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The urban process under racial capitalism: Race, anti-Blackness, and capital accumulation

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs racial capitalism as a framework for understanding the urban process. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to center the racial character of the urban process within a broader political economy of racial capitalism and (2) to position capitalism and racism as mutually dependent systems of exploitation. The paper begins by discussing the omission of race and racism within urbanization processes. Here, the work of David Harvey is critiqued in order to highlight not only the contradictions of capitalism, but also those of Marxist scholars in understanding urban development. The paper then discusses the forms of racial capitalism through modalities of dispossession and displacement, the agents engaged in this process, and the competing ideologies that structure the urban political economy, particularly in the U.S. The paper ends with suggestions for future research to consider the constitutive nature of capitalism and racism in producing urbanization processes.

To live under capitalism is to accept or submit to that bundle of rights necessary for endless capital accumulation.

—David Harvey (2003b, p. 940)

It's impossible for a White person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can't have capitalism without racism.

—Malcolm X (1964)

Introduction

Urban scholarship has long focused on questions investigating the structuring of hierarchies within and between cities and urban areas. The “urban” – denoting both a place and processes of urbanization – becomes increasingly important to understand how urban restructuring has impacted neighborhoods, cities and regions (Schafran, 2019). Dominant frameworks, such as the capitalist forms of urbanization put forth by David Harvey (1978, 1996, 2003b, 2012), among others (e.g., Friedmann & Wolff, 1982; Moreno, 2014; Smith, 2010), illuminate the effects across the urban landscape. However, the role of race and racism embedded within the capitalist modes of production become elusive. This perpetual oversight contributes to the notion that race and racism are marginalized urban experiences rather than central components shaping it. Simultaneously, race scholars have continued to

theorize how race and racism are influencing economic and social structures within cities and regions. However, few have seriously contended with how race structures the urban form (e.g., Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Dorries et al., 2019; Gibbons, 2016; Hackworth, 2019; Rothstein, 2017; K. Y. Taylor, 2019). As such, contemporary urban studies is in need of a framework that articulates the constitutive nature of capitalism and racism in producing the urban.

Similar to the work of Du Bois¹ (1899, 1935), Robinson (2000) offers *racial capitalism* as an alternative to a historical understanding of capitalism as a modernized break of the old feudal order. Rather, racialization processes were present exaggerating the regional, sub-cultural, and dialectical differences of people within Europe (Robinson, 2000). With recent work highlighting the importance of this conceptualization (e.g., Bledsoe et al., 2019; Dorries et al., 2019; Hackworth, 2019; Markley et al., 2020; K. Y. Taylor, 2019), urban scholarship has yet to fully develop racial capitalism as a framework for analyzing urbanization. With vivid urban histories highlighting the ways in which communities, particularly African Americans, have fought for equal rights (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2016; K. Y. Taylor, 2016), it is quite perplexing how urban scholars have treated urbanization as a colorblind process versus one predicated upon the exploitation of people of color. This is not to say that scholars have never contended with questions around political economy, racialization processes, and urbanization. Specifically, work within urban geography and Black Studies has illuminated the anti-Blackness of global capital (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019), property values and racialized violence (Gibbons, 2016), and the production of settler colonial cities (Dorries et al., 2019). Yet, such exemplary work has largely focused on particular techniques (e.g., property relations, capital accumulation, settler colonialism) through empirical contexts. This paper contributes to the literature by outlining the ways in which racialized spaces have been, and continue to be, erected, racialized, and exploited under a broader political economy of racial capitalism through processes of urbanization.

Following the work of Harvey (1978, 1996, 2003a, 2012) and Robinson (2000), my objective is to understand the urban process under racial capitalism. I confine myself to the racial capitalistic forms of urbanization because I accept the idea that the “urban” has a specific meaning under the racial capitalist mode of production as the city, and its interaction with surrounding areas, has largely been the locus of such activities. Within the framework of racial capitalism, I hang my interpretation of the urban process on the twin themes of *dispossession* and *displacement*. These two themes fundamentally describe the central totality of the urban process as spaces and places have been created and reproduced through these activities. In what follows, I draw upon Harvey (1978, 1996, 2003a, 2012) and Robinson (2000) to create a synthesized framework of how racial capitalism structures and reshapes the urban process.

The paper begins with a critique of David Harvey’s (1978, 1996, 2003a, 2003b, 2012) work on capital accumulation and urban development. Here, I argue that his approach rests upon a colorblind ideology in his analytical treatment of capitalism. This includes a rather brief, but poignant, engagement with Harvey (1978, 1996, 2003a, 2012), along with Marx (1976), in order to ascertain the contradictory nature of his writings on accumulation and class struggle. By negating the role of race in the urban process, racial inequalities are treated as an effect of uneven development (Squires & Kubrin, 2005) rather than central components. The paper then offers racial capitalism as an alternative to understand the racialization of the urban process by outlining its forms, agents and competing ideologies. It

involves three particular levels. Level 1 discusses the twin forms of dispossession and displacement, which are argued to be realized through several urban modalities (e.g., blockbusting, segregation, suburbanization, gentrification, foreclosures, evictions). Within Level 2, I develop the concepts of *racial capitalists* and *material laborers* to denote the centrality of exploitation of racial hierarchies among collective interests. The struggle between racial capitalists and material laborers is borne out in the expropriation of people *and* places, with both being spatially bounded and located, and subjectively valued. And Level 3 discusses the competing ideologies of capitalism and racism as mutually dependent structures of racial capitalism.

Particular attention is paid to the plight of African Americans, or Black people, as racialized subjects to understand how racial hierarchies serve as a basis for contemporary and historical valuations of people *and* place. I focus on the United States as the site of my analysis. While the United States has been experiencing decades of economic growth, poverty, underemployment, and substandard housing were still the norm for many Black and Brown people (K. Y. Taylor, 2016). Yet, as Robinson (2000) eloquently argues, several processes of racialization existed well beyond the confines of the New World.² The paper ends by offering suggestions for how future research should engage racial capitalism as a framework for analysis. This attempt is no simple task, especially through the confines of a journal article. Nor is it exhaustive as a holistic look at the contours of racial capitalism would necessitate engagement with other social institutions (e.g., education, criminal justice, food systems) and other established hierarchal systems (e.g., gender, sexuality, religion, ableism, nativity). However, given the often reductionist treatment of race to highlight differences across urban communities, this paper seeks to center race and the racialization of people *and* places within a broader urban political economy based on the superstructures of racial hierarchies and urbanization processes.

