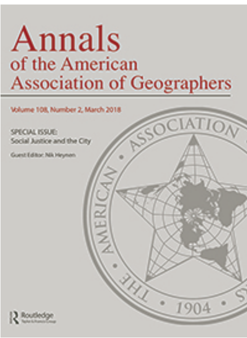

Annals of the American Association of Geographers

ISSN: 2469-4452 (Print) 2469-4460 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raag21

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To cite this article: Sara Safransky (2018) Land Justice as a Historical Diagnostic: Thinking with Detroit, Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 108:2, 499-512, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2017.1385380

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1385380

Published online: 14 Dec 2017.

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Land Justice as a Historical Diagnostic: Thinking with Detroit

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Debates around urban land—who owns it, who can access it, who decides, and on what basis—are intensifying in the United States. Fifty years after the end of legally sanctioned segregation, rising rents in cities across the country are displacing poor people, particularly people of color. In this article, I consider debates around land in Detroit. Building on work in critical race studies, indigenous studies, and decolonial theory, as well insights from community activists, I introduce and develop what I call a "historical diagnostic." This justice-oriented analytical approach illuminates the racialized dispossession that haunts land struggles and foregrounds the historical antecedents to and aspirations of contemporary land justice movements. Drawing on research conducted in Detroit between 2010 and 2012, I analyze instances when the moral economy of land becomes visible, including a truth and reconciliation process, the period when the state of Michigan placed the city under emergency management, and a tax foreclosure auction. An examination of these events reveals alternative ways of knowing and being in relation to land that we might build upon to confront displacement in cities today. *Key Words: the land question, moral economy of land, racialized dispossession, truth and reconciliation, urban commons.*

在美国, 有关城市土地的辩论 —— 谁拥有土地、谁能使用、谁决定、以及根据什麽基础 —— 正逐渐加剧。终止合法进行隔离五十年后, 全国各大城市不断上涨的租金, 持续造成穷人流离失所, 特别是有色人种。我于本文中考量底特律的土地辩论。我植基于批判种族研究、原住民研究、去殖民理论, 以及社区行动者的洞见, 引介并发展我称之为 "历史诊断" 的概念。此一以正义为导向的分析方法, 描绘出纠缠着土地争议的种族化迫迁, 并强调当代土地正义运动的历史前身与灵感。我运用 2010 年至 2012 年间在底特律进行的研究, 分析土地的道德经济成为可见的境况, 包含真相与和解过程、密西根州将该城市至于危机管理之期间, 以及因未缴税而取消赎回权的财产拍卖。对这些事件的检视, 揭露出我们认知并与土地产生关系、并以此为基础来应对当下城市中的迫迁的另类方式。 *关键词: 土地问题, 土地的道德经济, 种族化迫迁, 真相与和解, 城市公有地。*

Los debates alrededor de la tierra urbana—sobre quién la posee, quién tiene acceso a la misma, quién decide, y con qué bases—se están intensificando en los Estados Unidos. Cincuenta años después de que se castigara la segregación, el aumento de la renta de la tierra a través del país está desplazando a los pobres, en particular a la gente de color. En este artículo, tomo en cuenta los debates sobre la tierra que se están presentando en Detroit. Edificando desde el trabajo desarrollado sobre estudios críticos de raza, estudios indígenas y teoría descolonizadora, lo mismo que a partir de perspectivas esgrimidas por los activistas de la comunidad, presento y desarrollo lo que yo llamo un "diagnóstico histórico". Este enfoque analítico orientado por la justicia ilustra las desposesiones racializadas que acompañan la lucha por la tierra y pregonan los antecedentes históricos de los movimientos contemporáneos de justicia por la tierra, y sus aspiraciones. Basándome en investigación efectuada en Detroit entre 2010 y 2012, analizo los casos en los que la economía moral de la tierra se hace visible, incluyendo un proceso de verdad y reconciliación, en un período durante el cual la ciudad fue puesta bajo administración de emergencia por el estado de Michigan y sometida a una subasta de ejecución hipotecaria por impuestos. El examen de estos eventos pone de manifiesto maneras alternativas de saber y ser en relación con la tierra sobre los cuales podríamos construir para confrontar el desplazamiento en las ciudades de nuestros días. *Palabras clave: la cuestión de la tierra, economía moral de la tierra, desposesión racializada, verdad y reconciliación, bienes comunes urbanos.*

"It's the last day to pay," the man said to a passerby marveling at the line spilling out of the Wayne County Treasurer building in downtown Detroit. The gray winter day seemed to match the mood of the residents clutching envelopes and folders stuffed with documents as they waited for hours in hopes of keeping their homes from being auctioned. Once inside, a police officer directed homeowners,

Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 108(2) 2018, pp. 499–512 © 2018 by American Association of Geographers
Initial submission, January 2017; final acceptance, April 2017
Published by Taylor & Francis, LLC.

most of whom were African American, where to go to "make arrangements." "When you get to the eighth floor, you will get a number," the officer yelled. "Keep that number! Then go to the fifth floor." There residents filed into lines where they waited to settle their debts or get on payment plans to spare their homes. Each October, Wayne County, which encompasses Detroit, holds the country's largest tax foreclosure auction. Houses can be sold for as little as $500. In 2015, as many as 100,000 residents risked eviction.[1]

