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The urban process and city building under racial capitalism: Reflections on Prentiss A. Dantzler's "The urban process under racial capitalism: Race, anti-Blackness, and capital accumulation"

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The sociologist Prentiss A. Dantzler contributes significantly to developing a framework for analyzing the urban process and city building under racial capitalism (Dantzler, 2021). Why is the quest to formulate such a framework so important? The civil rights movement called for creating *integrated residential areas* where people from across the race and class divide shared neighborhood space. The civil rights movement won many victories, but developing *integrated residential areas* was not one of them (Cruse, 2009; Hall, 2005). White resistance to race and class residential segregation doomed the quest (Gottesdiener, 2013; Massey, 1990; Massey & Denton, 1998; Taylor, 2019). At the same time, calls to "develop" the Black community socially, economically, and physically were denounced as "separatist" or criticized as efforts to *gild the ghetto*, a term used to describe making significant investments in developing the ghetto for Blacks (Gill, 2012). The die was cast. Blacks could not "integrate" White neighborhoods and the quest to develop the Black community was attacked as retrograde.

Consequently, the collapse of the institutional ghetto gave rise to the underdeveloped and marginalized Black neighborhood, which became the epicenter of systemic structural racism and anti-Blackness in the United States (Desmond, 2023; Wilson, 1987). The robust neighborhood effects literature premised that a causal link exists between adverse neighborhood conditions and undesirable socioeconomic and health outcomes (Sampson, 2002, 2019). Today, underdeveloped Black urban neighborhoods face a *new and present danger*: dispossession and displacement from the city caused by the White reclamation of the urban core (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022). Many cities nationwide, including Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Chicago, have lost significant Black populations over the past 20 years (Overly et al., 2022). Most significantly, these adverse conditions caused, and will continue to cause, Black neighborhoods to become sites of resistance and the fightback (Williams, 2015).

Since the knowledge city's rise triggered the collapse of the institutional ghetto after World War II, there have been significant changes in Black urban space, but the physical dilapidation and socioeconomic challenges in these socio-spatial sites have remained essentially the same. The late historian Gilbert Osofsky, in his 1968 article, "The Enduring Ghetto," contextualized the situation by arguing that a "tragic sameness" existed in Black urban space over time. Everything changes in the Black community over time, but

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the physical environment remains underdeveloped (Osofsky, 1968). The argument is that Blacks have been concentrated in the city's most undesirable residential districts at every stage of urban development. Yet, we have no adequate analytical framework to guide studies of the *material* and *immaterial* forces that produce and reproduce Black socio-spatial units as marginalized sites of arrested development (Goings & Mohl, 1996; Powell, 2008; Woods, 1998/2017).[1] Without such an analytical framework, we will not succeed in developing *intervention strategies* that can transform Black neighborhoods into great places to live, play, and raise a family.

Dantzler aims to understand the urban process and city building under racial capitalism. His central theme is that racism is *inextricably* interlocked with capitalism and they represent the twin towers exploitation and racial inequality. While the literature on racial capitalism has become increasingly robust, few studies apply it to the urban process and city building (Chasman & Cohen, 2017; Fernando, 2023; Pirtle, 2020). Thus, Dantzler takes a giant step forward in forging an analytical framework for understanding the urban experience of Blacks and other racialized populations under racial capitalism. Such insight is critical for identifying root problems, developing revolutionary solutions, and for understanding the role of agency and resistance among Blacks and other racialized groups (Cruse, 2009). In this brief essay, I intend to contribute to developing an analytical framework to understand the urban process and city building under racial capitalism by building on Dantzler's argument.

Dantzler's argument

Dantzler centers the racial character of the urban process within the broader political economy of racial capitalism. He argues that the interaction of capitalism and racism spawns an urban process that produces a racial hierarchy and inequality. Dantzler contests David Harvey's framework of the urban process by hanging his interpretation on the twin themes of dispossession and displacement instead of accumulation and class struggle (Harvey, 1973, 1978).

Dantzler correctly argues that the Harvey framework is colorblind and does not account for the role of race and racism in the urban process. However, his reformulation is also problematic. Dantzler's dispossession and displacement themes highlight the *exploitation* of people and places, emphasizing the social impacts and injustices of the urban process. It builds on Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession by framing dispossession and displacement within the political economy of racial capitalism (Harvey, 2020). The problem is that in Harvey's framework and classic Marxism, accumulation breeds resistance and a class struggle that catalyzes social transformation and the creation of a new society (Harvey, 1978). In the Dantzler framework, exploitation is highlighted, but *resistance* seems to be pushed to the margins. Thus, his urban process has no protagonist forces to create social transformation and a new society.