Capitalism and colorblind urban development

It is generally understood by social theorists on the functions of capitalism where wealth is accumulated through the exploitation of labor. As Harvey (1978) states, “The essential Marxian insight, however, is that profit arises out of the domination of labor by capital and that the capitalists as a class must, if they are to reproduce themselves, continuously expand the basis for profit” (p. 102). For the purposes of accumulation, class struggle becomes central to the function of capitalism. Following this theory of surplus value, the source of capitalists’ profit is through the exploitation of labor. The maintenance of their positions and its role in class struggle is due to the inherent tenets of violence that embodies the production process. Through physical and symbolic forms, the dynamics ingrained into the accumulation of surplus value reproduces these class relations (Marx, 1976). Marx’s (along with Friedrich Engels) theory of historical materialism thus focuses on understanding the material conditions of a society in order to understand its historic development.

Harvey (1978, 1996, 2012) argues that the built environment is produced as a resource system for the production of value and surplus value. Moreover, he distinguishes between the consumption of revenues by the bourgeoisie and the need to reproduce labor power (Harvey, 1978, pp. 113–114). Thus, urbanization has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses (Harvey, 2012). However, such theorizing rests its conceptualizations on a class-based perspective reflecting a colorblind ideology that rests upon a race-

neutral understanding of the urban process. Capitalist logics are often argued to contain no intrinsic reason why race should play any role in efforts to generate profits through the commodification of land (Gibbons, 2016). Yet, the United States, among other countries, has a long history where race *and* class have and continue to structure social divisions for the sake of capital accumulation. Race does not sit outside the logic of capital (Roediger, 2019).

While recent urban scholarship has pointed to the ways in which social inequality is produced by race and racism (e.g., Hackworth, 2019; Rothstein, 2017; K. Y. Taylor, 2019; Trounstein, 2018), race and racism are not some new mechanisms to create social divisions. Nor is their use central to the U.S. For example, much of Robinson's (2000) argument is focused on processes of racialization present in Western civilization since the eighteenth century. These processes are not fixed as the construction of race, and its influence, has changed across time and space. Critical race theorists have long argued that the analytical treatment of race has been reductionist, pushing for more intentional engagement with race and racism as a process. For example, Omi and Winant's (2018) theory of racial formation argues racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. Such approaches rely on the understanding that human interaction rather than natural differentiation become the source and continued basis for racial categorization (Lopez, 1994). Through the creation and reproduction of racial identities, race becomes both a social status and tool by which individuals can enact violence upon others.

As Robinson (2000) argues, "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (p. 39). The basis of this exploitation does not become one based on class position, but one that becomes *racialized* in an effort to create an "other" from partaking in the production process. Regardless of one's economic position, the stigmatization of their racial character becomes socially constructed and contextually bound. Race and class positions are thus organized and formalized as constitutive agents of difference within a broader political economy of racial capitalism. But wouldn't these differences elicit a contradictory character of capitalism? And wouldn't scholars, such as David Harvey, recognize these tendencies to exaggerate not just class distinctions, but racial ones as well? Before outlining the contours of the urban process under racial capitalism, I briefly engage with the work of Harvey (1978, 1996, 2012) to highlight these contradictions, while also illustrating his omission of race and racism as a precondition of capital accumulation.

Urbanization and the contradictions of capitalism

Harvey (1978) focuses on two particular contradictions of capitalism to make his argument.³ The first argument focuses on the capitalist class, which exist in a realm of both individuality and freedom as well as conformity and coercion. As such, Harvey (1978) argues, "As a consequence, individual capitalists, each acting in their own immediate self-interest, can produce an aggregative result which is wholly antagonistic to their collective class interest" (p. 102). Harvey's (1978, 2012) influential framework provides a rigorous treatment of the circuits of capital that create the "moral, historical and cultural conditions" shaping the labor force. By illuminating the ways in which the urban process involves several forms of production and consumption, he provides an overall structure of relations

that formalize investments and capital flows within the built environment (Harvey, 2012). New institutional arrangements, including financial innovation sets and organized capital, facilitate urbanization booms (Harvey, 2012). Harvey (1978, 2012) frames the urban process through the struggle between the “urban-rural dialectic” suggesting the division of labor in society is realized in the physical infrastructure for production and the transport of commodities where social expenditures are absorbed within urban areas. Such processes are thus seen as taken place within a “rational spatial organization” of physical and social infrastructures (Harvey, 1978, p. 114). As a result, capital and labor surpluses depend on mechanisms for pooling surplus capital and investing into the built environment.⁴

Part of the issue I take with Harvey’s (1978, 2003a, 2012) arguments is the lack of specificity about *who* may enact their individual and collective interests to generate surplus value or how such spatial fixes are predicated upon the (de)valuation of people and places. The struggle between capitalists and the proletariat relegates racial differences as byproducts of class conflict. As Bledsoe and Wright (2019) argue, “while capitalism exploits all of the worlds’ populations, it does not dominate all of them in the same way” (p. 12). Furthermore, the spatial fix “preserves and propagates capitalism” and “also entails a racial (fix)ation as the continuation of accumulation” treating certain people and places as “obsolete, in need of appropriation, removal and erasure” (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 16). Further, labor forces are strategically shaped through racialized processes oftentimes through racist, exclusionary methods. To position an individual solely on the basis of one’s class position seems to assume a world in which other identities such as race and gender do not exist. As Collins (2015) reminds us, intersectionality helps us rethink the individual within a capitalistic society since “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (p. 2). Considering which individuals have the collective power to develop profit becomes paramount. And how these same individuals develop institutions, policies and practices to (re)produce surplus value while simultaneously restricting others from doing so builds the basis for the urban process – a point I will build upon throughout this paper.

Racial differences become the material force that conditions the urban process. As Robinson (2000) argues, (in the case of Europe) nationality becomes not just an identity, but an ideology bound up with racialized myths that fostered domination of Europeans by Europeans. These differences were exaggerated distinctions through which new collectives were formed on the basis of one’s racial character. Therefore, at the macro level, ideologies seek to establish a hegemonic power among racialized groups. Considering Harvey’s (1978) second contradiction of capitalism, he focuses on the source of capitalist profit: the creation of surplus value through the exploitation of labor. Relying on the process of exchange, instead of class struggle, he argues laborers, much like capitalists, “freely’ trade the commodity they have for sale in the market place” (Harvey, 1978, p. 103). This assumes the position of the laborer within a workforce that produces commodities as the only object of their control. Competition arises within each faction for the sake of the accumulation. Accumulation thus becomes the main goal, for the capitalist by exerting violence against the laborer (and inherently other capitalists through the demands of competition; Marx, 1976). However, several assumptions undergird this thinking that raise questions around the hegemonic powers held by these economic (and social) classes.