In the twentieth century, Detroit was not only famous for putting the world on wheels but also shaping an American Dream that celebrated homeownership. In the twenty-first century, the city stands as an exemplar of housing precarity and urban land crisis. Today, fewer than 700,000 residents occupy Detroit, which was built for almost 2 million. Following decades of deindustrialization and white flight, the city, which has a population that is 83 percent African American (U.S. Census 2010), was one of the hardest hit during the 2008 and 2009 subprime mortgage crisis. Bank foreclosures were compounded by Wayne County's tax foreclosure policy, fueling a speculative real estate market with investors snatching up property at rock-bottom prices. At the time of writing, city officials characterize an astounding 150,000 parcels—one third of the city's landed area—as vacant or abandoned. Much of this land has become de facto public through the state's tax reversion policy. The municipal government has been engaged in a concerted effort to develop land acquisition, disposition, and regularization policies as part of a broader fiscal austerity and revitalization agenda. Yet the ownership, value, and political meaning of so-called vacant land is disputed by people who live on the land, care for it, and imagine different futures on it.

Between 2010 and 2012, I spent fifteen months in Detroit studying how various actors staked claims to the city's "abandoned" land. It was a period of intense uncertainty and friction. A contentious city-wide planning process called the Detroit Works Project (DWP) had just been launched by a public–private consortium. The DWP sought to "rightsize" and "green" Detroit by dividing it into market-based zones (Safransky 2014; Akers 2016; Montgomery 2016). The resulting plan or strategic framework slated "distressed" zones for disinvestment and reimagined occupied neighborhoods as ponds and farms (Detroit Future City 2012). Simultaneously, a state-imposed emergency manager began instituting severe austerity and privatization measures, precipitating the city's bankruptcy in 2013. In response to these political-economic and territorial reconfigurations, some activists began fighting not just against urban displacement but for land justice. They joined a diverse and growing chorus of organizations, domestic and international, that have begun resisting urban and rural land consolidation, gentrification, black land loss, and the loss of Native land rights under the banner of land justice.

What do twenty-first-century social movements mean when they advocate for urban land justice? Since its classical formulation in agrarian political economy, the land question has been a catch-all phrase for concerns about land and resource distribution: Who owns what, who decides who gets what, and on what basis (Bernstein 2010; Peluso and Lund 2011)? These questions have been the subject of scholarship in the postcolonial Global South where rural social movements from the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil (e.g., Wolford 2010) to the Landless People's Movement in South Africa (e.g., Ntsebeza and Hall 2007) have demanded agrarian and land reforms for decades, but they have received less attention in Global North cities. The racial and cultural politics of land and property in the United States are, like South Africa or Brazil, haunted by colonial conquest, historical racialized dispossession, and a state that has perpetuated white property privilege (Harris 1993). In urban geography, the land question tends to be approached from a political-economic perspective that illuminates how capital circulates through cityscapes (Smith 2002; Harvey 2006). Such analyses are critical for understanding the relationship between the production of urban space and the expansion of capitalism, as well as contemporary urban displacements. They often underemphasize, however, the politics of race and difference (Young 1998; Kholsa 2005). Political-economic frameworks alone do not give us the tools to capture the powerful feelings of historical loss and injustice associated with urban land struggles, nor do they capture the consciousness, aspirations, and claims of resistance movements on their own terms. In other words, when twenty-first-century movements talk about urban land, they are often not just talking about capital and class but also about race and colonialism.

In the 2015 Association of American Geographers plenary "What Is Urban about Critical Urban Theory?" Ananya Roy (2016) argued that "today's urban question is a land question" and emphasized the importance of attending to historical difference in the study of urban problems. Roy argued that agrarian pasts and rural land regimes are implicated in urban development today and that the not-urban, rural, or agrarian

is a necessary supplement to the urbanization-of-everything theories, like "planetary urbanization" (Brenner and Schmid 2014). Following Derickson's (2009) call for "non-totalizing" theory, Roy argued that such conceptualizations of the urban should be accompanied by methodological attention to uncertainty and "undecidability" (cf. Mouffe 2000) and invites us to read the urban "from the standpoint of an absence" (inspired by critical theorist and feminist Nancy Fraser; Roy 2016; see also Roy n.d.). Building on Roy's work, I consider the land question in Detroit from the standpoint of absence.

Thinking with community activists in Detroit, I argue for a "historical diagnostic" of the urban land question. Here, *diagnostic* refers to the practices or techniques that residents use to diagnose contemporary problems and *historical* signifies their concern with how "history," to quote James Baldwin (1968), "is not even the past, it's the present." A historical diagnostic seeks to link contemporary land struggles to the historical continuum of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) and racial liberalism (Mills 2008) and capture the ways in which social movements try to reckon with state violence by staking alternative claims to land. This approach emerged during my fieldwork out of a sense of urgency to account for the old racial tensions and historical traumas around land loss as well as feelings of uncertainty, resentment, and indignation that were surfacing as dramatic territorial reconfigurations in Detroit pushed the land question front and center in political debates. In 2011, I helped organize a participatory research project called Uniting Detroiters that brought together residents, activists, scholars, students, progressive social justice organizations, and neighborhood groups to study and discuss the emerging development agenda in Detroit, how it fit into broader national and global trends, and identify local challenges to and opportunities for transformative social change (Newman and Safransky 2014; Campbell et al. forthcoming).[2]

During a series of community meetings, we engaged in conversation and debate about the land question: To whom did Detroit's abandoned lands belong? How were they being redistributed? By what processes? Who decided? These conversations, as well as interviews that we conducted as part of the project, revealed that official categorizations of land as vacant and abandoned often contrasted with how residents materially used and cared for the land, imbued it with affective meaning, and staked claims to it. They also revealed ways of knowing and being in relationship to land at odds with dominant conceptualizations of land as surplus, exchange value, and something to be owned. Finally, they suggested that to make sense of the racial antagonisms and fierce resistance to new land governance policies, it was important to attend to both political economy and the moral economic dimensions of the urban land question as well as develop ways of thinking about "land beyond property" (Goeman 2015, 87).