Dantzler's interpretive themes are inspired by scholarship on the settler city (Simpson & Hugill, 2022). The dispossession and displacement interpretive themes are understandable in this context. The settler city was built on stolen land seized through the violent dispossession and displacement of the indigenous population. However, once formed, the urban process *within* the settler city changed, especially after Whites gained hegemonic domination over the indigenous population and their territories. As the settler city evolved,

a different, but still racialized, urban process drove city-building (Taylor, 1984). The argument is *the settler city framework minimizes agency, resistance, and thus the protagonist that drives societal transformation.*

The corrective measure to Dantzler's framework I propose hangs on three themes: *accumulation, dispossession*, and the *racial struggle*. These three themes are integral to each other and provide different windows from which to view the totality of racial capitalist activity within the urban. In this interpretive framework, I include accumulation because not all forms of accumulation in the neoliberal age are accumulation by dispossession (Moreno & Shin, 2018). Accumulation, in this sense, generally refers to the process of amassing resources, capital, wealth, and other valuable assets. Within this context, accumulation by dispossession refers to capital accumulated by dispossessing people of their assets and resources. This formulation emphasizes the extraction of neighborhood wealth from underdeveloped Black neighborhoods and other communities of color (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Metzger, 2000). Most significantly, in this formulation, displacement and dispossession are *not* conflated, but displacement is included in the dispossession model because they are interactive forces that occur simultaneously, or displacement will result from dispossession. Of course, this formulation is not intended to minimize displacement but to account for it in the analysis of dispossession.

Next, within the context of dispossession and displacement, I premise that exploitation will breed resistance through the *racial struggle*. Here, I broadly define the *racial struggle* as economic fights over workplace issues, struggles for access to work, battles over neighborhood conditions, including the quest to improve housing, and fights over civil and human rights issues. The worsening of neighborhood conditions combined with low wages and joblessness triggers the material laborer's fight against the racial capitalist, and this struggle will eventually transmute into a struggle for societal transformation and the creation of a new society (Cruse, 2009; Marable, 1983/2015; Williams, 2015). I posit that these three themes—*accumulation, dispossession*, and *the racial struggle*—make it possible to interpret the role of the urban process and city building under racial capitalism.

Hyper-exploitation

Dantzler's concept of the *material laborer* is central to his analytical framework because it captures the multidimensional character of Black exploitation and objectification. In particular, it exposes the *hyper-exploitation* of Black workers. This formulation helps to identify the central issues over which racialized populations struggle and explains why Blacks are the most consistently radical group in the United States (Marable, 1984/2007; Taylor, 2021). Black workers are hyper-exploited and reduced to objects that are brutalized in multiple ways. For example, during the slave epoch, Blacks were workers and commodities that could be bought and sold. Also, enslaved Blacks were used in medical experiments, and women were frequently victimized sexually (Washington, 2006). Today, most Black workers are trapped in the low-wage sector of the labor market, with many others turned into *human raw materials* for the prison industrial complex (Hinton, 2016; Taylor, 2021).

Dantzler argues that "the struggle between racial capitalist and material laborers is borne out in the expropriation of people *and* places" (Dantzler, 2021, p. 115). This critical struggle occurs when racial capitalists expropriate value from workers *and* assets, resources, property, and wealth from their communities. Because racialized populations are trapped in

spatially bounded neighborhoods, they are easy prey for predatory finance, commercial, and rentier racial capitalists. These agents play a central role in extracting wealth from these marginalized and underdeveloped neighborhoods. The local government also plays a significant role in dispossession by seizing property and land for back taxes and unpaid fees and levying excessive fines and fees for traffic violations (Connolly, 2014; Taylor, 2020, 2019). The government also plays the lead in turning material laborers into human raw materials for the prison industrial complex. This dispossession process keeps racialized populations, particularly Blacks, on the economic edge and *reproduces* them as workers willing to take low-wage jobs with limited benefits and little hope of advancement. The resulting economic and social hardships produce adverse health outcomes, causing under-developed communities to be over-policed and in a chronic socioeconomic crisis (Hinton, 2016).

