduction. Indeed, capitalism and its operations are full of mysticism; while “disenchanted” the ability of humans to see themselves as agents of their own lives as they are simply subsumed into the flow of production and the market, it is also full of magical tricks. I refer, for instance, to the mysterious process—entirely sustained by the ethereal fact of personal trust—whereby

paper became money, to the emergence of a highly speculative capitalism that is ruled by the fortuitous and which produces informal economies that rely on chance and magic—from money-attracting rituals to *jogo de bicho* or *animalitos* lottery—to conjure wealth.

Enchantment is not exclusive to capitalism. As I mentioned previously, authors like Federici have posited a relationship between the common, insofar as it is a logic opposed to that of capital, and the magical. For instance, in his foreword to Federici's *Re-Enchanting the World* (2019), Peter Linebaugh suggests that the enclosure of woodlands starting in thirteenth century England destroyed the peasants' "spiritual claim on the soil," implying that customary practices of common use of pastures generated a relationship to the land that transcended the material framework of property. Following Linebaugh, we might argue that continued communal use amounts to an accumulation of "collective energy" onto the land, a process that mirrors the transformation of an object into a *something else* that Marx describes in his critique of fetishism—except that commoning-as-enchantment describes the opposite operation: communal practices restore the enclosed woodlands' original use value. Moreover, Silvia Federici argues that sixteenth and seventeenth-century European women who were left destitute after the privatization of communal forests were often framed as witches, their transgressions (often property crimes, like stealing timber or driving their animals into private pastures) conflated with trickery and evil magic. Ultimately, she contends, the persecution of witches served the project of eradication of communal modes of peasant life and the consolidation of a new mode of production based on waged labor. Federici has described a related process in the Americas, where the repression of traditional beliefs was necessary to enforce a capitalist labor discipline on the indigenous population. Indigenous and African religious practices and sociability were often said to be influenced by the devil (Federici 2010, 273). By framing communal uses of the land within an enchanted/demonic belief system, colonial authorities justified the enclosure of non-propertyed land. We may conclude that, while agglomerating positive as much as negative connotations, communal practices hold a clear connection to the "magical universe."¹

This brief overview has meant to account for some examples of the ambivalent relationship between capitalism, the common, and enchantment: the "uses" of

¹ See Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe*, 2000.

enchantment in articulating modes of experience in which an objective relationship is imbued with an energy that changes it. This energy may be directly related to the material conditions of existence of the object (for instance, the collective energy of labor that aggregates to cast the spell of exchange value); or like the “magic tricks” that capitalism requires to maintain the illusion of its inevitability. The connotations of enchantment are unstable, and it is difficult to define it definitively as positive or negative. Its language allows us to formulate estranging relationships—relationships of lack or disenchantment—, but also the experience of being seized, possessed, or filled with an otherness.

Commoning Among Ruins

Let us look back upon the ruined space of La Soledad. Rosina’s body is elderly and weak. Meanwhile the ceiling of La Soledad is falling apart, its walls flake away, its plumbing system barely functions, and its garden and patio are full of debris and discarded objects. The parallel ruination of body and built environment constitute visible signs of dispossession in a Marxist sense: the process by which the worker has been stripped of her labor power. In fact, the film retroactively portrays domestic work as a particularly dispossessory experience in which the absence of a home of her own was a forced condition of Rosina’s labor. Moreover, in the present time of the film, Rosina’s ill and unproductive body is completely severed from the work force. Here, dispossession is not only the separation of the worker from their labor power, but a marginal experience of capitalism in which she has been rendered superfluous, agency-less. This dispossession continues to “haunt” Rosina through the reality of her reliance on the ruined space, hinging on an informal living arrangement. However, in turn—and despite the proprietors’ complaints—Rosina makes the house available to her grandchild and his family. While the titleholders prefer La Soledad to remain an enclosed and private space, guarded by Rosina as their appointee, she transforms La Soledad into an open, lived-in space where social hierarchies can be contested. José and his partner Marley also make the house available to a marginalized community that would have been out of place in La Soledad’s previous days, including Tito, José’s brother, who arrives unannounced from the Ruiz Pineda barrio, running from a friend’s murderers who want to kill him as well.