In this article, I engage in a historical diagnostic of the land question in Detroit by analyzing instances when expectations of what is right and just are violated and the moral economy of land flares up. E. P. Thompson (1971) developed the concept of moral economy to explain the customs, traditions, and ethical norms that led to widespread food riots in the English countryside in the late eighteenth century when enclosures dispossessed peasants. Like Thompson's moral economy, a historical diagnostic is interested in the deep historical meanings, emotions, norms, and moral and ethical beliefs that clash in contestations around land, whether in the form of mass mobilization, everyday resistance, or public outrage, but it seeks to understand how they arise from the standpoint of historical racialized property relations and freedom dreams that are often absent from political-economic theorizations of land problems whether within the academy or policy and planning circles.[3] This entails accounting for how calls for land justice in Detroit are often as much about staking claims to alternative forms of sovereignty, political subjectivity, and personhood as they are about affordable housing or rights to landed property.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first part develops the case for a historical diagnostic. Next, I theorize the concept of property and land beyond property. The third part of the article turns to three cases where the moral economy of land flares up, including a truth and reconciliation process, the state takeover of the city, and the Wayne County land auction. In the conclusion, I turn to increasingly urgent land questions facing U.S. cities and consider the stakes of a historical diagnostic as a justice-seeking mode of inquiry and tactical response.

Racial Justice and the City

Roy's call to attend to historical difference in the study of urban transformation was a challenge to urban geographers. In the Global North, Marxist political economy has dominated geographical studies of urban space since the early 1970s when David Harvey ([1973] 2009) published *Social Justice and the City*. The

landmark text drew attention to how capitalism structures contemporary urbanism and social inequality. In so doing, it expanded the scope of urban geography beyond mapping and modeling of urban spatial patterns to explain the political-economic processes behind them. One consequence of this text's lasting impact on urban geography has been a tendency to emphasize class contradictions as the driver of history and urban change in a manner that deemphasizes racial antagonisms. This legacy begs a larger question concerning how we conceptualize historical injustice in our analyses of urban problems and, for the purposes of this article, how such conceptualizations shape our approach to the land question in the city today.

When Harvey completed *Social Justice and the City* in 1973, he was living in Hampden, Baltimore. Like other industrial urban areas of the time, Hampden was experiencing factory and mill closures, economic decline and rising unemployment, and outmigration in the wake of intense urban uprisings across the country. From 1964 to 1967, every major central city in the United States with a sizable black population experienced civil disorder. There were 329 major rebellions in 257 different cities (Woodward 2003). The largest was in Detroit, where on 23 July 1967, a police raid on an after-hours bar quickly escalated to widespread protest and destruction. Within a week, 17,000 armed officials patrolled the city, more than 7,000 people were arrested, and forty-three people were dead. The uprisings radically reshaped the material landscape of the city. Property damage was extensive, with more than 2,500 buildings looted, burned, or destroyed. Although white flight was underway prior to the uprisings, it increased rapidly in the years following. Between 1967 and 1969, 173,000 residents left the city (Fine 1989). After Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on 4 April 1968, there were another 200 uprisings in 172 cities, including one in Baltimore in which six people died, more than 700 were injured, and 5,800 were arrested (Woodward 2003; Elfenbein, Hollowak, and Nix 2011). Inner cities across the country were literally and figuratively on fire.

Surprisingly, however, in *Social Justice and the City*, there is little mention or analysis of the "problem of the color line" (Du Bois [1903] 2007) in the United States or the uprisings as a response. It is particularly striking given how the rebellions dramatically reshaped urban politics and patterns of urbanization, serving as a reminder that the standpoint from which we theorize is critically important.

Within urban studies, there is an increasingly vocal movement informed by critical race theory, postcolonial and decolonial theory, queer theory, subaltern studies, and feminist theory that seeks "to 'provincialize' urban theory born out of observations of European and North American cities" (Derickson 2016, 2). Instead, it aims to attend to lived experience of difference in place and the knowledge that emerges as people negotiate complex histories and struggle against oppression and for alternative possibilities. It is here that I locate my call for a historical diagnostic.

The way I am thinking about a historical diagnostic builds on sociologist Avery Gordon's call for "alternative diagnostics" to postmodern forms of analysis that account for the political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions of modern forms of dispossession as well as imaginaries of "what has been done and what is to be done otherwise" (Gordon 2008, 18). Gordon used haunting as an analytical framework to study how abusive systems of power, particularly those that seem to be over (e.g., slavery), become a "seething presence," interrupting any neat separations of past, present, and future. When it comes to land, a historical diagnostic seeks to become attuned to the moral claims that historical dispossessions make on the present (Bird Rose 2004). In its pursuit of justice, a historical diagnostic is concerned with the task of illuminating hidden histories that point toward alternatives, decolonization, and the challenge of recuperation.[4] To this end, it is particularly concerned with uplifting the ways in which people of color have struggled for land and their contributions to the production of space, especially the ways in which such struggles bequeath ways of knowing and being that are not merely responsive but propositional.