Building on Dantzler, I argued that accumulation by dispossession triggers a *racial struggle* linked to exploiting people and place (Marable, 1983/2015; Taylor & Naison, 2000). Thus, the triple focal points of struggle under racial capitalism are the *workplace*, *discriminatory labor markets*, and the *neighborhood-built environment*. Moreover, in the neoliberal age, as exploitation increases in racialized communities of color, White reclama-tion of the city intensifies, and the gentrification process accelerates, I posit that the underdeveloped neighborhood (place) will become the focal point of exploitation, thereby becoming the center of the *racial struggle* (Hunter, 2013; Overly et al., 2022). Harold Cruse, the radical social critic, explained the relationship between exploitation, resistance, and the revolutionary potential of the Black freedom struggle.

> The Negro movement represents an *indirect* challenge to the capitalist status quo not because it is programmatically anti-capitalist, but because full integration of the Negro in all levels of American society *is not possible within the present framework of the American system . . .* The United States cannot and never will solve the race problem unless America changes the economic, political, cultural, and administrative social organization of this country in various sectors. (Cruse, 2009, p. 100)

There is one point of contention between Dantzler and myself. He uses the *disinvestment* concept to describe the activities of racial capitalists in underdeveloped neighborhoods. I argue what many scholars conceptualize as *disinvestments* are actually *predatory investment*s made by financial, commercial, and rentier entrepreneurs. Blacks and other racialized populations are easy prey for economic predators because they reside in spatially bounded, underdeveloped communities with limited residential mobility. Consequently, dispossession and displacement occurring in these marginalized, underdeveloped neigh-borhoods represent predatory acts of accumulation by dispossession (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Taylor, 2020).

The city building process under racial capitalism

Dantzler tells us why Blacks and racialized populations are concentrated in marginalized, segregated, and underdeveloped neighborhoods, but he does not tell us *how* this happens, nor does he *explain* how race shapes the structure and form of cities. The problem is that Dantzler conflates the urban process and city building. Although similar and interactive, the urban process and city building are *different* concepts. The urban process refers to the

dynamic economic, accumulative, political, social, and cultural activities that drive urban change and city building. It encompasses how people interact within urban settings, forming social relationships, organizing communities, and how urban structures impact individuals and groups. The urban process explores factors such as ideology, culture, governance, population growth, economic shifts, technological advancement, and the down-on-the-ground activities of varied populations (Hershberg, 1978; Reissman, 1966).

On the other hand, city building refers to the *actual* construction and ongoing renewal of the *urban*—the physical city—and the policies and regulations guiding its growth and development. It refers to the ideology, decision-making, and deliberate planning, design, and financing that inform and guide the built environment's physical construction: infrastructure, bridges, utilities, buildings, parks, public spaces, architecture, land use regulation, and schools, housing, and residential districts, and the like (Fogelsong, 1986; Taylor, 1993). City building grows out of and aims to *actualize* the dictates of the urban process. It responds materially and immaterially to *urban process dynamics*—economic shifts, population growth, demographic changes, and technological innovation—and intentionally constructs the built environment to reflect the goals of wealth accumulation, profit-making, and promoting specific ideological narratives (Fernando, 2023; Fogelsong, 1986; Mohl, 2001; Taylor, 1984, 1993).

Lastly, *scale* is critical when discussing the urban process and city building under racial capitalism. Dantzler does not discuss the topic, but in the post–World War II era, the "urban" refers to the central city and its surrounding suburbs. Urban Planners sometimes refer to this as the regional city or the urban metropolis. In this context, the "city" can be conceptualized as the "urban metropolis," and the central city refers to the urban core, while the suburbs embrace the municipalities surrounding the urban core. This terminology is important because the central city and suburbs were planned and developed as one place in the post–World War II era. Thus, the city-building process entailed the actual building of the urban metropolis (Mohl, 2001; Taylor, 2000).

Racism and the rise of the knowledge city

Now, operating within this analytical framework, I want to illustrate *how* race and the construction of underdeveloped racialized neighborhoods informed the structure and form of cities. In the postwar era, residential development drove the knowledge city's development. In this spatial formation, the center city and suburbs combined to form *one big city*. After World War II, mass homeownership anchored the residential development *and* the city's structure and form—the physical layout, organization, and arrangement of urban space (Taylor, 2000).

During the Great Depression, the government and private sector forged a mass homeownership strategy to jumpstart the economy and address the nation's severe economic challenge. The construction and real estate industries were major employers, and by encouraging homeownership, the government hoped to create employment opportunities for construction workers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and related professions. Significantly, the government and private sector aimed to make homeownership an instrument of wealth accumulation for ordinary citizens. The owner-occupied house would be *commodified*, and property owners turned into *homeowner entrepreneurs* who participated in the real estate market by purchasing their homes at one price and selling them at a higher

price in the future, thereby making a profit. Thus, homeownership was transformed into a form of wealth accumulation for the working class, higher-income professionals, and the elite (Fogelsong, 1986; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Taylor, 2020).