Primarily, it assumes one’s personhood being seen only different along the lines of an individual’s class position. However, such characterization of individuals within capitalism

becomes quite reductionist. By centering this discussion on the built environment, its historical development and contemporary urban inequalities, I argue that racial capitalism provides a needed corrective to the capitalist modes of production under the urban process. The ability for certain groups to create surplus value for themselves requires an engagement with questions surrounding inherent rights to land and property. Through the lens of racial capitalism, I argue that value is being derived from both people *and* places. Gibbons (2016) argues that White supremacy has been built into definitions of U.S. land values and how this has been articulated with the formation of the city and ideas of community and belonging. Moreover, Bhandar (2018) notes that property laws in settler colonies have been critical instruments for colonial accumulation of capital that develop in conjunction with the formation of racial subjects. Once existing as mere property, Black people have and continued to be excluded from realizing their full personhood. Property ownership, or more explicitly the control of land, has historically been tied to notions of citizenship, realized in constitutionally established rights through the lens of race, gender and class position (Dantzler, 2018). And as cities have grown over the last century, many of the people living on this land could not fully realize full citizenship due to their racial identity (as well as gender and religious affiliation). In this paper, land is treated as the terrain of capitalist accumulation with Black people being historically and contemporarily treated as racial subjects.⁵ Moreover, any attempts to critique the capitalist system have drawn attention to the ways in which the larger political economy upholds White supremacy (Gibbons, 2016; K. Y. Taylor, 2016).

Following Radin's (1982) *personhood perspective*, people possess certain objects that "are closely bound up with personhood because they are part of the way we constitute ourselves as continuing personal entities in the world" (p. 859). As such, under a broader political economy of racial capitalism, Black people find themselves in a precarious position. I argue that this position commodifies the individual into a state of cyclical exclusion and subjugation as, a concept I call, *material laborers*. The material nature of Black people historically serving once as a form of legal property and contemporarily in a state of constrained citizenship establishes a unique position as both a laborer and a product within capitalistic development. When considering the *how*, the racial character of U.S. capitalism yields a deeply racialized economic system, whereby race and racism become embedded within the interpersonal, institutional and systemic innerworkings of capital production and accumulation. The "urban" – as both a site and process of racialized development – becomes the locus by which this process is fully realized. Drawing from Burden-Stelly (2020), one can understand the urban as a structural location where the irresolvable contradiction of value minus worth arises. More simply put, "Blackness is a capacious category of surplus value extraction essential to an array of political-economic functions, including accumulation, disaccumulation, debt, planned obsolescence, and absorption of the burdens of economic crises" (Burden-Stelly, 2020, p. 3). Through processes of dispossession and displacement, the urban process creates and recreates an evolved set of social relations between capitalists and laborers predicated upon racial hierarchies establishing the urban as the structural location of such activities. The next sections outline the multiple levels of the urban process under a system of racial capitalism.

The levels of racial capitalism within the urban process

Recalling that this broader political economy calls for a mutually constitutive system of capitalism and racism, it is necessary to operationalize the organization of exploitation through racialized modes of capital accumulation. In this section, I discuss the ways in which racial capitalism has been used through three different mediums as it relates to the contestation of land and property realized in the procurement of housing. This section goes beyond just questions of homeownership versus renting or the subjugation of low-income communities of color as independent social phenomena. It draws upon the historiography of Black people as material laborers to create a vantage point for other scholars to attempt a similar analysis for other institutions or racialized groups. This conceptualization is not the only system of exploitation. However, the following discussion seeks to bring the racial character of the “housing question” into perspective. I do this by outlining the contours of each level while also bringing in recent work that exemplifies its operation. I leave others to position alternative institutions of social life (e.g., education, criminal justice, transportation) under the frame of racial capitalism.

Figure 1 illustrates the levels and interactions of racial capitalism. The first, or primary, level focuses on processes of displacement and dispossession. The specific tools and modes of exploitation are contextually defined, but thematically similar in their effects. The second level focuses on the particular agents of exploitation. Given the previous discussion, I focus on the interaction between *racial capitalists* and *material laborers* to understand the impact within and across cities in the U.S. Here, I discuss how capital accumulation involves the racialization of people and places. The third level focuses on the ideological forms of the broader urban political economy. Particular attention is paid

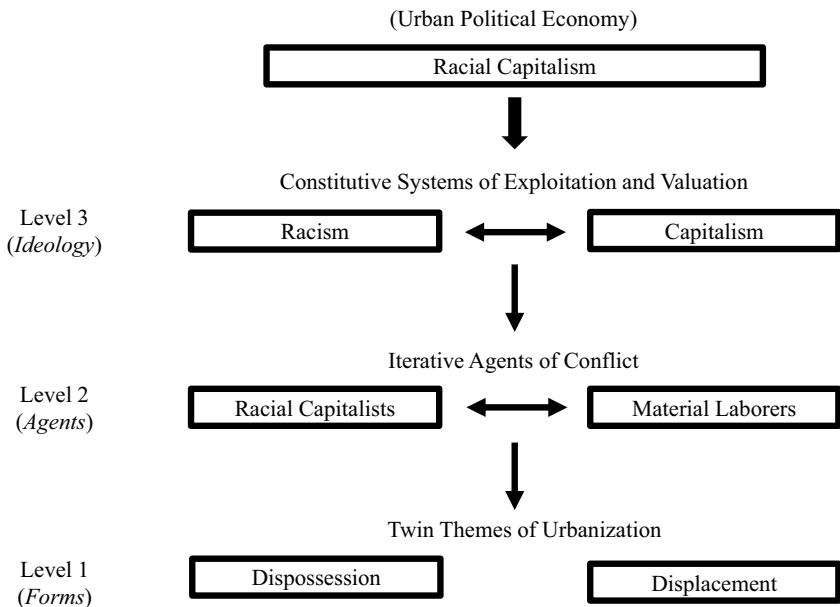


Figure 1. The urban process under racial capitalism.

not to the physical practices of racism and capitalism, but to their ideological effects on the overall system.