Engaging in a historical diagnostic of the land question in the United States, then, is about attending to those utterances, viewpoints, feelings, and deferred dreams that exploded during the rebellions of the 1960s, exposing and challenging a pillar of social and political organization established during the colonial and antebellum eras that divided territory and society by race and put land ownership and, therefore, the means of production in the hands of settler colonial whites.

Seeing Land beyond Property: The Moral Economy of Land

Property relations established under colonialism and slavery and perpetuated under legal and extralegal segregation practices—from historical rural black land

theft to Jim Crow segregation, racialized federal housing programs, and the reverse redlining of the 2008–2009 subprime mortgage crisis—remain a huge obstacle to democratization. Given that the majority of Americans hold and pass on most of their wealth in the form of land and home equity, land dispossession has severely reduced the ability of blacks and other people of color to accumulate wealth via property ownership (Oliver and Shapiro 2006).[5] Moreover, programs that have sought to correct such injustices by redistributing land or granting reparations—such as the Freedman's Bureau that promised to redistribute abandoned Southern land to emancipated African Americans or the Pigford class action lawsuit of 1977 that sought to reconcile the U.S. Department of Agriculture's racist lending practices from the 1930s—have failed to be realized, or compensation has been so limited that only a small number of people who can prove that they were dispossessed for a finite period of time have been compensated (Daniel 2013; Goldstein 2014).

Such compensatory promises of justice have worked, as Alyosha Goldstein (2014) argued, to *close off* and *contain* the colonial past and its history of racist discriminatory laws in a way that reproduces uneven geographies and social orders. In terms of the contemporary land question, there remains a challenge of how to hold open this history in a way that foregrounds, first, how property relations in the United States are thoroughly saturated in racism and, second, how resistance movements have fought for alternative ways of thinking and being in relationship to land. Taking up this challenge requires deep thinking about our taken-for-granted conceptualizations of property and land.

Property is typically invoked as a material object that one owns. Yet, as critical property theorists have shown, it is better understood as a bundle of negotiated social, political, legal, and economic relationships that confer value through exclusion (Hann 1998; Merrill 1998). I think of this as the relationality of landed property. A focus on relationality helps illuminate how property regimes do much more than mediate the distribution of land (Blomley 2003, 2008, 2010). They structure our relationship to the state. They order bodies in space. They bring into being political identities. They also shape how we think about belonging in relationship to one another. In this way, a focus on relationality brings attention to how property is subject forming (Strathern 1999; Pottage and Mundy 2004), suggesting, as Grace Kyungwon Hong (2014) wrote, that "propertied subjectivity is not universal." This is to say, that propertied subjectivity is not inherent in human nature but that private property models have lived effects, particularly promoting an individual legal, autonomous subject and intersubjective severalty.

Historically, in the United States, property ownership was the path to citizenship but, of course, only those considered white and male could vote. In other words, possessive individualism structured racialized citizenship. Not only does the state enable the existence of private property but it exists, in part, to protect it (Locke 1704). This history has led, as Cheryl Harris (1993) demonstrated, to a "property interest in whiteness" and continued inequities. It has also "occluded, rendered deviant, or erased" (Hong 2014) alternative claims to land and property that challenge liberal notions of personhood, citizenship, and governance such as cooperative forms of stewardship and notions of reciprocity, for example, the idea that we should care for the land because it, in turn, cares for us (e.g., Nembhard 2014; Bandele and Myers 2017). At the same time, histories of racialized dispossession and the particular conditions of black property ownership in the United States have given rise to distinct spatial imaginaries and relationships to land (Armstrong 1994). For example, George Lipsitz (1994) termed this the "black spatial imaginary," which, among other attributes, favors use value over exchange value and supports public spaces and services. Likewise, Katherine McKittrick (2011) wrote about "a black sense of place," which illuminates how "bondage did not foreclose black geographies but incited alternative mapping practices" (949). And bell hooks (2009) reflected on how the relationship among blackness, culture, and the Kentucky landscape where she spent her early childhood forged within her a distinct sense of belonging.[6]

Attending to the narrative dimension of land claims, particularly those put forth by protest movements (Roy n.d.), illuminates the meaning that land holds for them (Tuck, Guess, and Sultan 2014). Bearing witness to these claims necessitates that we develop, following Mishuana Goeman (2008), ways of seeing land beyond property. Recognizing land beyond property and territory involves understanding land as a "meaning making process rather than a claimed object" (Goeman 2015, 72–73). Here land becomes a repository for people's experiences, aspirations, identities, memories, and visions for alternative futures. It is a site of ritual and ancestral communication. Methodologically, Goeman (2015) suggested focusing on land

as a "storied" site of struggle and resistance (cf. also La Paperson 2014).

A focus on meaning making also indicates a particular way of reading history in relationship to the land question. As Goeman (2008) wrote, "Deconstructing the discourse of property and reformulating the political vitality of a storied land means reaching back across generations, critically examining our use of the word land in the present, and reaching forward to create a healthier relationship for future generations" (24). Goeman's concept of storied land is similar to the distinction Rob Nixon made between official and vernacular landscapes. Official landscapes are those of planners and bureaucrats (think the property grid), whereas vernacular landscapes are those shaped by the affective multigenerational maps of communities with, as he wrote, "all the hindsight and foresight that entails" (Nixon 2011, 18). My interest in Nixon's and Goeman's concepts of storied land and vernacular landscapes is not simply that I think they offer a more accurate description of our relationship to land but that they open up the land question beyond political-economic analysis and, in so doing, help us see ways to repair what scholar and activist Coulthard (2007) referred to as "the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination" (456).