The problem is that mass ownership could not be achieved without radically changing the mortgage system. During the 1930s, the existing mortgage system made homeownership a risky business. It required a substantial downpayment and a short repayment period, usually from 2 to 5 years. This obsolete mortgage system made homeownership financially difficult for many people and hindered the growth of mass homeownership. The government and private sector decided to replace the old system with an amortized mortgage, allowing a more extended repayment period, typically over 20 to 30 years (Taylor, 1993, 2020).

This shift in mortgage types required a real estate appraisal system that could predict the future value of housing units. In the context of longer-term mortgages, lenders and borrowers needed to assess the value of the housing units being mortgaged and their potential for appreciation or depreciation over time. One of the most influential contributors to developing this modern real estate appraisal method was Frederick M. Babcock, a real estate appraiser. Babcock focused on the neighborhood, *not* the individual house, in developing his approach to real estate appraisal. He theorized that neighborhood demographics determined a residential area's physical conditions, desirability, and the value of its housing. Thus, the neighborhood, rather than the dwelling unit, was the driver of residential land and housing values (Taylor, 1993, 2020, 2019).

Therefore, the *future value* of a house could be predicted based on a community's location (stage) in the neighborhood's life cycle. Babcock posited that neighborhoods moved through five stages of development, each resulting in *inevitable* declining conditions, ultimately becoming a blighted or slum district. The neighborhood trajectory was the most critical variable in determining land valorization. In this context, Babcock theorized that the mere presence of Blacks in a community signaled a *rapid decline* in property values. He also indicated that the presence of low-paid immigrants, such as Italians, and Jews would also negatively impact property values. Thus, Babcock built race *and* class into his model of residential land valorization. Babcock admitted that determining a neighborhood's trajectory and housing values was highly subjective, but that did not keep him from developing his racist model (Taylor, 1993, 2020, 2019).

In his neighborhood life-cycle theory, Babcock centered race, and other real estate appraisers agreed. For example, the American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers supported and reinforced this racist land valorization concept. The institute said that groups from dissimilar cultures destroyed property values. When a new class of people from different races, colors, nationalities, and cultures moved into a neighborhood, the older inhabitants believed their community was starting to decline and left. The Homeowners' Loan Corporation's residential security map project validated the theory that a linear relationship existed between race and class *and* neighborhood conditions. The HOLC used a classification system based on demographics, housing type, land use, and location. They classified neighborhoods in about 240 cities based on four categories: A-*Best*, B-*Still Desirable*, C-*Definitely Declining*, and D-*Hazardous* (Nelson et al., 2023).

The residential security maps showed that Blacks and low-paid immigrants were overrepresented in the *declining and hazardous neighborhoods*, seeming to confirm the Babcock thesis. *Blacks and other people of color became synonymous with neighborhood*

decline and low property values. The Babcock model took on a life of its own and spawned a knowledge city that stratified residential areas based on the homogenous neighborhood concept that stressed race and class, housing type, and housing cost (Taylor, 1993, 2020). Racial residential segregation became the foundation on which the knowledge city was built. It determined how cities were planned, designed, laid out, zoned, and regulated. Racial residential segregation was the engine that drove the city building process and determined the structure, shape, and form of the urban (Fernando, 2023; Taylor, 2019).

The aim was to *recreate* the racial hierarchy as a neighborhood hierarchy by constructing socially differentiated socio-spatial sites based on race and class exclusivity for the sake of wealth accumulation *and* reproducing Blacks and racialized workers as material laborers. In the case of Blacks and other racialized populations, their neighborhoods were also designed as sites of hyper-exploitation through accumulation by dispossession. Thus, along the Babcock residential land use spectrum, *wealth accumulation* occurred at one pole and *hyper-exploitation* or accumulation by dispossession at the other. In this context, higher-income Whites were segregated in highly developed suburbs in the new urban metropolis, while lower-income Whites were clustered in less developed and desirable residential districts.

Meanwhile, Blacks and other racialized populations were segregated on the most under-developed and devalued residential lands in the metropolis. In this context, Black neighborhoods were *place-holder* communities. As soon as the spatial sites they occupied could be put to more profitable uses, they were dispossessed and displaced (Taylor, 1984, 2020). The process driving this residential model can be reduced to this simple principle: *Housing values **increase** as a residential area becomes Whiter and more class-exclusive. In contrast, housing values **decrease** as a residential area becomes Blacker and more class-inclusive* (Taylor, 2021).