Level 1 serves as the “base” of racial capitalism in the urban process. Level 2 highlights the agents of racial capitalism. And Level 3 highlights the superstructure, borne out in the ideological underpinnings of the urban process under racial capitalism. The next sections expand upon the contours of each level in order to tease out how race and racism is central to the modes of production of capital accumulation. As Harvey (1996) argues, “We need critical ways to think about how differences in ecological, cultural, economic, political, and social conditions get produced . . . and we also need ways to evaluate the justice/injustice of the differences so produced” (p. 5).

Level 1: The thematic forms of racial capitalism

The first level of the urban process racial capitalism focuses on processes of dispossession and displacement. This serves an extension of Harvey’s (2003a) adaptation and redeployment of Marx’s notion of “primitive accumulation”. Harvey (2003a) argues:

A closer look at Marx’s description of primitive accumulation reveals a wide range of processes. These include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade; the usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation. (p. 145)

While Harvey (2003a) points out the accumulation through dispossession, displacement is not seen as a contingent process, but more so as a process that is overlaid by production and consumption. Furthermore, the “process of proletarianization” does not adequately engage with systems of racialization, which tend to establish Whiteness as a hegemonic form of identity while simultaneously subordinating non-White bodies regardless of their class position. These twin themes produce particular modes of exploitation that center on the racial character of urbanization as people and places are racially marked. Figure 2 outlines several modalities of racial capitalism which

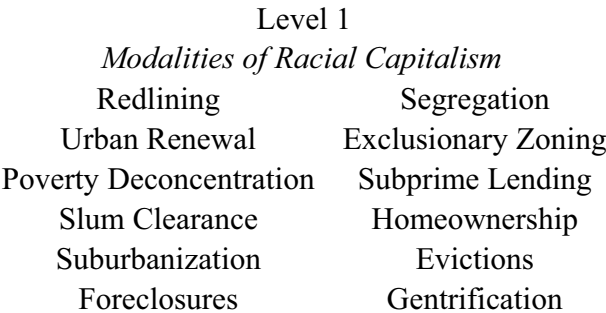


Figure 2. Modalities of exploitation and valuation under racial capitalism.

involve racialization processes of exploitation and valuation. Each mode involves a subsequent discussion of dispossession and displacement. The interaction of these processes creates different forms of urbanization by which cities and urban areas change over time through processes of racialization.

Dispossession and displacement as forms of production

Following this argument, capital accumulation is the byproduct of racial capitalism and its means of production exist within the forms of production. According to Melamed (2015), racial capitalism has been often associated with White supremacist capitalist development including multiple processes such as slavery, colonialism, genocide and migrant exploitation. However, within the urban context, it is important to use racial capitalism as a production of social separateness and differentiation needed for capitalist expropriation to work. I offer dispossession and displacement as the vantage points by which to identify, analyze and understand violence against racialized individuals and collective life itself. Some remarks should be made about their analytical use.

Dispossession

This first form of racial capitalism under the urban process focuses on dispossession. Dispossession involves the explicit taking of both physical land and property and the erasure of symbolic forms of occupation. Central to this concept of dispossession is a rethinking of ownership outside the realms of state sanctioned legal forms. If one considers the U.S. as a colonial apparatus, property ownership becomes a form of state-sanctioned violence used to exaggerate social separateness. Within urban areas, this becomes evident through the historical development of housing policy which defines these social relations with its privileging of owners over renters (Dantzer, 2018; McCabe, 2016). A house is a particular type of entity that involves a juridical-economic-moral status (Kramer, 2016). The value of property is seen through its material (as asset), political (as dominium), and symbolic (as shelter) position (Chakravartty & Da Silva, 2012). Processes of segregation, exclusionary zoning, blockbusting, eviction, and foreclosure undergird this concept. Each mode involves an intentional taking of one's property and removes the right of one to occupy such location for the continued reproduction of that commodity within the system. Racial capitalism unsettles and expands understandings of property offering a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between settler colonialism and slavery, and the role that property plays in these related forms of oppression (Dorries et al., 2019). For example, segregation and exclusionary zoning remove housing (and as a result, neighborhoods) from being attained or occupied. Historically, explicit practices such as redlining, blockbusting and segregation have been used to target communities of color, especially Black communities (Rothstein, 2017; Trounstein, 2018). Such elicited actions show that class alone cannot explain the purposeful and disproportional effects on Black people. Moreover, evictions and foreclosure remove people from housing through a dilution of ownership where renters (through eviction) and homeowners (through foreclosure) realize the tenuous nature of their property rights (see Sullivan, 2018). Regardless of their tenure status, dispossession confines the ability of these material laborers to overcome this form of

exploitation. Other scholars have discussed dispossession through a deeper theorization of settler colonialism and the city.

Cities in settler-colonial context occupy a paradoxical kind of site in relationships between the colonizer and the colonized (Porter & Yiftachel, 2019). Settler colonialism infers the invasion of Indigenous lands rendering Indigenous bodies and lives displaceable. Yet, only recently has the use of this framework involved a more explicit focus on the interaction between Indigenous lives, colonial structures and urbanization processes.⁶ Studies such as Tomiak's (2017) focus on the settler colonial context in the production of urban space through the reclamation of new urban reserves highlights the dynamic interaction between the state and Indigenous resistance and placemaking. Other studies such as Addie and Fraser (2019) illustrate how processes of neighborhood transformation, contestation, and succession are realized through ongoing settler colonial relations. Bhandar (2018) argues that modern property law contributes to the formation of racial subjects in settler colonies and to the development of racial capitalism, relying on settler colonialism as an urban process which participates in a larger racialized political economy. However, it is important to note here that such forms of dispossession do not always infer a form of displacement.

Dispossession does not necessary equate to the physical movement of people from land, or more importantly, place. Aside from the physical dislocation of people from place, one can extend the meaning of dispossession to involve the extraction of value (e.g., ghettonization, movement of jobs and resources, devaluation of housing, neighborhood disinvestment). As such, this paper argues that dispossession stems from different spatial logics of power realized through several modalities of urbanization, which I expand upon later in the paper. When discussing dispossession as a mode of production within racial capitalism, it is important to consider the ways that this process carries out across different circuits of capital accumulation. Dispossession becomes the antecedent for accumulation, while displacement regenerates this cycle of exploitation.

