PART VI

RACE AND URBANISM

16

Black and Blight

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In August 2015, volunteers from an organization called Detroit Eviction Defense built a fence in a vacant lot next to the home of Lela Whitfield (figure 16.1).[1] Whitfield was facing eviction. Ten years earlier, her mother took out a reverse mortgage for $25,000 to pay off the home's mortgage and deal with medical bills. Borrowers typically do not pay accrued interest on reverse mortgages while they are alive or occupying the house whose value they are borrowing against. After her mother passed away in 2010, Whitfield inherited a home appraised at $9,000 and a debt of around $60,000 on the reverse mortgage. After refusing Whitfield's attempt to purchase her home for $2,500, the owner of her mortgage, Fannie Mae, foreclosed on her and, in July 2015, a court ordered her to vacate her home.

Whitfield refused to leave. Her neighbors supported her stand and one of them, Myrtle Curtis, cofounder of the Freedom Community Garden across the street from Whitfield's home, referred her to Detroit Eviction Defense. The fence built of pallets and scavenged wood prevented an eviction crew from placing a dumpster next to Whitfield's home and would allow protesters to surround a dumpster more easily. Among the images and messages painted on the fence by members of the neighborhood was the declaration of a "foreclosure-free zone" in which "black homes matter."[2]

Fig. 16.1 Lela Whitfield, Feedom Freedom, Detroit Eviction Defense, and community members' Eviction Defense Fence, Detroit, August 2015. Photo courtesy Detroit Resists.

How can this declaration be translated into histories of architecture and urbanism and what can architectural and urban history offer to its reading? In the following, I will pursue these questions through an examination of the history of "blight" in the American city. While some critical urban histories have addressed blight, these accounts typically neglect the relationship of blight and race, deal with that relationship in passing, or frame that relationship in terms of racial bias or prejudice instead of structural racism or racial capitalism.[3] And yet, in the American city, the definition, discovery, removal, and prevention of blight historically has been coterminous with the displacement and dispossession of non-white communities. As such, the history of blight forms a substantial part of the historical context that produced the declaration that "black homes matter." As one of an ensemble of terms that emerged to know and manage the modern American city, the history of blight is inseparable from the history of race and its inevitable correlate, racism, in American urban modernity.

"Blight Is a Cancer . . ."

"Blight is a cancer. Blight sucks the soul out of everyone who gets near it. . . . Blight is radioactive. Blight is contagious. Blight serves as a venue that attracts criminals and crime. It is a magnet for arsonists. Blight is a dangerous place for firefighters and other emergency workers to perform their duties. Blight is also a symbol . . . of all that is wrong and all that has gone wrong for too many decades in the once-thriving world-class city of Detroit."[4] This was Dan Gilbert, billionaire founder of the online mortgage lender Quicken Loans and self-proclaimed savior of downtown Detroit through real estate development, speaking in 2014 in his new role as cofounder of the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force.[5] The occasion was the release of the *Task Force Plan*, which documented 80,000 buildings in Detroit that were either "blighted" or threatened by what the plan called "future blight": an authentic innovation in the abject annals of blight science. Around 90 percent of these buildings were single-family homes, the predominant repository of wealth for most of Detroit's black families. The plan was to condemn and demolish each and every one of them.

Gilbert's description of blight was, of course, hysterical. But it was also historical. It echoed accounts of urban decay in Detroit from the very moment that such decay came to the attention of municipal officials and the investment class about one hundred years earlier.[6] Indeed, in Detroit, as elsewhere in America, blight removal has functioned identically, efficiently, and racially unevenly as a mechanism of accumulation by dispossession, whether "blight" signified overcrowded working-class neighborhoods or abandoned working-class neighborhoods, whether "blight" was discovered in the industrializing pre–World War II city or the de-industrializing post–World War II city, and whether the definition of "blight" was explicitly racist or seemingly race-neutral.