Guided by this principle, after World War II, a dynamic new American city was built—the knowledge city—consisting of a central city and suburbs—and anchored by the homogenous residential model. In this *model*, the suburbs became the homeownership zone, the regional center of population growth, and the primary residential location of working-class, professional, and elite Whites. Race and class shaped the suburbs. The White working-class aristocracy, professionals, and elites resided in the most class-exclusive and developed suburban municipalities, while ordinary White workers clustered in the older, inner suburbs. Blacks and other racialized populations were *Whitelined*—kept out of the suburbs—and concentrated in the urban core. In this setting, Blacks and other racialized populations were forced to reside in segregated, underdeveloped, and marginalized neighborhoods on the most undesirable residential lands (Gottesdiener, 2013; Taylor, 2020, 2019).

Of course, this pattern was not absolute. Some Whites continued to reside in central city neighborhoods, and some Blacks and racialized populations lived in the suburbs. *However, these issues notwithstanding, in the knowledge city, the racial hierarchy was reproduced as a neighborhood hierarchy based on social and racial differentiation*. In this racist system of residential development, White neighborhoods became sites of wealth accumulation, and Black neighborhoods became devalued sites of predatory entrepreneurial activity. Most significantly, the *valorization* of White residential space was based on the *devalorization* of Black residential space. This was the first phase in developing the knowledge city, from about 1945 to 1990 or 2000 (Taylor, 2020, 2019).

In the second and current phase in the knowledge city's development, neoliberalism and White reclamation of the city are turning the urban core into a site of intense accumulation, dispossession, and displacement anchored by gentrification. Increasingly, African Americans are being pushed into the decaying inner suburbs of the knowledge city. For example, since 2000, among the cities with the largest Black populations, nine of ten have lost population, with New York, Chicago, and Detroit sustaining the most significant loss. Even though Detroit remained predominantly Black, it still lost 277,516 Black residents (Overly et al., 2022).

These segregated, underdeveloped, racialized neighborhoods were not just a consequence of urban development but were, in fact, a force that shaped the structure and form of the knowledge city. Thus, race and racism are not marginal dimensions of the urban experience and the city-building process but are central components shaping it. In essence, racism and capitalism are interwoven and influence each other in shaping the structure and form of cities and reproducing Blacks and racialized populations as material laborers stuck in segregated, marginalized, and underdeveloped neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Prentiss Dantzler significantly contributes to developing a framework to analyze the urban process and city building under racial capitalism. I aimed to strengthen Dantzler's analytical framework for understanding the urban process and city building under racial capitalism by building on his argument. The core idea is that you cannot understand the urban process and city building under capitalism without accounting for race and racism. Dantzler corrects this error using a racial capitalist framework to understand the urban process and city building. My contributions have been to expand the interpretive themes to include accumulation and the racial struggle. These two additional themes provide a more holistic view of racial capitalism and identify Blacks and racialized populations as the protagonists that will drive social transformation and the creation of a new society. This protagonist role is created by the hyper-exploitation faced by these racialized populations and is based on the notion that exploitation breeds resistance.

I also contribute to expanding Dantzler's argument by accounting for the city-building process. I posit that the urban process cannot be fully understood without knowing how city building actualizes its wealth accumulating goals through the construction of the physical city and the neighborhoods where people live and raise their families. In this scenario, neighborhoods become the sites of wealth accumulation, the reproduction of racial capitalist domination, *and* the reproduction of material laborers. In this urban duality, Whites are consigned to neighborhoods of wealth accumulation and privilege, *and* Blacks and racialized populations to neighborhoods of devaluation and arrested development. Under racial capitalism, the neighborhood or residential district becomes a vehicle for the reproduction of race and class domination.

Thus, when one sees how the *city-building process recreates the racial hierarchy as a neighborhood hierarchy*, Dantzler's notion of exploiting people and place come to life. Most significantly, the city building process makes it apparent that racial residential segregation has two interactive goals—wealth accumulation and reproduction of Blacks and the racialized population as material workers. This harsh reality is precisely why "segregation is so much at the heart of how our cities are planned, designed, and laid out."

Note

1. Frameworks exists but those that situate Blacks in an urban setting ignore the political economy and view the city through ecological lenses that conceptualize neighborhoods as "natural" sites. For example, the popular systemic structural racism framework conceptualizes racist as *disconnected* from capitalism (Powell, 2008).

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