The film often portrays the house as a site of celebration. Marley, Tito, and José’s friends congregate in the garden to drink *aguardiente*, improvise songs, and talk about their daily hardships between jokes. In one of the scenes, a large gathering is

happening in La Soledad. People are chatting while sitting on pieces of debris in the patio, drinking beer, playing music, cheering, and toasting, while Marley is cooking a large communal *sancocho*. The festive moments in the film tend to include shots of the open gate through which people are entering—a gate that is otherwise always locked—and show the visitors spilling out of and into the house, thus blurring the line between the guarded inside and the outside, visually undoing the split between private and common. Such moments of communing (*common* as a verb) constitute suspensions of the power relations that underwrite José’s relationship to the house: La Soledad can be repurposed to host class and racial “others” in the spaces of the ruin.

The mansion is not an entirely communal space. It is still privately owned, albeit not in an enforceable way—at least not until the moment of the demolition that we never see. This tension between inhabiting and owning, as well as the idea of a tenancy unattached to legality, reflect debates surrounding housing in present-day Venezuela that are traversed by issues of the private and the common. More specifically, the film directly interpellates the social practices that have risen in recent years through informal housing arrangements. A quick search in *Mercadolibre Venezuela*, a popular sales portal, reveals over a hundred houses in the Caracas metropolitan area labeled “abandoned houses,” while Facebook sell-and-buy groups are full of advertisements for “cuidacasas” (housekeepers) for homes left empty and unsold by migrant families.² An insightful 2018 article in *El Nacional* begins: “Fear of abandoning their things is one of the dilemmas faced by the Venezuelans who have migrated over the last 20 years . . . However, the economic crisis has given some others the opportunity to reinvent themselves with ‘new trades,’” such as house-keeping services (Pérez 2018). On the other hand, migrants commonly make their empty houses and apartments available to friends or acquaintances that cannot afford to pay rent or are looking to move to more centric locations, and those friends might open the houses to other friends as well. I suggest that these non-monetary caretaking deals work in two ways: as mutually beneficial relationships and as instances of blurring the private.

In *La Soledad*, however, the owners of the house ultimately panic as they sense that Rosina’s community challenges the private character of their property. This is particularly palpable in the one scene in which Rosina speaks with Mrs. Irene, one of the family members. Standing on the outer side of the gate of La Soledad, Irene

² According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, as of 2021 there are 4.5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide. See: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/venezuela-emergency.html>.

complains: “You knew you couldn’t let those people in here.” “‘Those people’ are my children,” replies Rosina. “I know they are your children, but that was never spoken about. That was never agreed. It was just supposed to be you. Now this looks like a squat house.” “You’re right,” answers Rosina, “but I can’t kick them out. They’re my children.” Irene, visibly upset, replies: “Talk to them. They can find a job or somewhere to move. But they can’t stay here, because I need *my* house.” Despite this rift between Rosina and Irene, the dislocations that take place within their arrangement—such as the absence of money from a real estate transaction—reproduce those of home-caretaking in contemporary Venezuela. The relationship between the absent owner and the dweller is based solely on trust, and the “tenant’s” tenancy lies outside any legal framework, as it is essentially enacted in living-in the house. The existence and viability of these practices create a crisis in the conventional understanding of ownership as a legal status that entails other legal operations (such as leasing) that are ruled also by a specific framework. The law does not contemplate these arrangements.

Shortly after hearing about the imminent demolition of the house they live in, Marley suggests to José that they “finally get enrolled in Misión Vivienda,” the social housing mission that has become one of Chavismo’s flagship projects. This indicates why José and Marley are living in La Soledad with Rosina in the first place. María Pilar García-Guadilla has described the Venezuelan state’s housing policies throughout the second half of the twentieth century, during a series of democratically-elected governments following Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorship, as disarticulated projects that addressed the exodus of rural population into cities through the massive production of houses and isolated residential developments (2011, 82). Those projects sought to provide alternatives to the *barrios*, the “informal city” of precarious houses that began to form in peripheral areas during the 1950s and 60s. As is often the case of domestic workers, we may assume that Rosina had been part of that migrant movement into Caracas, and that José later preferred to bring his family to live with her in the mansion, however run-down, than to stay in the barrio. García-Guadilla has also argued that, in its paternalistic producer-manager-financier role, the Venezuelan State tended to minimize both private and non-profit contributions and community efforts to solve housing problems, but those directives shifted under Chávez, whose 1999 Constitution sought to widen mechanisms of participation (84). Such a change allowed community initiatives to emerge while also drawing from popular urban struggles of the 1980s and 1990s, such as those articulated in the Asamblea de Barrios in Caracas. Some of those new organizations were the Comités de Tierra Urbana (86). Later, in 2004, Chávez

