A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Sara Safransky, *The City after Property: Abandonment and Repair in Postindustrial Detroit*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2078-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2002-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2461-3 (ebook)

One of the most striking moments in Sara Safransky's *The City after Property: Abandonment and Repair in Postindustrial Detroit* is this scene: A city council meeting to finalize a financial consent decree, which will implement sweeping an austerity agenda throughout the city, including a massive program of property tax foreclosure, which is sure to displace thousands of Detroiters. In the packed room Detroiters are allowed two minutes each to speak, and they come to the mic, one by one, to protest. For two minutes each they tell histories, give testimony to the damage that has been and will be caused by treating the interests of the city's bond holders as more important than the housing and survival of residents.

This scene encapsulates many of the vantage points that Safransky offers in this wide-ranging book. It is a scene about policy and politics—the city council, emergency management, urban finacialization. It is also a scene about the lived experience of mass dispossession of Detroiters, which itself is both about material loss and about the silencing narratives that accompany it. It is a scene about rage, and sorrow, and most of all defiance. It is about Detroiters refusing a logic of property which has largely served to dispossess them of it.

The City after Property is at once an intimate ethnography of the city, a geographic critique of racial capitalism, and a celebration of the visionary work of Detroiters fighting to remain in the city in the context of massive displacement. One of the feats of this book is the fluid narration of the structural to the intimate. This means that as it describes the roots of tax policy it always returns to the lived experience of it, the human, the intimate, loss and grief. The result is Safransky's own refusal, over and over, to reduce the forces of dispossession in Detroit to abstraction.

Indeed, abstraction is one of the violences that *The City after Property* denounces as most enabling Detroiters' dispossession. For instance, Safransky describes the ways that shifting the auctions of tax foreclosed homes online meant that bidders—those participating in the pillage of Detroiters' homes—were able to avoid an awareness of the sorrow and desperation of

homeowners who were losing their homes. That is, abstraction—through the technology of online auctions—facilitated an expansion of harm. Safransky describes this dynamic, and refuses it, again and again.

The City after Property is unusual in the way it intentionally jumps scales—from the intimate, home life, the garden, to the city-wide, to the national and the global. It does careful work to ground Detroit's present in a long context of racialized land grab, settler colonial city-building, redlining, and deindustrialization. And yet the book is grounded in ethnographic work. The result is likely to be clarifying for students, in that it constantly roots every political discussion, every long arc of history that it describes, in on-the-ground lived experiences. It's not just a description of how a policy works. It's how it feels, how it shapes a conversation, how it frames the contours of people's everyday lives.

Similarly, Safransky links long historical arcs to the present as she traces the threads through time that have led to organized abandonment and loss for Black Detroiters and the myriad ways that they have organized to resist. For instance, in explaining the political forces that have led to the mass auctions of tax foreclosed homes, Safransky notes the links between the 2014 tax foreclosure policy and the 1999 Urban Homesteading Act, conceived by conservative Michigan legislators as a mechanism to "discipline" poor people into proper liberal subjecthood. And she traces the ideological thread of the 1999 Urban Homesteading Act to the original Homestead Acts to settle the Western United States. Her historical contextualization reveals the ideological connections between all of these policies, in this telling quote from Michigan State Senator and sponsor of the Urban Homestead Act, Bill Schuette, who asserted that the "'challenge' in the nineteenth century was 'a wild and lawless West; today it is Cabrini Green and South Central Los Angeles'" (p.69-70). These histories matter, Safransky insists, because ideas matter materially—the common sense that rendered sensible the euphemistically named "Indian Removal Act" to give land to white settlers, continues to make sense of Black dispossession in Detroit. For many Detroiters, these ideas have justified a structure for their homes, communities, and political power to be stolen out from under them.

On one hand, this book might be viewed as a contemporary analogue to Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), which traced specific racial processes and policies in

Detroit to understand a radically unequal mid-twentieth century city. *The City after Property* does similar work to examine a "systematic state-led process of unmaking Black homeownership" in Detroit (p.58).

However, *The City after Property* distinguishes itself as it interweaves this more bird's-eye analysis with Detroiters' extraordinary assertion of agency, creativity, defiance, and movement building. Safransky furiously describes the transfer of land and home from Black Detroiters to an investor class. But even as she wants us to examine soberly the violence that this transfer of home and wealth in the city has wrought, she does not allow this violence to have the last word. That is, *The City after Property* outlines how racial property violence has shaped the city in part to argue that there could have been, and indeed are, so many other possibilities for how we might relate to land, home, place, and claims to the city. Never in this book do we lose sight of Detroiters, and the tremendous resistance and moral determination that they have engaged to claim their right to remain, to shape, and to build new ways of being in the city. Whether it's describing the way that residents' two-minute public comments at council meetings functioned as "a practice of reparative witnessing" (p.120) or Black-led urban agriculture as working to "plot the world anew" (p.180), Safransky never loses sight of the ways that Detroiters have always presented an alternative to a logic of capitalist dispossession.

Safransky's astute ethnographic writing makes *The City after Property* an engaging read, appropriate for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. This is especially helpful as it describes systems and processes—tax policy, municipal finance—that with a less deft narration can make students' eyes glaze over. *The City* stays grounded in the human, in the ways these systems play out in the lives of Detroiters, down to the level of neighbors describing the houses on their blocks.

While this book is about Detroit, it should be of interest to anyone who is hoping to understand—and counter—urban displacement and what Ananya Roy (2019) has called "racial banishment". Safransky does exceptional work tracking the specific ways that property has functioned in the city—histories of settler and racial capitalism, organized abandonment, and land grabs—outlining important patterns in the ways that racialized dispossession take place.

Indeed, the result of her precision and specificity, is a profound examination of the nature of urban property itself, and possibilities otherwise.

References

Roy A (2019) Racial banishment. In Antipode Editorial Collective (eds) *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50* (pp227-230). Oxford: Wiley

Sugrue T J (1996) *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Jessi Quizar
School of Urban Studies
University of Washington Tacoma
jquizar@uw.edu

January 2024