

# Review of “Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism”

By Sarah Mayorga

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**Reviewer:** Davon Norris, *University of Michigan*

Sarah Mayorga's *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism* is a refreshing contribution to urban scholarship. Instead of identifying some process animating inequality across the focal city of Cincinnati, Mayorga flips the script using her 117 interviews to give voice to how residents of two working-class neighborhoods—Riverside and Carthage—explain the slew of changing conditions in their communities and Cincinnati as a whole. Mayorga takes seriously what residents have to say centering the book around a distillation of their accounts into a set of three, what Mayorga refers to as, urban specters: neglect, trash talk, and security. These specters operate as partial recognitions or explanations that residents deploy to make sense of their lives and neighborhoods. It is important to stress that these specters are partial. As the cover art cleverly hints, specters lack key details capturing only the broad silhouette of dynamics in Cincinnati. This yields at best dubious accounts of urban phenomenon and at worst perpetuates racialized understandings that obscure key capitalist processes shaping changes across the city. By drawing attention to these urban specters, this rich investigation sheds light on how the oft-theorized entanglement of racism and capitalism manifests in the daily experiences of people trying to live meaningful lives while they also try to understand the complex problems making it harder for them to do so.

The core of the book explores each specter in turn. Here, the value of Mayorga's approach shines through as it becomes clear that the specters play a dual role of explaining and obscuring. For example, residents frequently expressed feelings of neglect and being left behind by many actors but especially the municipal government. The specter of neglect explains the lack of investment, inadequate public transportation, and the closing of neighborhood schools as resulting from being low on the city's priority list. While partially correct, Mayorga highlights how such accounts lose sight of the challenges associated with population loss in Cincinnati aided by exclusionary suburban incorporation. In fact, Mayorga notes many White residents deployed neglect-related language yet elided white flight as a force shaping present problems. Choosing to emphasize city incompetence or lack of care helped residents make sense of underdevelopment in their communities without implicating themselves or grappling with the larger structural conditions in Cincinnati. The specters of trash talk and security worked in a similar way. Trash talk yielded spurious understandings of neighborhood trajectories where residents saw city neglect as sparking an influx of literal trash and, more pejoratively, “trash people.” Residents primarily used trash talk to normalize a racialized distinction between homeowners and renters. That is, residents identified the presence of renters and subsidized housing as drivers of neighborhood problems

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echoing textbook antiwelfare attitudes and negative views of renters as contributing little to a community's social fabric. Again, Mayorga clearly illustrates how this conflation of renters with trash and as being negatives to a neighborhood is *an* explanation that eschews and lets off the hook the role of exploitative and negligent landlords. The final specter of security outlines how residents' desire for secure communities worked to justify increased policing despite repeated experiences of police failure. Solutions to the persistent problem of feeling in danger and at risk of being victimized that both Riverside and Carthage residents expressed was exclusively rooted in policing displacing an interrogation of how to meaningfully generate safety and whether it was possible for policing to produce safety.

In the case of each specter, the way residents made sense of their communities and city simultaneously moved them towards certain kinds of interpretations and away from others. Rather than seeing their neighborhood problems as emanating from larger relational processes shaped by racism and capitalism, each specter tended towards a narrower individualized understanding. This meant that while residents of Riverside and Carthage found themselves subject to the downsides of underdevelopment, stigmatization, and ineffective policing, the ways they understood the causes of those problems were incomplete. A key consequence was that residents saw other residents as the problem, and they often engaged one another with a cautious and suspicious disposition reinforcing the negative trajectories they bemoaned.

*Urban Specters* sets out as an ambitious attempt to give life at the micro level to macro historical processes that typically fall under the banner of racial capitalism. In this regard, *Urban Specters* is a success. Indeed, the book is so successful in what it does well that it also raises clear questions begging for attention. Where do these specters come from? How are they sustained or changed? What institutions or actors benefit from which specters? What kinds of politics do these specters enable or constrain? Do these specters have unique epistemic purchase that resonate in local policy discourse? Without attention to these questions, the larger stakes of these specters were not always clear. Additionally, we only get partial glimpses of how residents framed and talked about futures that might be more inclusive, collective, and safe. These glimpses were most overt during the chapter on policing; however, the peeks we get do not quite yield systematic and identifiable ways to imagine the kinds of relations and conditions that residents desired and the kinds of steps that would help move towards that vision. As a result, the book leaves us almost with a fourth urban specter, that of a "better future."

Overall, *Urban Specters* illuminates the ways racial capitalist dynamics haunt the everyday lived experiences of people and, most importantly, the stories people tell. These stories are messy and complex, yet Mayorga's analysis neatly guides readers through the thicket of racial capitalism as it manifests on the ground. As a result, *Urban Specters* is not an exegesis of racial capitalism nor a clarification of its inconsistencies. But by hearing how residents themselves make sense of incredibly high-dimensional problems, readers come away with something perhaps more valuable, an almost embodied or intuitive sense of the problems of racial capitalism qua system and the promise of racial capitalism qua lens through which to understand the world. Because of this, *Urban Specters* is a valuable and generative resource for scholars of race, urban inequality, and political economy.