Truth, Reconciliation, and Rebellion

"A shared history is needed to claim and accept truths," said Naomi Tutu, the daughter of Desmond Tutu. She was addressing a crowd of approximately 300 people gathered in a large ballroom at the Cobo Hall convention center in November 2011 for the inaugural event of the Metropolitan Detroit Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Racial Inequality (MTRC). The MTRC, which was modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established after apartheid, was charged with investigating the historical roots of race-based opportunity in the Detroit metropolitan region, specifically the legacies of segregation and housing discrimination (MTRC 2011; Inwood, Alderman, and Barron 2016). The MTRC raises a critical set of questions about historical injustice and reconciliation in regard to the urban land question, not just in Detroit but in the United States.

One of the goals of the commission was to revisit the 1967 Detroit uprising and consider its impacts today.[7] The postwar struggle for Detroit is a critical historical conjuncture for understanding the city's contemporary land crisis and the structure of feeling that shapes ongoing black struggles for land, property, citizenship rights, and liberation. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1976) developed the concept of "structure of feeling" to capture how meanings and values are lived and felt in ways that are simultaneously structured and fleeting, inevitably moving forward while always being historically and politically informed. Whereas earlier riots were often sparked by whites defending property and jobs through violence against blacks, the uprisings in the 1960s were a response by the black community to a multitude of factors making life untenable: the racism and brutality of the white police force, the murders of key leaders of the freedom struggle and civilians alike, the promise and failure of the Great Society era and urban renewal, increasing unemployment as car factories moved toward automation and outsourcing and left the city, and segregation and redlining.

Oppressive policing tactics set off the 1967 rebellion, but in the ensuing days it turned into an assault on those who controlled housing and commerce in the community. In contrast to the 1940s, most "rioters" did not direct violence at civilians. Rather, they targeted, as Ahmad Rahman (2008) argued, "the most visible symbols of capitalism and racism" (184): property and the firefighters and policeman who were its protectors. Property—whether landed buildings or commercial goods—embodied unequal power relations and segregation in the city and the spatial isolation of African Americans. The 1967 rebellion was, Rahman wrote, "an extremely destructive attempt by the black community to violate those boundaries of 'place,' raising the question of who would rule, and under what condition" (189).

Prior to the rebellion, black radicals in Detroit had started seeing themselves as part of a global struggle against imperialism and for decolonization. New alliances linked Detroit, Cuba, and China, signaling the freedom movement's commitment to international solidarity and a growing understanding among African American intellectuals and activists that the urban ghetto was an internal colony and that land was central to the struggle for self-determination (Cruse 1968; Clark 1965; Carmichael and Hamilton [1967] 1992; Blauner 1969). Efforts to establish a territorial base for the black community were, as Russell Rickford (2017) argued, "one of the period's defining political developments" (956). For example, when Malcom X delivered his famous "Message to the Grassroots" in Detroit in 1963, he argued that "land is the basis of freedom,

justice, and equality." In an essay titled "The Land Question," Eldridge Cleaver wrote, "Black people are a stolen people held in a colonial status on stolen land, and any analysis which does not acknowledge the colonial status of black people cannot hope to deal with the real problem" (Cleaver 1970, 186, cited in Fung 2014, 164).

Calls by Malcolm X, Cleaver, and others to establish a land base for the black freedom struggle were taken up in different ways. Although black agrarianism and efforts to establish rural land bases were prominent, others saw the city as the key site for land reclamation and domain of black politics. Detroit was an important center of activity. In 1966, James and Grace Lee Boggs, black radical activists, public intellectuals, and Detroit residents, published a revision of the rural black belt thesis and called for people to reclaim the city as the "black man's land" (Boggs and Boggs 1966). Two years later, 500 radicals convened at the Black Government Conference held at the Shrine of the Black Madonna church in Detroit and signed a Declaration of Independence with the aim of creating the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), an independent black nation that would occupy five Southern states within the United States (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina) where Afrikan citizenship could be realized (Berger and Dunbar-Ortiz 2010). The RNA rejected U.S. political structures and citizenship. They sought to operationalize Amiri Baraka's assertion that "black is a country" by "liberating" land in the rural South and claiming land in Northern cities.

Meanwhile, the Black Panther Party (BPP), which established a chapter in Detroit in 1968, deployed a territorial strategy that sought to develop solidarity networks (global in reach) and locally dispersed power centers. Like the RNA, the BPP made demands for land in their Ten Point program. They called for the overdue debt of "forty acres and two mules," for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace," and for a United Nations–supervised referendum for the "black colonial subjects" to determine their "national destiny." Rather than seeking to establish a national land base, however, they focused on reclaiming institutional spaces (e.g., housing projects, schools, community centers, and prisons) and developing what they thought of as city-center communes with the goal of making liberated territories (Reyes 2009). The BPP's extensive survival programs were envisioned as a way to escape the oppression of U.S. empire through everyday social reproduction, mutual aid, the establishment of a political base of resistance, and the production of alternative forms of community (Hilliard 2002).