Displacement

The second form of racial capitalism under the urban process focuses on displacement. The remaking of urban space through ebbs and flows of population change challenge traditional notions of who has a right to the city.⁷ The city has always been a place of contestation. As Harvey (2003b) argues, "Calmness and civility in urban history are the exception not the rule" (p. 939). As such, with the constant circulation of capital, changing demographics illustrate the market exchange of place. These are not just due to the "speculators" that Harvey (2003b) discusses but several groups have worked together to produce changes within their surrounding environment. Whether its private interests looking for development opportunities to accumulate more wealth or middle-class communities calling for more policing to promote public safety and protect their property values, the ability to garner resources to remake urban spaces for their own heart's desire can reestablish one's inalienable rights to occupy space and thus facilitate processes of displacement. Displacement becomes an inherent feature of racial capitalism subsequently following different forms of dispossession. Neighborhood changes, due to a number of redevelopment initiatives including slum clearance and poverty deconcentration, rest upon a detachment

of people from place *and* resources. Processes of gentrification and segregation are examples of this form.

From the coining of the term by Ruth Glass (1964), gentrification has largely been used to denote the displacement and replacement of lower-income communities groups by higher-income groups. Gentrification not only includes the physical displacement of people, but also the shifting institutional environment. Residents socially construct their neighborhoods drawing upon different spatial areas and unconventional geographic boundaries (Hwang, 2016a). Once their neighborhood does not fit their daily needs or once amenities do not meet their material position, physical and symbolic forms of displacement occur disrupting everyday patterns of urban life. Segregation also invokes a form of displacement confining groups of people within particular urban areas. In isolation, segregated communities are not an issue. However, when combined with forms of disinvestment, the spatial logics of social separateness create conditions of precarity and marginalization, which limits the ability of people to live their full collective lives. As McKittrick (2011) and Gilmore (2007) argue, racial violence and segregation infer a naturalization of the dispossessed, which intertwines with the seduction of conceptualizing this naturalization within our present order of human life. Yet as these scholars note, these processes are unnatural and brings to life what is otherwise considered to be absolute otherness (McKittrick, 2011). These processes have taken shape across a number of cities as the result of racist housing policies and public-private partnerships seeking to render disadvantaged communities of color invisible (see Hirsch, 2021; Massey & Denton, 1993; Trounstein, 2018). This form of social separateness thus exacerbates the overall value of neighborhood forcing material laborers to attribute the accumulation of wealth to the attainment of particular locations.

While the examples here are not totally exhaustive of each mode of production, they do outline basic issues central to most urban studies scholars. I am precluded from surveying the entire field of urban scholarship in order to achieve such critique. However, by proposing the ways in which past and present research continuously engages these processes, any future research should position these questions under a broader political economy to understand the historical development of the urban process. I will attempt to highlight some of the work in this area later in the paper. However, it is important to now revisit how the modes of racial capitalism determine various levels of market value exchange. The locality of these modes exists at the small unit of a house and as large as the metropolitan area. While each mode can be operationalized from a purely capitalistic lens, to do so would obscure the actual reality of their operation.

For example, Rothstein's (2017) popular book, *The Color of Law*, highlights the actual intentionality of redlining across the U.S. The historiography of racist planning and housing policies infused Black communities with notable devalued statuses. The particular ways in which the government allocated local housing policies and land use controls is also illuminated by other recent work (e.g., K. Y. Taylor, 2019; Trounstein, 2018). Even when looking at the plight of different cities, many of the same vestiges of segregation still remain largely intact even if racial attitudes are becoming more progressive (Howell & Emerson, 2018). However, while much attention has been focused on disrupting relatively high levels of clustering among low-income, communities of color (Goetz, 2003), little attention has been focused on deconcentrating pockets of White affluence (Goetz et al., 2020). As such, scholarship tends to focus on access to neighborhoods with high levels of opportunity (see Chetty et al., 2020)

without contending with the essential spatial logics of power governed by White communities for their own benefit. Affluent, White communities are symbolic of racial violence enacted upon Black communities for the sake of perpetuating the marginalization of Black spaces as an inferior status driving research and public policymaking to focus on immersing Black people in White spaces without destroying the structural conditions that segregated these communities in the first place.

Capital accumulates not due to the value of the work of the laborer, but the extraction of value from people *and* places. Within the capitalistic system, surplus value is derived from profits from the products sold and the workers' labor costs (Marx, 1976). Harvey (1978, 2012) argued that in order to maintain the value of excess capital, this requires investment, specifically investment in urban areas. However, history has shown that this process of the "spatial fix" has consistently been racialized, with Black communities serving as places which are devalorized, then subsequently through processes of dispossession and displacement, revalorized. For example, as Gibbons (2016) argues, it is the dialectic between use and exchange values "of land that the nexus lies between (racial) ideologies, economics and politics as they articulate with the physical form of the city" (p. 866). Gibbons (2016) goes on to say, "Property ownership ensures that this understanding of use value and its impact on life pathways and opportunities always sits alongside its exchange value" (p. 866). Such racial ideologies are realized in the mere presence of non-White bodies, by which spaces occupied by non-White people are deemed less value. For example, recent studies such as Howell and Korver-Glenn (2020) have found that neighborhood racial composition was a stronger determinant of appraised home values in 2015 than it was in 1980. This intertwining of land and housing values and the presence of non-White people render people of color, particularly Black people, as devalued, illegitimate spatial actors (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019), resulting in forms of displacement as organic and an ongoing effect of urbanization. Blackness is thus "the quintessential condition of disposability, expendability, and devalorization" (Burden-Stelly, 2020, p. 3).

To purely understand this process through solely an economic lens obscures how value is determined by racialized structures and opportunities. Racism acts as a material force (Robinson, 2000). Du Bois (1935) seminal work explores this duality of exploitation in *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois (1935) writes, "The ability of the slaveholder and landlord to sequester a large share of the profits of slave labor depended upon his exploitation of that labor, rather than upon high prices for his product in the market" (p. 36). Using racial capitalism helps operationalize the ways in which people and place, and not work, are valued. While the mechanisms and their determinative value are highlighted, they are not finite as many of the tools have changed over time to realign the structure with new ways of exploitation while still maintaining a similar relationship between racial capitalists and material laborers.