As such, the conceptualization of blight and practice of blight removal have productively obscured the fundamental needs in capitalism for a population of reserve labor—the underemployed, unemployed, and those working outside the capitalist system—and for urban space to accommodate that population. When defined as blight, the urban spaces that forces of reserve labor occupy are discursively and practically expelled from the system that produced them. These spaces are framed as obstacles to property development, as opposed to products of a disavowed form of de-development premised on maintaining reserve labor in a precarious condition. The pathologization of blight in Detroit and other industrial cities in America thereby occludes a spatial manifestation of a fundamental contradiction between capitalism and democracy—the way in which capitalism requires inequality to productively function.

Race has been the predominant medium of difference that has stabilized and legitimized the hierarchical social order of capitalism.[7] In the American colonies and the United States, "whiteness" and "nonwhiteness" have been consistently conjoined, with these conjunctions structured by historical imperatives for an exploitable population of reserve labor, the enduring effects of exploitation, and ideologies of white supremacy that have rendered exploitation as legitimate, necessary, or nonexistent.

Space, as property, has functioned as a key resource for the production and reproduction of white domination and non-white subordination. In her landmark essay, "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl Harris historicized the inextricable relationship between property and race from the era of enslavement and colonial conquest to the present: "Rights in property are contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race. Through this entangled relationship between race and property, historical forms of domination have evolved to reproduce subordination in the present. . . . The evolution of whiteness from color to race to status to property (is) . . . a progression historically rooted in white supremacy and economic hegemony over Black and Native American peoples."[8] Harris's historicizing pushes us to interpret "blight" as an architectural condition that requires the state to take control of property from its seemingly negligent owners. Urban historians have sometimes noted the way in which definitions of blight have vividly changed over time. What has yet to be foregrounded, however, is the way in which those changes have continuously functioned to allow the dispossession and displacement of communities of color in the American city: on the one hand, definitions of blight have consistently applied to property owned or occupied by people of color, while, on the other hand, the remediation of blight has consistently served to transfer property from people of color, through the state, to predominantly white investors, developers, or owners. Property has thereby served as both an instrument and reward of racism; as Harris writes, "Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the interaction between conceptions of race and property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination."[9] Dispossession framed by concepts of "blight" in the modern and contemporary American city can therefore be understood to succeed the dispossession of colonial-era primitive accumulation that Harris and other scholars have described.

A Genealogy of Blight

Emerging in seventeenth-century British agricultural discourse, "blight" referred both to plant diseases of mysterious causes and to the symptoms of those diseases. In either case, blight was often understood to be caused by airborne agents; its geography was one of threats from afar invading unprotected crops and introduc-

ing contagions and epidemics. During the cataclysmic Irish Potato Famine, blight was connected to fungal parasites. The discovery of these parasites, however, did not dispel the mystery of blight. Whether the parasites were its cause or effect, and whether blight was a symptom of a disease or itself a disease, remained topics of dispute into the twentieth century.

In the late nineteenth century, English translations of the Bible began to replace the now-archaic word "blasting" with the word "blight" to describe one of the punishments wreaked by a wrathful god on unbelievers.[10] This biblical employment of blight suggested that the mystery of the disease might be explained by its status as retribution, a connotation that would continue to shape the use of the term as it moved from agriculture to culture and from countryside to city.

These moves took place in the early twentieth century in the context of the industrializing American metropolis. In the United States, early slum reformers did not make much reference to blight; the term does not appear in Jacob Riis's 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*, for example. By 1902, in *The Battle with the Slum*, Riis used the term twice, referring to "the blight of the double-decker" and "the blight of the twenty-five foot lot."[11] Riis's figurative use of "blight" as a name for the tenement's harmful environment corresponded with the simultaneous emergence of the term in the popular press as a metaphor for urban conditions that were undesirable, strange, or threatening to those who spoke on behalf of the city's dominant interests and constituencies. These conditions were connected to poverty, decline, or social difference; cast as "blight," these circumstances were staged as abnormalities—an urban disease that solicited a cure.