announced the creation of Misión Vivienda, which to this date has built hundreds of housing projects in and around the main metropolitan centers in the country. Initiatives like these, whether seen as participatory or as paternalistic, are the response to popular demands for the right to urban dwellings.

Residential ownership is one of the most contested issues surrounding contemporary housing policies in Venezuela. According to a 2016 official statement from the Ministry for Housing, the Venezuelan state has provided housing through the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela (GMVV) for over a million families since 2011. This statement, titled “Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela convierte al pueblo en propietario de un hogar digno” summarizes in quantifiable terms the achievements of the mission. It is notable that the word *propietario* (property owner) does not appear in the text itself, and the statement does not mention if the families allocated in GMVV units are the legal owners of their houses. It would therefore be incorrect to refer to Misión Vivienda beneficiaries as *propietarios*. In 2016, the same year that the Ministry for Housing published this statement, the opposition-majority National Assembly introduced a Law for the Granting of Titles of Ownership to Beneficiaries of the GMVV and Other Housing Programs that was later annulled by the government party-controlled Supreme Court, on the grounds that “es preciso imponer límites a la propiedad de las viviendas de interés social para impedir que los adjudicatarios de las mismas resignen dicho derecho por razones económicas y se desvirtúe la función social de dicha propiedad para favorecer al mercado inmobiliario” (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia 2016). Community-based participatory initiatives like the Comités de Tierra Urbana (CTUs) have also seemed to regard legal ownership as secondary to the right to housing. In a 2010 statement by Héctor Madera, a spokesman for the El Recreo CTU in Caracas, he describes the organization as a “Pioneer Movement” that works to communally recover idle and empty lots and buildings to either occupy or build houses. The term *propiedad* (property), however, is only mentioned once in the text, in reference to “juridical regularization and democratization of property” but with no elaboration on who would be responsible for that regularization and whether it would imply the distribution of property titles (Madera 2010). This evinces that property ownership is an ideologically ambiguous issue, as the political discourses around it are neither clear nor stable.

La Soledad takes place mostly within the space of the house, with very few glimpses of the outside. This confers the film’s narrative an isolated character, situating the story in a sort of exceptional dimension that the State cannot penetrate and where the notions of private and common are severed from judicial frameworks. Still, though

it goes mostly unmentioned, the State is tangible: in José's pilgrimage from one pharmacy to another searching for Rosina's medications; in the shortage of supplies in the hospital and of food in the market; in the idea that "only crime pays these days," which can be read on a wall in one scene; and in Marley's remark that she would take any job in Colombia rather than stay in Venezuela. The State is hinted at as a possible giver of care (through the reference to Misión Vivienda), but it is mostly the invisible overseer of precariousness and lack. This "absent presence" invites an interrogation regarding whether the State encourages the continuity of new or preexisting dispossessions, such that it is not a viable caregiver. We may extrapolate from this analysis broader considerations of how the Venezuelan State articulates its logic of the common. At the level of how it operates, we might see initiatives connected to the official discourse—the organs of "Communal Power"—as attempts to work through the debt of dispossession created by a history of segregation and unequal distribution of resources. Precisely because of this, the question of whether the communal entities of the State are politically autonomous is important. If the socialization of care emerges from the bottom and interpellates the State or if it happens the other way around matters insofar as the allocation of resources should not establish new, political debts, nor perpetuate inherited ones.

Specters and the Uses of "Possession"

Legal ownership being absent from the horizon of possibility for José and his family, we face the lack of a word that captures the extralegal, "other tenancy" that they hold. Returning to the idea of commoning as re-enchantment, in the following pages I argue that we may use term *possession* to describe it. I propose that the tenancy of the house by José's family may be appropriately dubbed *possession* insofar as this term has taken on an oppositional connotation in regard to *property*—that which José and his family emphatically *do not* hold. Moreover, I argue that an enchanted object, body, or space is an entity possessed by the extraordinary, and thus that enchantment may double as possession.