Level 2: The agents of racial capitalism

The second level of the urban process under racial capitalism focuses on the relationship between racial capitalists and material laborers within the racial capitalistic system. Given that value is derived from people *and* places, it is important to underscore how such value is predicated upon a racialized economy. As Wilson (2009) argues, any city vividly shows the power of contemporary economies and how poor people of color bear the brunt of

their effects in the wake of segregation, poverty, marginality, and neighborhood disinvestment. The ghettoization of Black people not only alludes to their economic status, but it also stigmatizes people and places with a racial moniker (Freeman, 2019). Racial capitalists therefore don't consider the products being produced but the racialized value of material laborers. To put it more simply, while Level 1 determines the orientation of an individual's economic value, Level 2 discusses how racial capitalists derive their profits through the collection and ongoing exploitation of material laborers. Thus, race goes beyond a socially constructed category of identity to establish racial hierarchies and valuation processes. The case of gentrification allows one to illustrate this process of racial capitalism by illustrating the interplay of how racial capitalists derive and redefine valuations of Black spaces.

Scholars have long argued over the actual definition of gentrification (Brown-Saracino, 2017). Since the work of Ruth Glass (1964), it has been used to describe changing neighborhood patterns.⁸ Aside from current debates that focus on definitions of the term itself (Brown-Saracino, 2017; Slater, 2006) as well as methodological approaches to ascertain the objective and subjective rates of neighborhood change, and subsequent displacement (Hwang, 2016b), gentrification scholars arguably still remain in a "empirical stalemate" (Hwang, 2016b; Zukin, 1987). Many scholars discuss gentrification as a specific type of class transformation, while others explicitly highlight the racial character of the causes and effects (see Hyra, 2016). In the vein of this paper, my argument sides with the latter. It is important to note that gentrification as a sole process of neighborhood change hasn't touched every American city neighborhood. However, within a broader conceptualization of the causes and effects of demographic changes, one can theorize how gentrification operates as a mode of dispossession and displacement.

As Brown-Saracino (2017) argues, "In summary, many recent quantitative analyses portray gentrification as less encompassing, more tenuous, more selective, and overall less dire than the cumulative image that emerges from much contemporary qualitative sociological scholarship" (p. 525). However, Brown-Saracino (2017) goes onto say, "Cities grappling with deindustrialization and increasing income inequality have followed different pathways and met different fates" (p. 525). That is to say, gentrification is not a universal mode of racial capitalism, but rather, a unique mode that is ideologically driven, placed-based and historically contextualized. Yet, behind such processes are agents. Cities and urban areas are not fundamentally attractors of labor and employment, but rather attractors of racialized human capital. That is to say, gentrification is not a universal mode of racial capitalism, but rather, a unique mode whereby the overall nature of urban communities is based on its racial character. As such, agents like housing developers and gentrifiers extract value from the "racially organized capital" based on where land is *and* who occupies that land. However, attention to gentrification has led scholars to articulate the mere attractiveness of cities and subsequent acts of displacement and not what Yiftachel (2020) calls the *displaceability* of urban displacement. Yiftachel (2020) argues that several logics including nationalism, statism, identity regimes and struggles for human and urban rights, interact with exigencies of globalizing capitalism to generate new types of urban citizenship. Power garnered by these spatial logics create the conditions of growing vulnerability for long-standing residents by shifting resources to new urban residents at the expense of the historical disinvestment of Black urban communities.

Scholars treat demographic shifts and residential mobility as the mobility of capital and not racialized capital subjects. Instead of the Marxist (1976) view of capital flows being reduced to the work of the laborers and the surplus value gained from the exploitation of their labor (Marx, 1976), racial capitalism provides a theoretical framework to reconceptualize individuals as racialized subjects. Again, cities and urban areas are not attractors of labor and employment, but rather attractors of racialized human capital. It has been argued that urban scholars have viewed the sorting and sifting of the urban population by income and race as a “natural” part of city-building (H. L. Taylor, 2020). Previous debates on human capital and urban and regional growth fixate on the postulation that people are the motor force behind regional growth. However, White spatial exclusivity is the source of the high property values and the wealth-producing capacity of White spaces. The classic work of Jane Jacobs (1961) points to the relationship between creative people and the spurring of economic development. Scholars like Richard Florida (2005) have pointed to the treatment of “creative people” as a form of stock and endowment underlying the development of urban policies that seek to increase the attractiveness of cities as potential homes for different occupational types including scientists, professors, engineers, and artists to name a few. However, social classes define these groups on the basis of generated income from each category without a full understanding of the presumed “creativity” existent within each superficial occupational group. As Krätke (2010) argues, the delimitation of creative class groups isolates creative professionals without understanding how finance and real estate professionals enact finance-dominated and increasingly speculation-driven capitalist modes of development. Again, it becomes clear that revitalization efforts to attract new development are based on a valuation of desirable land and people driven by housing developers and policymakers to increase profits through the reconfiguration of geographies of low-income, communities of color neighborhoods. This “urban phenomena” exists in city land markets which stimulates a desire on the part of the “growth machine” to acquire more and more land (Logan & Molotch, 2007).

Cities employ different strategies for establishing and progressing their own economic interests. Scholars have begun to underscore the question of race as it relates to capitalist formations. This is even present as oppressed communities try to develop their own systems of sustenance. Even when local communities, particularly marginalized communities of color, set out to create their own alternatives to capitalism, they are diminished due to their existence within a broader political economy. Bledsoe et al. (2019) argue that analyses of diverse economies as alternative economic practices employed by local communities must explicitly attend to the fact that both capitalism and its alternatives are shaped by racial differences. Moreover, ignoring how racialization underlies capitalism runs the risk of downplaying how race configures the system itself and alternatives to it. As H. L. Taylor (2020) argues (among others), Black neighborhoods are sites of spatial exploitation where predatory development, segrenomics, and exploitation dominates. Moreover, Howell and Korver-Glenn (2020) argue, such predation is realized in the continued undervaluing of home values through the continued practice of appraising houses from historical periods of overt, intentional racist housing policy. The underdevelopment of Black spaces therefore incorporates a city-building process that “uses an urban market system that commodifies land and that deliberately constructs underdeveloped neighborhood spaces to house Blacks and extract surplus value from their sociospatial units” (Logan & Molotch, 2007; H. L. Taylor, 2020).

