

## Urban specters: the everyday harms of racial capitalism

by Sarah Mayorga, Chapel Hill, NC, The University of North Carolina Press, 2023, 220 pp., \$27.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4696-7493-3

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Urban specters: the everyday harms of racial capitalism**, by Sarah Mayorga, Chapel Hill, NC, The University of North Carolina Press, 2023, 220 pp., \$27.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4696-7493-3

The urban sociological literature has long attempted to understand the myriad ways that racial/ethnic relations, as well as class dynamics, shape the everyday lived experiences of urban dwellers. American neighborhoods seem to be inextricably shaped by patterns of settlement by race and class. Sarah Mayorga's *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism* provides a compelling account of how residents of two lower-income and mixed-race neighborhoods in Cincinnati understand their place within Cincinnati, how they experience local divestment, and grapple with their standing within Cincinnati's list of priorities. Beyond these questions of urban planning and local governance, she also takes a deep dive into how residents deal with each other in light of a racialized capitalist system that relies on their subordination and exploitation. She draws on an extensive collection of 117 in-depth interviews from across these two neighborhoods and across racial groups within these areas. The result is a fascinating examination of both race relations and class dynamics in a changing city. Her book makes a significant contribution to the study of both critical racial/ethnic studies and urban sociology, and perhaps more importantly to the theoretical underpinnings of these two traditions.

Mayorga opens her book by laying out her argument for studying racial capitalism in Cincinnati, and for her concept of "urban specters." By racial capitalism, she means the ways in which racism has intersected with a capitalist economic framework to create and perpetuate urban inequality. She argues that we can observe racial capitalism in the ways in which people describe their neighborhoods and their fellow residents. She refers to urban specters as the subtle ways in which her interviewees recognize these structures within their lives and allude to them, and yet cannot fully articulate the manner in which capitalism accomplishes this. She describes this process as, "I am interested in not just the details of what people said, however, but also the underlying assumptions of those statements and rationalizations" (11). Indeed, throughout this book, she is masterful at taking her participants' words, often presented in long blocks of quotes for deep context, and unpacking them to investigate how racial capitalism permeates their lived realities.

In the chapters that follow, she explores these themes through a study of different types of urban specters using evidence from her in-depth interview data. She divides these up into three central themes, or specific specters. The first specter (Chapter 2) explores how the residents of these two neighborhoods perceive relative underdevelopment and local neglect in terms of the broader


Cincinnati area. The second (Chapter 3) examines how private property conveys a sense of ownership of the neighborhood to certain individuals, which leads to “trash talk” on the part of residents, often taking on racial overtones. The third specter (Chapter 4) interrogates how policing and public perceptions of safety reflect racial capitalist ideologies. This is perhaps her most effective chapter where she supplies vivid quotes from her respondents that simultaneously reflect a desire for greater public safety, and yet countless examples of police failure to safeguard the neighborhood and sometimes even hostile treatment of those seeking help from law enforcement. In the subsequent chapter (Chapter 5), she expands these three specters to explore how the presence of these processes of racial capitalism relate to a greater sense of distrust and disconnection between residents of these two neighborhoods as a result.

Despite the hefty subject matter of her book, processes of race and class in urban inequality, she ends on a surprisingly optimistic note. In the concluding chapter of her book, rather than accepting the harsh realities of racial capitalism, she sounds the call for abolitionist thinking. She writes, “We must remember that poverty—for individuals and neighborhoods—is not a necessary characteristic of modern living. It is a policy choice. We choose it daily with our economic priorities and policies” (156). While the idea of dismantling capitalism in the U.S. may seem like a pipe dream, especially after reading Chapters 1–5, she offers a glimpse of what that could look like. She reports instances of care and desire for social connection among the residents of these two neighborhoods. She argues that broader efforts to re-envision urban life must start with a focus on local features and organizing.

What Mayorga offers us here is not new, yet her discussion of the material is fresh. Sociology has a long-standing scholarly tradition of exploring the ways in which race and class matter for our understanding of urban inequality. This book is not innovative in that regard. However, what she brings to the table is new data that she connects superbly to theories in this area on both race relations and neo-Marxist theories of class relations. At times, the connection to theory is dense and academic in a way that feels disconnected from her subjects. For example, her use of the term “urban specters” to describe her respondents’ words might not resonate with her own respondents. That said, her work expertly intersects urban sociological theories of race and class. The manner in which she is able to take the concepts discussed in her interviews and weave them into a rich discussion of theory is both skillful and illuminating. Indeed, while much of the sociological literature on urban inequality is often centered on adjudicating between race versus class in an ongoing academic debate, Mayorga demonstrates how poor race relations are fundamentally intertwined with class exploitation through racial capitalism, eschewing the debate altogether. In this manner, she challenges her reader to interrogate these long-held categorical distinctions that the field emphasizes.

Overall, Mayorga’s *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism* provides a compelling account of two Cincinnati communities and how they grapple with the lived experiences of neighborhood marginalization and disinvestment. In a time of mounting racial strife and economic insecurity, her book provides

a solid contribution to urban sociology, social stratification, and critical race studies.

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