In *The Dispossessed*, his analysis of Marx's 1842 articles on the debates on the law on thefts of wood in the Rhineland, French philosopher Daniel Bensäid (2021) attempts to elucidate the slippery difference between property and possession. To begin, he argues that possession is a *fact*, while "property" describes an institutionalized right—the privatization of possession. He explains that, according to Proudhon, possession is a continuous state that requires nothing but a guarantee of its perpetuation

to ensure public order. Bensaïd clarifies that Proudhon uses “possession” to describe the relationship between people and the means of production: while a farmer may be the *proprietor* of their harvest, they *possess* the lands, because the right to the means of production is “evidently” common (31). Bensaïd also shows that “possession” is the term employed by Marx to describe the collective and cooperative appropriation of the means of production—a relationship on which individual property, as that which belongs to each person by virtue of their labor, is contingent (49). Furthermore, Bensaïd identifies in *Capital* a “type of property that does not tie the product to a single individual, cut off from the whole, the association, and the community” and which is distinct from private and individual property (50). We might say that this non-individual and non-private property is common property, and taking cues from the rest of the text, we may call it “possession” as well.

Marx’s 1842 articles responded to a law being debated in the Rhine Province Assembly that illegalized the customary rights of the poor to collect timber. For Bensaïd, this law illustrated both the “vigor of customary practices of usufruct rights and the growing criminalization of such practices by an emergent capitalist society.” Laws like this were enacted in Europe in order to abolish any “entanglement” of collective and personal rights, and any sort of “indeterminate” or “hybrid” property, in favor of absolute private ownership (Bensaïd 2021, 12).

“Entanglement” and “hybridity” are key aspects of *La Soledad*’s narrative. The *fact* is that José’s family inhabits this house as a result of several entanglements: of a lifelong, unequal, but affective relationship between Rosina’s family and the owner family; and of Rosina’s caretaking relationship with the house as a condition of her *factual* status as an inhabitant. Much like the tenancy of the house in *La Soledad*, possession refers to a relationship that cares little for the law because the law cannot encompass it. It defines a hybrid mode of tenancy in which the fact of habitation and the legal status of the house remain in unresolved tension.

Once José finds out about the owner family’s decision to demolish the house, he grows noticeably anxious. One afternoon, while watching a TV documentary about fortunes hidden in colonial properties, his instinct is sparked. He becomes more attuned to his surroundings, and frequently walks into the garden searching for signs of a buried treasure. In one scene, he perceives a strange sound indoors and begins tapping on the walls, hoping to locate a hidden compartment. Later, he enters a shed in the garden and is swept into a state of daydream. A black man then appears in front of him; the man is smoking and then begins to whistle. Whistling is associated with lost souls in

Venezuelan folklore, which confirms to us, and to José, that the man is a ghost. There is no follow-up to this eerie encounter, but it stirs him to ask his grandmother if she has ever seen spirits in the house. Rosina recounts to him a legend about the very first owners of the property, who allegedly murdered their slaves during a burial of *morocotas*³ so that their spirits would forever guard the treasure. She advises José to avoid “messaging” with that treasure. “If you ever saw it, you wouldn’t be able to touch it,” she says. José perseveres and brings in a metal detector, which ultimately leads him to a spot in the wall of the shed that turns out to be filled with razor blades. Frustrated after this finding, he falls asleep in the darkness, on the specter’s lap.

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, philosopher Jane Bennett states that “to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (2001, 4). Bennett contends that the enchanted is something that surprises us, hits us, and reminds us of “the specificity of things” that surround us. It also supposes the subversion of how we normally experience time and space, entailing “a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement . . . it is to be transfixed, spellbound . . . a ‘moment of pure presence’” (5). Enchantment involves the appearance of phenomena that produce affects like surprise and wonder, shake up one’s perception of reality, and reveal the presence of something extraordinary. I have previously shown how enchantment-as-ruination is present in *La Soledad*; however, the appearance of a specter midway through the film offers a provocative connection between enchantment and the common. A supernatural turn in such an austere, documentary-like film further articulates the nuances of Rosina’s family’s possession of the house in terms of enchantment.