The increasing emphasis on the land question among these black groups and others—like the American Indian Movement, the Chicano group Crusade for Justice, and the Chicano Mexicano and Puerto Rican group Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional—and their growing coalitional politics points to a shared understanding that the United States functioned as a capitalist imperialist system that exploited people of color at home and abroad and that the nation's settler colonial roots needed to be overturned (Berger and Dunbar-Ortiz 2010; Fung 2014). As Native American activist and scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (1969) wrote in an essay titled "The Red and the Black," "No movement can sustain itself, no people can continue, no government can function, and no religion can become a reality except to be bound to a land area of its own" (179). These groups saw land control as foundational. More than an end unto itself, land was envisioned as a means of creating society anew. While activists battled with the state through armed conflict and legal challenges, suffering death, political imprisonment, and the disintegration of organizational capacity, the land question waned, but it never died, nor did the impulse that land was the material grounds for self-determination and survival (Berger 2009; Rickford 2017).

These historical struggles condition the structure of feeling that surrounds debates over the land question today. They show up in white nostalgia for the "old" Detroit and unrelenting antiblack racism that emanates from the suburbs. They present themselves in the symbolic and cultural value of Detroit as a majority African American city. They pulse in residents' expressed love for the city and the way they claim its radical history as a source of power and resilience. They condition the ways racialized groups negotiate rising insecurity in an era of finance capital and austerity politics. They inflect calls for land justice and claims that the city has a right to remain majority black in the face of urban shrinkage and gentrification. They also shape debates over how to deal with the burden of historical violence in the present.

Historical Debt and Reconstruction

Although much hope surrounded the MTRC, it also elicited skepticism and even resistance and

resentment from some community activists, particularly given its launch amidst the controversial state takeover of the city, which many saw as an attempt to loot the collective black legacy of Detroit. I draw attention to the skepticism triggered by the MTRC because it raises a question of how we might more adequately grapple not just with the legacies of segregation, as was the stated task of the truth commission, but with the "abusive colonial structure itself" (Coulthard 2007) and the immense violence exacted on indigenous, black, Latino, and other communities of color in the United States through the historical construction of private property and the racialization of space.

The MTRC, which was the only second-ever truth commission in the United States (the first was in Greensboro, North Carolina), emerged as part of a global industry advocating official and nonofficial apologies as a way to heal harms resulting from historical violence based on the assumption that truth and forgiveness help build communities anew (Coulthard 2014; Stauffer 2015). Although many grassroots activists participated in the inaugural event, others critiqued the commission for their outreach efforts and for lacking the teeth to actually do anything. Some also expressed concern that the commission would move too quickly past historical racialized violence to unity, particularly when new modes of governance and urban investment were leading to widespread dispossession and hardship for residents, epitomized by the looming threat of emergency management (Inwood, Alderman, and Barron 2016).

At the time the MTRC launched, five cities in Michigan had been appointed emergency managers. They all had majority black populations in a state where only 14.3 percent of the populations identified as black or African American (U.S. Census 2010). In Michigan, emergency managers are given sweeping powers over city finances and operations. Locally elected representatives by and large lose their power to make decisions. It is worth underscoring that Detroit's fall to emergency management in 2013 meant that over half of African Americans in Michigan essentially had their voting rights nullified, calling up a long and ugly history in the United States of white efforts to suppress the black vote that includes slaughtering African Americans for simply discussing voting and instituting poll taxes that required citizens to pay a fee to vote (Anderson 2016).

It is in this context that the memory of such unfinished struggles to claim space, citizenship, and reconstruct society overdetermined the structure of feeling in public meetings about the state takeover. Meeting rooms were often filled to capacity with discontented and concerned citizens associated with a range of groups, from African American church leaders to union representatives, seasoned organizers who were active during the civil rights and black power era, and a younger generation of community activists working on a range of issues from foreclosures to water shutoffs. During the public comment period, older activists frequently invoked the names of local black freedom fighters and emphasized the threat the takeover posed to black self-determination. One black woman who prayed before the city council exemplified these concerns and feelings of collective heartbreak: "Do not let them take away our home rule," she cried out, "our dignity. Let us stand on our own ground."

Others compared emergency management to slavery. They shamed city council members, arguing that the black political class had forgotten where they came from. Housing rights activists condemned fraudulent bank practices and racist, predatory mortgages that resulted in foreclosures. Others critiqued tax breaks given to developers. "Land and water mean wealth and power for the people," one person said. On occasion, demonstrators threatened to burn the city down again, referencing 1967, and argued that the state's violence should be met "by any means necessary," echoing Malcolm X's call to take up arms if necessary. Instead of arguing for residents to arm themselves to defend their communities, however, they urged them to "hit the streets" to fight for their jobs, pensions, homes, and schools. They also joined in protest songs, drowning out meeting proceedings with verses of "We Shall Overcome."

Their protests always seemed like they were about waging a war against forgetting the past as much as demonstrating against policies in the present. The indignation expressed at the loss of black home rule served to show how the neoliberal agenda and new austerity regimes mapped onto earlier forms of racial and colonial subjugation and how this past was not a bygone era that could be reconciled because it was a prologue to the present. In truth and reconciliation processes, philosopher Jill Stauffer (2015) has argued that resentment and resistance might actually be more restorative than forgiveness and that forgiveness might not be a goal worth reaching. "[W]e need to understand how to make judgments," she wrote, "about what can be repaired, what should be repaired, what cannot be repaired, and, perhaps, what should be left broken" (Stauffer 2015, 35).