Extending blight's agricultural genealogy, early descriptions of urban blight often staged the immigrants who were filling the ranks of the industrial city's reserve armies of labor as agents of this urban disease. These were the same immigrants who were also being portrayed as agents of medical diseases—depictions that reified cultural fears of racial others as biological danger and thereby legitimized the study, management, and control of immigrant bodies and the urban spaces they occupied.[12] Writing about Chinatown, a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* described how the city's "poorer and more vicious classes" were "an eyesore to the municipality and a blight on property."[13] For a reporter at the *Detroit Free Press*, immigrant residents of tenements were a population that would "blight" any city "with the breadth of degradation."[14] These figurations of the socially excluded as agents of blight began to include African Americans in the course of the Great Migration, in which some six million African Americans moved from the rural south to northern cities.[15] As "blight," the impoverishment of the spaces to which the socially excluded were confined became an effect of their inhabitation rather than of urban segregation maintained by zoning, covenants, and violence alike.

Blight Science

"Blight" became a technical term for an urban condition at the same time as it circulated as a metaphor. This happened in the contexts of two newly formed professions: urban planning and real estate development. Each profession recruited "blight" as a name for one of the principal problems that it could solve or capitalize on. The status of blight as a mysterious affliction and metaphorical figure was both traded on and transformed; blight became a problem soliciting the technical solutions of urban planning and opening up challenges and opportunities for real estate development.

In both planning and real estate development, the problem of blight was described in terms of property value. An early reference comes from the Town Planning Institute's Fourth National Conference on City Planning in 1912, in a talk by the Boston architect J. Randolph Coolidge entitled "The Problem of the Blighted District."[16] Already in 1912, Coolidge addressed his audience "as people who know what my definition of a blighted district applies to, each of you in your own city or town."[17] But he then provided his definition, arrogating to city planning the authority and expertise to explain this well-known phenomenon. Coolidge's definition was that "a blighted district is one in which land values after a period of increase are stationary or falling."[18] The suggestion is that increasing property values are a general public good, so that falling values constitute an urban disease—a disease that city planning could defend against and cure. Here, the emerging concept of property value can be located with respect to the venerable Lockean theory of property, with property value posed as a product of what Locke called "cultivation."[19] For the seventeenth-century philosopher, the right to land was commensurate with the ability to till it, in the twentieth, the value of land depended on how it could be made to yield.

As described by Richard M. Hurd in his 1903 book, *Principles of City Land Values*, the real estate market depends on increases in property values, with threats to those increases defined as "nuisances . . . under which name we may class anything tending to depreciate the value of land."[20] As a technical term, "blight" named the spatial product of what Hurd called "nuisances." This placed realtor and planner together in a collaborative project to imagine, in the words of pioneering developer J. C. Nichols, "a future solution of blighted and abandoned areas of urban property of various types which have heretofore been so common in American cities."[21]

In the discussion following Coolidge's presentation on blight, Frank B. Williams, a New York lawyer, zoning advocate, future cofounder of the journal *City Planning*, and future sponsor of the Williams Prize Competition for the Best Essay on Blighted Districts by Students of American City Planning, noted that "a blighted district tends to become an unsanitary district, and where the blight goes far

enough in time it may even tend to become a slum district. . . . As soon as health considerations can be urged in connection with this problem the courts allow us a free hand. . . . There is every reason why unsanitary districts or districts blighted in any way should be condemned as a whole, re-planned, and the land sold off so that the city can get all the economic and hygienic advantages."[22] This notion of the slum as "an advanced case of blight" became axiomatic during the Depression.[23] Blight removal as slum prevention provided a symbolic resolution to the actual contradiction between free market real estate development, on the one hand, and social welfare, on the other—the acceleration of social suffering by real estate development. While real estate development failed to promote social welfare in the American city, it could nevertheless be framed as such a promotion by narrating it in terms of blight removal and slum prevention. Blight removal thus came to be an important component of a "reverse welfare state" in which public resources are dedicated to the advancement of corporate welfare, in this case with a rhetoric that masked private interest as public good.[24]