Relating this back to gentrification and questions of neighborhood change, Black spaces are reimagined through a White city-building lens by which redevelopment efforts are predicated upon the devaluation of Black people and places for the benefit of racial capitalists. Black neighborhoods existing as what H. L. Taylor (2020) calls “placeholder sites” embodies not only the mere presence of Black bodies, but their occupation of land. Therefore, understanding Black people as material laborers allows one to consider how the physical dispossession and displacement of Black people is directly tied to subjective valuations of their occupation of land within these placeholder sites. People are inextricably tied to place. In order to facilitate the spatial logics of dispossession and displacement, racial capitalists facilitate disinvestment and predatory exploitation through land valuation strategies that devalue material laborers of their property and personhood. While H. L. Taylor (2020) focuses on the underdevelopment of Black sites as a structural outcome of the capitalist city-building process, I extend this line of thought to consider the agents at play, which at times includes Black bodies existing beyond the ghetto. While much focus here has been paid to the derivation of value from Black underdeveloped neighborhoods, the material force of racialization permeates additional social structures of capitalism (Robinson, 2000) through which value is derived (e.g., criminal justice, education, health). However, in emphasizing the importance of racism in explaining capital accumulation, one must consider how competing debates surrounding capitalism and racism and their subsequent impact on Black bodies and places operate under a racial, hierarchical political economy that structures and restructures difference. This leads into my third point here: the ideological basis of racial capitalism and its historical and continued impact on the urban process.

Level 3: The ideology of racial capitalism

In order to make sense of these processes and their continued perpetuation of unequal urbanization across cities and surrounding urban areas, I now discuss racial capitalism as an ideology. Following the writings of Marx (1976), among others, ideology is discussed here as a superstructure that is emblematic in legal, economic and political systems. As Robinson (2000) notes, racial capitalism illuminates the ways in which racialism permeates social structures emergent from capitalism. To this extent, it is important to question the superstructure of racial capitalism in order to highlight the prevailing hegemonic spatial logics of urbanization in an effort to expose the racial character of capital accumulation. In this session, I position racism and capitalism as iterative superstructures that condition such phenomena.

To accept racial capitalism as a framework for understanding the urban process, one has to also accept the salient existence of the constitutive systems involved: capitalism and racism. Robinson (2000) argues, “The comprehension of the particular configuration of racist ideology and Western culture has to be pursued historically through successive eras of violent domination and social extraction. . .” (p. 66). Given the political, social and economic dimensions of urban areas, I position racial capitalism as an organizing system of beliefs and discourse to discuss how cities and urban areas are structured. [Figure 1](#) illustrates racism and capitalism at Level 3 as mutually constitutive systems of exploitation. However, as Piketty (2020) notes, “Given the complexity of the issues, it should be obvious that no ideology can ever command full and total assent: ideological conflict and

disagreement are inherent in the very notion of ideology” (p. 3). Nevertheless, in order to conceptualize a just city (Fainstein, 2014), the urban process must be understood through a framework that considers not only circuits of capital flows (Harvey, 1978, 1996), but also how urban areas are (re)structured, with racialization processes being central to the spatial logic of capital and the production of difference.

So how has capitalism really reshaped cities and urban areas? One plausible answer exists with a complementary and necessary inquiry into the ways racism has affected urban areas through the (re)production of capital. I draw upon recent work in urban studies to underscore the duality of these exploitative systems. In his recent book, Hackworth (2019) argues that organized racism, specifically anti-Black racism, played a central role in creating the conditions for urban decline in the Rust Belt region. By contextualizing urban decline through perceived “racial threat” and a conservative ideology, policymakers created a policy regime of “organized deprivation” predicated upon a highly racialized inner-city (Hackworth, 2019). Neoliberal and racist ideologies combine to produce a particular kind of urban process, arguably central to American historiography. Hackworth’s (2019) analysis, while focused on one particular region of the U.S., is emblematic of a much-continued pattern of urbanization – the valorization of Black people and spaces leading to a bifurcated system of economic measures reliant upon austerity measures enacted upon Black neighborhoods for the benefit of White interests. As Du Bois (1935) argues, Whiteness serves as a “public and psychological wage,” providing poor Whites a valuable social status bound to their identification as non-Black. As Myers (2019) argues, the value of Whiteness depends on the devaluation of Black existence (K. Y. Taylor, 2019). By positioning racism with conservative, economic ideologies, Hackworth (2019) demonstrates how urban decline is a function of these hegemonic powers. And while his analysis is based upon, I would argue, an exclusionary form of racial capitalism, other scholars focus on its inclusive, predatory nature.

K. Y. Taylor (2019) argues that urban homeownership programs of the 1960s and 1970s exploited Black homeownership rather than creating a pathway to socioeconomic mobility. This was not structured by public or private interests alone, but in tandem. The real-estate industry, under the veil of racial discrimination and the enduring legacy of segregation, operated with the federal government to create state-sponsored, market-based solutions for addressing housing needs. K. Y. Taylor (2019) elucidates the ways in which such public-private partnerships structured a form of “predatory inclusion” that promoted homeownership through nefarious, racialized actions.⁹ The failure of such programs to create ladders of economic opportunity and racial equality was attributed not to the mechanisms of predatory inclusion, but to Black people and neighborhoods themselves. Through the embracement of neoliberalism, a modified form of liberalism which favors free-market capitalism, homeownership was used as a symbolic model of American idealism. Public policies have largely encouraged homeownership as a mechanism for building citizenship and strengthening communities (Dantzler, 2018; McCabe, 2016) with much of this promotion being realized in city building processes. However, as K. Y. Taylor (2019) argues, the promotion of homeownership involved a particular form of extraction situated under racial capitalism.

Within a system of racial capitalism, the American dream, often inclusive of homeownership as a pillar of socioeconomic mobility, rests upon exploitative systems of racialized profitmaking through property ownership. As Markley et al. (2020) suggest, when a place is marked as “Black,” the characterization may inhibit home price appreciation.

Thus, people and places are racialized through subjective forms of valuation that evaluate people and property based on their proximity to Whiteness. As a prevailing ideology, racial capitalism rests not only upon the racial character of capital production, but also through the reproduction of racist social, economic, and political systems, such as those embedded within the housing market. For example, alongside the aforementioned work (Hackworth, 2019; K. Y. Taylor, 2019), Howell and Korver-Glenn (2018) argue, variation in housing appraisal methods coupled with racialized perceptions of neighborhoods perpetuate neighborhood racial disparities in home values. Part of their discussion focuses on how policy interventions, such as the Fair Housing Act, did nothing to address previous forms of economic exploitation. Racial hierarchies became institutionalized through the built environment. The “urban” is thus the site of such attempts to derive value from the interplay of capitalism and racism within its continued state of production. The production of capital accumulation rests upon the production of difference realized in racial hierarchies and economic exploitation.

