

The City after Property: a conversation on critical geographies of race and property

The city after property: abandonment and repair in postindustrial Detroit,
by Sara Safransky, Durham, USA, Duke University Press, 2023, 328 pp.,
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BOOK REVIEW FORUM: THE CITY AFTER PROPERTY

The City after Property: a conversation on critical geographies of race and property

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The deeply moral and ethical questions surrounding urban land and property. These were questions about race and personhood. They were about abandonment and belonging. They were about reckoning and healing. This book is about these questions. (Safransky, 2023: xv)

The city has long served as heuristic for everyday life, as much a way of framing its fears and hopes as it is a place to study them. In *The City after Property: Abandonment and Repair in Postindustrial Detroit* (2023), Sara Safransky poses the difficult moral and ethical questions about urban life and its study. They encapsulate the epistemological debates around urban theory, collaborative knowledge-production and an engaged scholarship attuned to epistemic justice. The questions are also entangled with a reckoning with history – in part answered with counternarratives in projects produced in the course of her research such as *A People's Atlas of Detroit* (2020). Yet the questions at the heart of the book also grapple with more-than-knowledge by venturing into the ontological project of racial capitalism and its material expansion.

The book opens many possibilities for possible engagement, but this forum invites contributors to comment on the connections between race and property. It is a relationship haunted by a history of exploitation. In a vividly described scene from a city council meeting in 2012, Safransky recounts how a nine-member all-Black council faced an inconsolable public:

Every two minutes, the gavel pounded, interrupting individual testimonies, but they'd already been entered into a river of affirmations of collective heartache, frustration and defiance. I couldn't help but think of their testimonials like truth and reconciliation in real time, but they refused reconciliation – economic or otherwise. Speakers compared emergency management to slavery. (Safransky, 2023: 118)

Safransky takes on the complexity of understanding the entwined nature of property and abandonment by underlining the centrality of race and structural racism. She reminds readers of the limits of deterministic economic explanation, and centers instead on Black life, community, movements, activism and the many legacies that shape Detroit. Likewise, this book forum invites a reading of Safransky's work from this perspective of agency – how people fought back and how they care.

The invitation has generated a rich conversation. tamika l. butler considers the possibilities of entrusting Black and Brown people to take a lead in both defining the problem and solution, as a way to reconsider the epistemic basis of property and the impetus to learn (2024). Rachel Brahinsky discusses Safransky's use of a longer historical lens and methodology in order to reveal property's central role in racial capitalism (2024). Drawing on shared personal backgrounds and academic concerns, Sage Ponder considers how predatory debt is invariably rooted in preexisting systems of extraction and dominance (2024). Building


on the legacy of the Black Power movement, Mia Dawson insists on the legitimacy of unsanctioned claims that is thematized in the book (2024). Nathan McClintock untangles how racial capitalism is upheld through “plot/plantation” relations and the way that settler colonialism is conditioned by myths of the “wilderness/frontier” (2024). Finally, Safransky reflects on writing this book, and what it means to “write into commitments” in such a way that can be simultaneously subversive and empowering (2024). These contributions highlight ways of reading that extend beyond a single perspective and invite thinking with *The City after Property* from different critical, personal and normative positions.

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Trust the people: a lesson in listening, learning and following the lead of Black people in *The City after Property*

After graduating from Stanford Law School in 2009, I became a nonprofit civil rights lawyer, starting a workers' rights clinic in San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters' Point. Bayview is an oft-neglected neighborhood in a city with an ever-decreasing Black population that shares some similarities with Detroit – the subject of Safransky's (2023) *The City after Property*.

To be effective, I first had to understand the new Muni rail line that had begun servicing Bayview. I heard anger, frustration, and despair from countless community members who felt, once again, that the city did not care about *their* mobility or access to resources at the core of the city but had only created the Muni line to service 49ers fans traveling to and from Candlestick Park in Bayview. This pivotal experience shaped my desire to leave law behind and begin a career as an urban planner.

As I learned more about the history of urban planning, I better understood the extent to which oppression and segregation have been cemented into our built environment by government planning decisions. In *The City after Property*, Safransky masterfully weaves rich stories,