Race, Space, and Blight

As property value was fundamentally shaped by the racial and ethnic definition of its inhabitants, the concept of blight also scientized, spatialized, and monetized white supremacy and racism; the same people of color whose presence depreciated property values became agents of blight. In *City Growth Essentials*, a widely used textbook for students of real estate that replaced Hurd's earlier *Principles of City Land Values*, the authors focused on "colored people" as a particular threat to property value and so a particularly dangerous cause of blight: "Property values have been greatly depreciated by having a single colored family settle on a street formerly occupied exclusively by white residents. . . . Segregation of negroes seems to be the reasonable solution to the problem, no matter how unpleasant or objectional the thought may be to colored residents."[25] The authors go on to implicitly pose white supremacist violence as means to protect threatened property values and thereby prevent blight: "Southern cities have a method of taking care of the problem which is well known, and seems to be entirely effective. . . . Colored people must recognize the economic disturbance which their presence in a white neighborhood causes, and must forego their desire to split off from the established district where the rest of their race lives."[26] Real estate developers and urban planners were assisted in their attempts to define, document, prevent, eliminate, and capitalize on blight by sociological theorizations of the relationship between race and urban space. Particularly relevant was the Chicago School model of urban geography in which the city was described by series of concentric circles marking "the central business district, a zone of transition, a zone of workingmen's homes, a residential area, and a commuter's zone": a system based upon "the tendency of