The appearance of the specter prompts us to further explicate the distinction between property and possession, now in the realm of spirituality and with attention to its colonial connotations. As religious historian Paul C. Johnson (2011) has shown, this subtle opposition of terms—property and possession—is traceable to Western political theory of the seventeenth century. At that time, Thomas Hobbes wrote of the phenomenon of spirit possession, encountered among colonial subjects and African slaves, as a threat to individuality, and John Locke affirmed that an individual is necessarily the “proprietor of his own person.” In order to conceptualize a civil society,

³ *Morocotas* were North American gold coins that circulated in Venezuela in the nineteenth century.

argues Johnson, which depended on “predictable and regulated rules of property ownership and exchange,” these political philosophers posited that individuals must be “their own” property, autonomous, inhabited only by the “the spirit of themselves” (403-4). Moreover, Johnson adds, property was endowed with “the magic of social transformation” that allowed a person to enter civil society when they became a property owner. Excluded from society would be those who were liable to experience spirit possession—in short, most Africans and Amerindians—because they were not owners of themselves, and therefore could not be proprietors (404). In this way, Johnson shows that the term *possession* carries a history of designating an otherness defined through the impossibility of property.

The category of spirit possession, defined in terms of Enlightenment philosophy, laid down the foundations of an ideological field whereby *some* human beings could be legitimately seen *as* property, and in which colonial expropriation of land and resources was entirely coherent with the task of “introducing” things into the realm of proper, self-possessed civil society (Johnson 2011, 405). Johnson’s analysis allows us to see how the idea of spirit possession could be deployed in colonial America as a signifier of the non-propriety—unruly and “unbounded” beings that could not conform to reason as defined, essentially, by the property of oneself (412). Therefore, we may reimagine the colonial ruin that Ann Stoler (2013) has described, not as haunted by a splendid, imperial bygone past, but by the ghosts of “irrational” and indeterminate subjectivities. Indeed, the idea of “unboundedness” entails porosity, fluidity, and even a sense of excess: possession could happen only to people who were not hermetically self-contained individuals and, as a result, were prone to host various identities other than their own.

If enchantment may double as possession, and possession implies unboundedness, it follows that an enchanted entity is not only itself. For instance, when Marx (2001) wrote of the turning tables of spiritism to demonstrate the nature of the commodity, he emphasized that a commodity *appears* to be a trivial thing, but its “metaphysical subtleties” are revealed when its exchange value emerges. This implies, of course, that it is absurd to believe that a table may be able to “stand on its head,” and thus that the commodity form is based on a sort of superstition. In that sense, and despite the efficacy of the spiritist metaphor to describe a process on which capitalism hinges, Marx understands belief in spirit possession as irrational. Still, enchantment is a useful image to describe the “congealment” of energies of labor, and in *La Soledad* it works to cast a counter-spell. Whereas in Marx’s example of the table, enchantment

works to overtake and ultimately conceal the usefulness of an object, in this film it reveals a truth that is not quite evident in plain sight: the appearance of the ghost uncovers an ongoing history of power relations. In this respect, the house is, indeed, not just a physical structure; it is not just itself, as it hosts other things. Likewise, we can argue that “possession” as a mode of common appropriation of the means of production (Bensaïd 2021, 49) also expresses unboundedness—the capacity to host, nourish, and enable the reproduction of multiple individualities.

The Lockean opposition of property understood as an active, positive state, to possession seen as a passive state of subjugation to (multiple) otherness, is one of many ways to understand the role of property in configuring the hegemony of private ownership. Within this framework, there seems to be something inherently *common* about the phenomenon of spirit possession, as it supposes the dissolution of the limits of property—in this case, of the “self.” Under this premise, the idea of personhood as a porous and penetrable state is irreconcilable with the idea of rational nature in the Anglo-European tradition—self-enclosed and consequently measurable, quantifiable, and discreet. In conclusion, *La Soledad* evokes “possession” in two ways. On the one hand, it depicts a hybrid tenancy that is marked by the logic of the common. José’s family possesses the house by living in it, while the impossibility of property and the threat of eviction loom over them. In this sense, their presence constitutes an enchantment. On the other hand, the house is shown to be already “occupied” by a supernatural presence with and through the characters, in a way that remits us to the idea of unboundedness that is characteristic of spiritual possession. There is both a physical and a spiritual continuity between José and the inhabitants of the past that haunt the house.