In challenging Detroit's fiscal crisis, residents and community activists inverted the meaning of the city's indebtedness by arguing that the suburbs had a debt to the city and that the city's debt was not to the banks or the state but a historical obligation to their ancestors to carry on the liberation struggle. This kind of inversion of the debt relationship exposed, first, how property interests in whiteness that have been reified by law and privilege are perpetuated by debt; second, the inadequacy of how care and moral obligation are built into the legal and economic structures of racial liberalism; and, finally, that the people who came before them had dreams that went beyond "limited emancipation," to use Hartman's (2007) words. Honoring this debt suggested refusing the state takeover as a force that was antagonistic to black power and self-rule. It also meant channeling resentment and indignation into the cultivation of relationships, infrastructures, and community-organizing strategies that would support an antiracist urban commons, an essential part of which was securing the right of blacks and other people of color to "stay put" (Rickford 2017) in the city.

A Land Justice Paradigm

In October 2015, I received an e-mail with the subject heading "Help Us Keep Our Homes." For years, community activists have called, unsuccessfully, for a moratorium on the Wayne County tax foreclosure auction. When the auction happens, some residents who are unable to settle their debts use a variety of tactics to defend their homes and land, including staging eviction defenses and sabotaging their own property, sometimes out of rage and other times to ward off potential buyers. Another tactic is to buy back your home through the auction, which the Keep Our Homes campaign was using. The goal of the campaign, which was led by two organizations committed to antiracist and black-centered leadership, the Detroit People's Platform and the Storehouse for Hope, was to save fourteen occupied homes, keep families in them, and secure them permanently through a community land trust. (They raised enough money to purchase fifteen homes.) It emerged as part of a larger grassroots activist effort in Detroit to articulate a land justice paradigm, which involved maintaining Detroit as a majority African American city and changing how we think about home, private property, governance, and citizenship in the twenty-first century as a necessary step in the cultivation of an antiracist urban commons.

Detroit's land justice movement was galvanized by debates over the planned ruralization of the city, in particular a contentious proposal by a white billionaire investor named John Hantz to build the world's largest urban farm in the center of the city as a way to create scarcity in land markets and drive up value. Hantz's project violated the moral economy of Detroit's vibrant food justice community, many of whose members saw farming in the city as being as much about establishing alternative forms of development as growing vegetables (Safransky 2017).

Hantz's project ignited vociferous resistance because it stood for something much larger than the 1,800 parcels that the city sold him for a mere $500,000. The project (which Hantz referred to as a "legacy project" that he hoped to pass on to his daughter) was the largest land sale in the city's history. As such, it served to perpetuate white supremacy in property relations in a city where the gap between African American and white homeownership was growing.[8] Moreover, it signaled a broader assault on democracy, the rise of a neoliberal development paradigm that disregarded black life, and the city's implicit support of land speculation. In short, the project stood for an approach to the land question that threatened how many Detroiters, in the face of state and corporate abandonment, had been working to establish visionary ways of addressing needs in their communities from gardens that fostered food security to the restorations of homes, parks, and schools that made neighborhoods more livable and grassroots campaigns to support local economies that would create a kind of city where people could live in "dignity, mutual respect, and love" (Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management 2014).

The People's Platform, among others, saw the mobilization against Hantz as an opening to extend land conversations beyond agrarian land tenure to how land-use decisions were being made, who benefited, and imagining new relationships to land. They saw the community land trust model, which creates a structure for shared ownership over space according to a defined mission and values, as one way to gain greater land control and begin to articulate a land justice paradigm. The Keep Our Homes campaign emerged from this pursuit. But why focus on homes?

In the United States, homeownership has been a symbol of democracy and a mechanism of political order. In Detroit, Henry Ford strived to turn his

employees into good workers and good citizens. Private property and homeownership were central to the latter. From the 1930s onward, the federal government (in conjunction with real estate brokers, building contractors, and manufacturers of house-related equipment) also propped up this vision by supporting thirty-year mortgages, extending homeowners' insurance, offering tax incentives, and encouraging land-use and zoning policies for single-family detached houses. Although local, state, and federal policies created a severely racialized homeownership landscape, high rates of African American homeownership in twentieth-century Detroit contributed to the rise of the city as a symbolic place of black home rule and sovereignty that was now under threat. "We were a community of block clubs," as Linda Campbell, the director of Building Movement Detroit and partner on the Uniting Detroiters project, put it.

> I think at one time we were at 300 plus block clubs across the city. A lot of that was about getting my sidewalk fixed and beautification, but it was also a way that people felt connected to their neighborhoods and their communities, and felt power around that.

It is the cultivation of such power that comes from being able to claim space and "stay put," less than the preservation of individual homeownership, that motivated the "Keep Our Homes" campaign. It reflected an understanding to quote one activist involved in the Uniting Detroiters conversations,

> A home is more than a relationship to governance and taxes. It's your physical basis for your relationship to the rest of the community.

Thus, the Keep Our Homes campaign recognized that the loss of housing in Detroit was not simply about the houses themselves but was about losing relationships and community infrastructure (the closing of schools, recreation centers, and churches that often follow the loss of homes). It also recognized that the loss of these relationships translated into a loss of humanity and that the only way out was to curb the displacement of black life and at the same time articulate notions of self, community, and space that did not buy into the universalizing tendency of propertied citizenship and possessive individualism. Land justice, in this sense, then, was not just about community land control but also about imagining new relationships to land as the necessary foundation on which to reconstruct a new citizenship and new humanity.

Conclusion

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of social movements in the United States saw land as the material basis for the struggle for collective self-determination. Today, as displacement in U.S. cities intensifies, the land question is once again gaining urgency. The 2008 foreclosure crisis continues to reverberate in home losses, widening wealth gaps, and the revival of "contract for deed" lending aimed at people who do not qualify for mortgages, particularly black and Latino homebuyers. At the same time, the reversal of white flight and return of upwardly mobile residents has caused a revaluation of land in urban centers. In Nashville, for example, where I live, there is a severe affordable housing crisis. From 2013–2017, the *average* home price in Nashville increased by 37 percent. Meanwhile, Nashville lost 5,300 affordable rental units in two years due to developers buying apartment complexes and increasing rents (Coleman and Ries 2017).