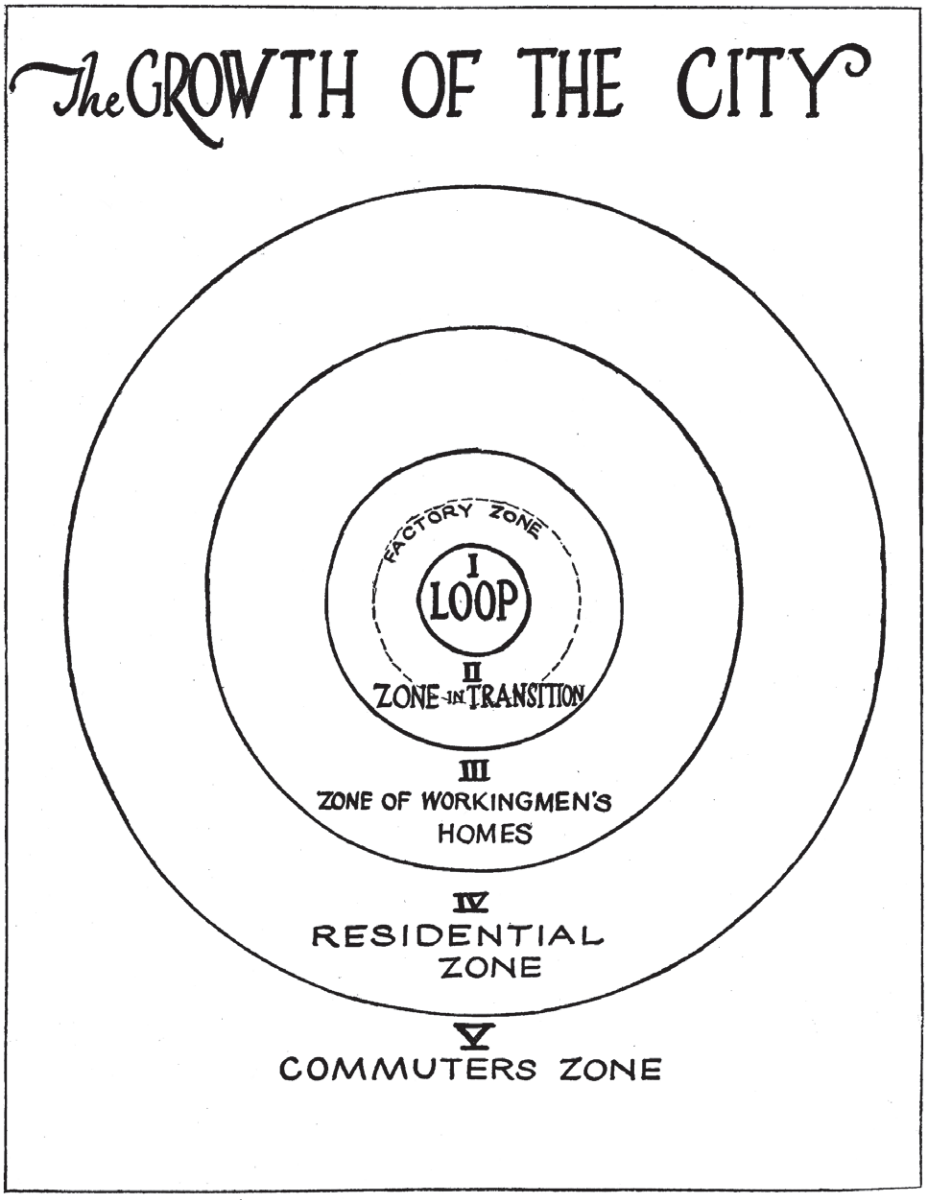

Fig. 16.2 Ernest Burgess, Concentric Zone Model of Urban Growth, 1925. Image from Ernest Burgess, "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project," in *The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment*, ed. Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925).

each inner zone to extend its area by the invasion of the next outer zone," according to Ernest Burgess, "a process which has been studied in detail in plant ecology" (figure 16.2).[27]

In this model of the city, zones were defined by race, nationality, and class, with invasions representing the movement of a community from its designated zone

into an adjacent zone. In "Residential Segregation in the American City," Burgess described this process of invasion in detail, including a map documenting invasion routes of "immigrants," among which "Negroes" were included with "Irish," "Bohemian," "Poles," and "Jews." For the Chicago School, the American city was a city where only white Anglo-Saxon Americans belonged, so that race and nationality functioned equally as markers of difference.

Following Robert Park's "race relations cycle," Burgess posed the "invasions" of "immigrants" as one phase in a teleological process in which "invasion" would be followed by the resistance—mild or violent—of the invaded community, the "influx" of newcomers and abandonment of the area by old-time residents, and then a "climax," "a new equilibrium of communal stability."[28] The Chicago School model of invasion and assimilation has been criticized for naturalizing and normalizing race and racial inequality, staging racial equality as the result of an evolutionary process of social change, and posing racial prejudice as the root cause of racial conflict. But it was precisely as such that the model provided valuable resources to urban planning and real estate development. In planning and development, the space of invasion was quickly identified as blight, with blight becoming a threatening urban condition that solicited professional expertise to prevent and eliminate it.

And so, by 1930, the causes of blight, according to John Ihlder, executive director of the Washington, DC, Alley Dwelling Authority, included land overcrowding, building obsolescence, the separation of city districts, and "invasion by incompatible uses," including air pollution, heavy traffic, "degenerate" uses of dwellings, and "social or racial groups antipathetic to earlier inhabitants."[29] These invasions were among the causes of the "insidious malady" of blight that attacked urban residential districts and, if left unchecked, yielded slums.[30] In his 1935 book *Rehousing Urban America*, Henry Wright visualized the relationship between invasion and blight in his diagrams of city growth; these diagrams showed the city growing as a series of concentric rings, with the ring of "blight" corresponding to the ring termed "zone of transition" in the Chicago School diagram (figure 16.3).[31]

The continuum between white supremacy, racism, and real estate subtended by blight became governmentalized in the work of economist Homer Hoyt. Hoyt received his PhD at the University of Chicago and was well aware of, and even critical of, Burgess's concentric ring model.[32] At the same time, however, Hoyt also reproduced Chicago School discourse on racial invasion in his work as principal housing economist of the Federal Housing Administration between 1934 and 1946. In *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago*, he ranked "races and nationalities with respect to their beneficial effect upon land values," with "English, Germans, Scotch, Irish, and Scandinavians" having the most favorable effect on land values and "Russian Jews, South Italians, Negroes, and Mexicans" having, in