Concluding remarks

This paper has sought out to analyze the urban process under racial capitalism. It begins by briefly engaging David Harvey and his arguments surrounding capitalism and the urban process. By highlighting Harvey’s (1978, 1996, 2012) treatment of capital accumulation through a Marxian approach of class struggle, I denote the limitations of not centering race and racism as central components of urban development. The built environment is a product of racialization processes that structure and (re)structure people and places through subjected valuations. As such, any critical understanding of the “urban” must include a racial lens in its conceptualization. In order to model what that looks like, I articulate the forms, agents, and ideologies of the urban process under racial capitalism. While many scholars concentrate on one or two levels of this process, I sketch out a framework in order to tease out the mutually constitutive nature of racism and capitalism in (re)shaping the urban process.

Following the work of the late Cedric Robinson (2000), the paper engages Harvey’s (1978, 1996, 2003a, 2012) arguments in order to expose the racial character of capitalism. I attempt this feat not as a way to quibble with David Harvey, specifically, or other Marxist urban scholars. Rather, this action is to provide a needed corrective to the often colorblind ideology that permeates urban scholarship. This line of thinking has left many to propose the right to the city as a conceptual basis for establishing social justice. Even Harvey (2003b) argues that

the right to the city . . . is not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image. (p. 941)

In this same essay, Harvey (2003b) also alludes to the inconsistencies of the concept. In many ways, increased urban development (or the lack thereof) may be driven by the political power existent within communities in order to keep out outsiders. Moreover, the contours of social justice may differ across and within communities. To be critical of the economic activities that explicitly shape and reshape cities and urban areas, one must reckon with the biographical histories of place and space, not as abstract objects but

physical and cultural processes. Racial capitalism is not static or general in its application, rather it is a dynamic mode of organizing the world that operates in particular ways in different contexts (Dorries et al., 2019). Critical work on the city must center anti-racist theorizing in creating a better future (Dantzler & Reynolds, 2020; Gibbons, 2016). This forces scholars to seriously consider the modalities, agents, and contending ideologies that shape urbanization process across different levels of scale. This includes city-building processes across and within metropolitan areas as well as more granular interactions on a city block. As such, any attempts at “social justice” must center race and racism at the core of the urban process.

Struggles for justice must reckon with the inherent ways capital accumulation is derived from the exploitation of racialized subjects. In line with Harvey (1978), “the domination of capital over labor must necessarily look to the day when the capitalist laws of accumulation are themselves relegated to the history books” (pp. 129–130). However, as Robinson (2000) reminds us, the racialization of people was a long practice before the establishment of the capitalistic order. As such, any attempts to restructure the flows of capital investment must primarily focus on racism and the guiding force of White supremacy in our history. As Bonds (2019) suggests, “property is reproduced through racialized and gendered social relations, enshrined in capitalist markets, protected by the law, and vigorously defended by the state” (p. 4). Moreover, Bledsoe and Wright (2019) argue that anti-Blackness remains a necessary precondition for the perpetuation of capitalism, through a global expansion of capitalist practices that rest upon Black a-spatiality and Black dehumanization. Without these acknowledgments, the racial capitalist levels of exploitation and accumulation will remain intact, replete with all of its internal structural conditions.

Notes

1. Loughran (2015) argues that Du Bois’s urban theory offers a richer understanding of urban processes due to his focus on how the socially-constructed racial hierarchy of the United States shaped the material conditions of industrial cities. While classic urban sociological canon focuses on the Chicago School and its use of an ecological approach, Du Bois argues that racial stratification is a fundamental feature of the modern city and urbanization and urban migration.
2. The New World denotes the newly occupied lands of Indigenous people within present day North America.
3. While the focus here begins with Harvey’s (1978) article, these contradictions have been further explored in subsequent writings. As Roediger (2019) states, Harvey’s distinction rests upon understanding capitalism, which he argues is permeated with race and gender oppression. However, on the other hand, Harvey contends that capital can be examined without a need to examine those same categories. I agree with Roediger’s (2019) larger discussion that race has to be central in understanding the logic of capital.
4. In *The Limits of Capital* and *The New Imperialism* (2003), David Harvey notes his theory of “the spatial fix” – a process to explain the geographic structuring and restructuring of capital flows across loci of profitability. Situated in larger discussions of globalization, Harvey suggests capitalism has an insatiable thirst to resolve inner crises by geographic expansion and (re)structuring. In some ways, he likens this drive to that of a technological fix and economic growth. However, it is here too where such conceptualization fails to consider how such “fixes” incorporate devaluation processes dependent upon *who* occupies such spaces. As Gibbons (2016) notes, “the unbroken link between race and value has meant that no physical depreciation is necessary for the existence of a ‘rent gap’ in communities of color, but of

course redlining practices, the withdrawal of resources, the practices of absentee landlords and the like have also been pivotal in placing capital's spatial fix" (p. 874).

5. Within the case of the U.S., among other countries, Black people served as slaves – a dual form of exploited labor and property. Yet, even when Black people received their emancipation, racial hierarchies remained intact as they sought for their own civil rights. The Black experience within the U.S. is often historically contextualized upon segregated urban communities while other oppressed groups like Indigenous people are rendered invisible from urban spaces. As such, processes such as segregation and suburbanization align the Black experience with the urban as the epidemic of capitalist production.
6. For more information here, see Porter and Yiftachel's (2019) special issue in *Settler Colonial Studies*.
7. The "right to the city" concept is attributed to the work of Henri Lefebvre (1996) noting that any particular revolution has to be an urban political movement making more practical the rights of urban dwellers and the users of local services.
8. Much of Glass's (1964) argument around gentrification in London focuses on changing patterns of consumption. Part of the changes she articulated dealt with the simultaneous practices of stagnation, aggregation and expansion. Similar arguments were made in the Chicago School by early urban sociologist including Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess conceptualizing "the city" through a human ecological perspective (see Park & Burgess, 2019; Korver-Glenn et al., 2021).
9. Other scholars such as Squires (1989) have argued about the ideology of privatism as the relationship between the public and private sectors in the 1960s, largely touted as cost saving mechanisms necessary to revitalize the city centers of America as a necessary approach for local and regional economic growth. The "privatized city" becomes the site of such partnerships through policy tools including tax breaks, low-interest loans and deregulation. See Squires (1989) for a detailed discussion.

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