Although the challenges facing urban poor and working-class residents, particularly people of color, are formidable, there is also a resurgence of activism nationwide around urban land. Resistance takes the form of antieviction defenses, land reclamations, campaigns to organize tenant unions and increase renter power, and transnational alliances. For example, in 2006, the organization Take Back the Land established Umoja Village, a shanty town on public land in Miami-Dade County, Florida, where affordable housing was destroyed for a new condo development (Rameau 2008). In 2007, the Right to the City Alliance began work on gentrification and the displacement of low-income people, people of color, and marginalized lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities from neighborhoods. They now have forty-nine member organizations across the country (Right to the City Alliance 2017). In 2009, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa inspired the founding of the Anti-Eviction Campaign affiliates in Chicago and Los Angeles, which defend families facing eviction and take over vacant, bank-owned homes for homeless families (Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign 2009). Most recently, on Juneteenth 2017, African American Independence Day, the BlackOut Collective and Movement Generation launched the Land and Liberation Initiative, calling for reclamation and arguing that "[l]and is essential in the fight for self-determination

and liberation for Black folks" (Black Land and Labor Initiative 2017).

For those of us concerned with social justice in the city, the crises of affordability and accompanying land rights activism present a political and ethical imperative to develop a more robust research agenda on the urban land question in the United States. Such an agenda would involve collective analysis of how new urban orders under construction by the state, the market, and philanthropic foundations are actively reinscribing inequality and racial segregation into the materiality of the U.S. city. It would equally attend to the visions and aspirations of those organizing to take back the land and consider how strategic research alliances within and beyond the academy might be developed to uplift and support these efforts.

In this article, I have introduced a historical diagnostic as a justice-oriented analytical approach that aims to expose the history of racialized property relations as well as alternative land epistemologies, ontologies, and structures of organization of resistance movements. In this way, a historical diagnostic of the land question suggests the importance of bending down and "listening to the land," as Guyanese poet Martin Carter (1977) suggested. It seeks to listen to those who have sought radically new ways of belonging and being in relationship to one another and the earth. It also seeks to amplify alternative structures of value that we might build on to confront the land question in cities today.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to all of those in Detroit whose interviews, stories, and actions shaped this piece and who have taught me so much. I am grateful for the questions and comments I received on this article when I presented a version of it as part of the Detroit School Series at the University of Michigan. Finally, thanks to Ashley Carse and two anonymous reviewers for your generous feedback and Nik Heynen and Jennifer Cassidento for your editorial support and guidance.

Funding

The National Science Foundation (Award #1203239), the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies provided financial support for research and writing.

Notes

1. The opening scene comes from a description of the auction in an article by Laura Gottesdiener (2015). For more on the history of the auction, see Akers (2015).
2. As part of the Uniting Detroiters project, we produced a documentary video called *A People's Story of Detroit* (available on YouTube) and a book called *A People's Atlas of Detroit* (forthcoming from Wayne State University Press).
3. Heynen (2016a, 2016b) made a similar point in his call for "abolition ecology."
4. A historical diagnostic is inspired by calls for "recuperative histories" from Bird Rose (2004), "secretive histories" from McKittrick (2013), and "legacies of ethical witnessing" from Ioanide (2014).
5. The largest gap in wealth transferences is between blacks and whites. It is also important to point out variation among black households, however. As Martin (2009) argued, the limited ability of blacks to transfer wealth from one generation to the next through the accumulation of property and other assets is a particular experience of being African American (vs. other black ethnicities) in the United States. She found that African Americans had the lowest likelihood of interest, dividends, and rental income of all black ethnic groups.
6. See also the Black/Land Project (http://www.blacklandproject.org), which gathers and analyzes stories about the relationship between black people, land, and place.
7. When talking about the uprisings of the 1960s, the distinction in terminology between riots and rebellions is important. *Riots* signal irrationality, whereas *rebellion* suggests a political response from blacks in the North facing de facto segregation and institutional racism. Moreover, calling the 1960s uprisings riots masks their difference with race riots of earlier decades that erupted as whites exacted raw violence on blacks fleeing the Jim Crow South in the name of defending white property. Consider, for example, the 1943 riot in Detroit that was sparked in part by a dispute the previous year over the siting of a black housing project called Sojourner Truth Homes in a white neighborhood. The Federal Housing Administration fueled white rage when it announced that it would not back mortgages in nearby neighborhoods, suggesting the role that the federal government played in de jure housing segregation, white flight, and the creation of a discriminatory marketplace (Freund 2007; Rothstein 2017). When black families tried to move in, white mobs numbering in the thousands assaulted them. Eventually, more than 1,000 city and state police and 1,600 members of the Michigan National Guard came to keep the peace as six black families moved in.
8. The nation's homeownership rates since 2007 have stabilized. According to a report by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing, however, African American homeownership rates have not rebounded equally. The gap is particularly pronounced in Metro Detroit, where in 2015 African Americans had a 42 percent homeownership rate compared to 77 percent for whites. Between 2010 and 2015, homeownership rates for African Americans in the region declined by 11.6 percent compared to 3.0 percent for whites (Har 2017).

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