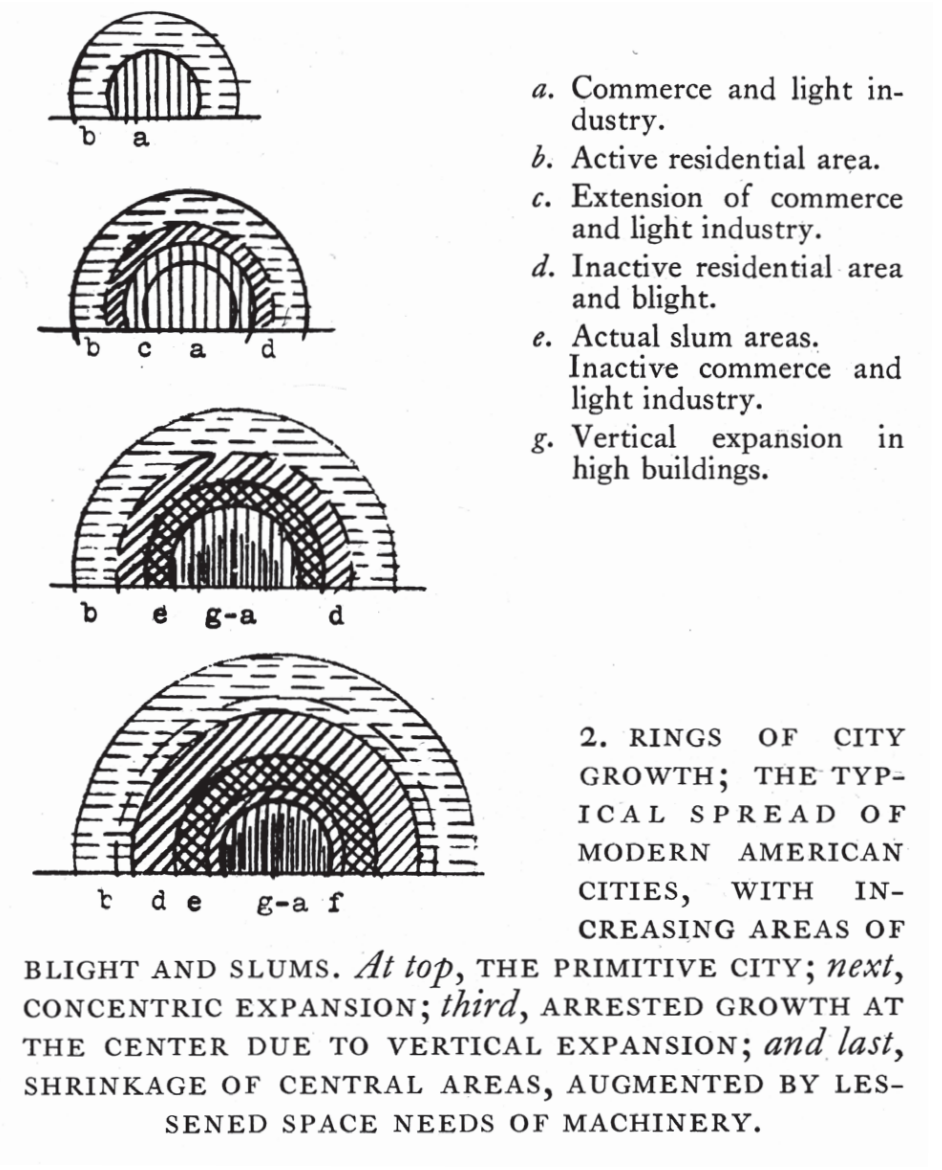

Fig. 16.3 Henry Wright, "Typical Spread of Modern American Cities and the Accumulation of Increased Areas of Blight and Slums," in *Rehousing Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

order, the most detrimental effects.[33] Hoyt wrote that "while the ranking may be scientifically wrong from the standpoint of inherent racial characteristics, it registers an opinion or prejudice that is reflected in land values"; here, what Hoyt specifically calls out as a pseudo-science of racial characteristics is embedded in and consolidated in another pseudo-science—that of "land values"—that Hoyt was central in staging as science-as-such.[34]