Writing about the Venezuelan spiritist cult of the indigenous queen María Lionza, anthropologist Yolanda Salas has suggested that spiritism relies prominently on the biographies, gestures, and stories of the spirits on two levels. On a more utilitarian level, each spirit’s specific personality and inclinations make them fit for certain acts of protection, guidance, or healing. On a symbolic level, these possessions unfold as dramatizations of an imagined historical consciousness that often challenges official versions of history (1993, 167). The cult of María Lionza has become a fertile field for vindicating subjects that were socially marginalized in life. For instance, the queen María Lionza has many “royal courts,” and some of them consist of characters like *malandros* and prostitutes, but also lesser figures of the official national historiography like the Negro Felipe, a rebellious African slave from the mid-1500s who sits at the head of

María Lionza's African court. As a result, for the cult, a possession ritual is more than a curative act for the benefit of a believer-patient: it supposes the re-telling of a subaltern history that believers and *materias* (mediums) are constantly elaborating.

While the spirit that José encounters in the shed in *La Soledad* does not require a human vessel, his irruption in the story dramatizes an erased history. This is achieved by means of the spirit's kinship with Rosina's family. The murdered slave, we see, is the same man that appears in picture frames at Rosina's bedside. In this way, the film collapses the identities of the spirit and of José's dead grandfather, suggesting a familiar link between them—or, to reference the imaginary of *marialioncero* spiritism, simply *indistinctness*: within the colonial ruin that functions as a portal or threshold space, the two men are interchangeable in articulating trans-historical traumas and debts. In turn, this relates to the significance of showing the ancestor as guardian of the treasure of the gold coins (*morocotas*). Faced with imminent homelessness, the idea of a treasure, already connected to him through his ancestors recent and ancient, may allow José to imagine a rectification of the dispossession he has inherited. The spectral *morocotas*, of course, are as ungraspable as the probability of repayment: "If you ever saw [the treasure], you wouldn't be able to touch it," warns Rosina.

Conclusion

The supernatural sub-plot does not and cannot be resolved within the constraints of the film's documentary-like style, however, and reaches a dead end after José's discovery of the razor blades in the shed. Still, it is a significant moment because the force of enchantment enables connections among spirit, matter, past, and present, expressing the complexity of the debt owed to Rosina and her family. I employ the term "debt" because the characters are indeed *owed* intangible things, the most urgent of which is the home that they cannot own. Repayment can only be imagined as a ghost, and the one way to work through the debt appears to be the holding of a possession unconcerned with ownership. Moreover, *La Soledad* portrays a sort of tenancy that tends to be porous toward the common, signaling an overlap of two types of incalculable debt: what Rosina's family is owed, and also what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have characterized as the *debt shared among the dispossessed*, meaning the shared condition of lack of space that can give way to the emergence of a shared space (2013, 154-5). The house is common insofar as no one individual living in *La Soledad* could claim it as their private property. It is collectively lived-in and welcoming to all who arrive, its gate open to a community of others in similar instances of dispossession and exclusion. The

possession of the house that I have described thus far is possible because the absence of legal property allows communal modes of relationship to emerge in its place.

Rather than staying with the characters until the demolition or following them through the search for a new home, either by means of emigration or through the bureaucracy of the State, the last sequence of *La Soledad* finds José, Marley, their daughter, and a friend at the beach—most likely in La Guaira, a port city half an hour away from Caracas. This final scene closes with an overheard shot of José floating in the waves, his body still, surrounded by blue. This is a striking moment of totality and serenity after much uncertainty, but most importantly, it is the first time that property is not being discussed in the film. The question of ownership over the space recedes and pure, unbounded presence is left—enchantment. This image conveys a desirable postponement of the anxieties faced by the lower classes in present-day Venezuela by means of reaffirming, in one simple and poetic image, that only the experience of the common, imagined here as the *boundless*, can redress the damage of dispossession.



José López in the final scene of *La Soledad*. Courtesy of the filmmakers.

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