The redlining conducted by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in the 1930s

in its "residential security maps" is one of the well-known results of Hoyt's theorization of land value. These maps were made for mortgage lenders to show the level of security for mortgage loans in a city's various neighborhoods; the presence of people of color in a neighborhood rendered that neighborhood risky for lenders and it would be outlined in red. Historians of redlining have debated its actual role in the loaning activity of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation.[35] What is clear, however, is that the lending of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation involved the federal government in the advancement of residential segregation, racially unequal housing, and racially unequal wealth accumulation.[36]

Segregation confined blight and slums to urban spaces occupied by communities of color. These spaces, however, were still threatening to white communities. As the *Detroit News* reported in 1946, "Slums and civic blight destroy property values—and, because, in doing so, they greatly increase the tax rate for the whole city, they throw an unjust and huge additional tax burden, amounting to tens of millions of dollars annually, on Detroit taxpayers who do not live in the slums and blighted areas. Slums and blighted areas also burden Detroit's taxpayers with still additional millions annually because of the crimes, fires, juvenile delinquency and disease they breed."[37]

As "blight," the effects of segregation, racism, and disadvantage became threats and burdens to the advantaged—a script for further exclusions of the already excluded.

Blight and *Black Metropolis*

In 1945, a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Chicago, St. Clair Drake, and a former doctoral student in Chicago's sociology department, Horace R. Cayton, published *Black Metropolis*—a book dedicated to their teacher, Robert Park, who had died the previous year. A study of Chicago's South Side, *Black Metropolis* provided the first critical perspective on blight in the context of a professional literature: a perspective immediately signaled by placing the word "blight" in quotation marks whenever it was used in the book.

Drake and Cayton wrote that: "Over half of Black Metropolis lies in that area which the city planners and real-estate interests have designated as 'blighted.' . . . The superficial observer believes that these areas are 'blighted' because large numbers of Negroes and Jews, Italians and Mexicans, homeless men and 'vice' gravitate there. But real-estate boards, city planners, and ecologists know that the Negro, the foreign-born, the transients, pimps, and prostitutes are located there because the area has already been written off as blighted. . . . Black Metropolis has become a seemingly permanent enclave within the city's blighted area."[38] In *Black Metropolis*, blight is no longer an unintended urban anomaly, but a product of the intersection of real-estate development, urban planning, and racism—an intersec-

tion whose status as an anomaly was part of the mystification of the economic and ideological structures that produced it.

At the moment when *Black Metropolis* was published, this mystification was becoming ever more pronounced. During and after World War II, racial and ethnic categories began to disappear from definitions of blight—not because race no longer mattered, but because racism was marked as undemocratic in the context of a new racial liberalism.[39] In parallel with antidiscrimination policies advanced in relation to military service and employment in war industries, then, discourse on blight became increasingly race-neutral. In the Federal Housing Administration Underwriting Manual, definitions of neighborhood invasion as changes in "racial occupancy" thereby became changes in "living standards," "user groups," "cultural traditions," "maintenance patterns," and other seemingly race-neutral terms.[40]

Black communities were also named by these terms; the only difference was that now this naming proceeded according to secondary attributes of these communities—attributes that were not targeted in antidiscrimination legislation. That is, to the extent that wealth, privilege and power were unevenly distributed across racial groups, then the project to extract value from property through seemingly race-neutral blight removal also functioned to dispossess black communities.

Race-neutral definitions of blight in the 1950s, then, marked the success of projects and policies to bring race, class, and urban space into correspondence with one another. Race could be explicitly extracted from definitions of blight, and blight removal would still be equivalent to Negro removal. The US Supreme Court famously overturned school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* in the summer of 1954 and then famously upheld the use of eminent domain to eliminate blight in *Berman v. Parker* a few months later. The conjunction of these decisions testified to the emergence of urban space—and to the blackness of blight—as the key medium of segregation in a supposedly post-segregation era, an emergence suggested by critical histories of *Brown v. Board of Education*.[41]

Blight Removal

In post–World War II American urban spaces, the discovery of blight was an incentive for urban renewal. As has been amply studied, urban renewal often conjoined the displacement of communities of color with the consolidation of adjacent central business districts and development of other downtown spaces perceived to be deteriorating or depreciating.[42] Racism and segregation were central to both the white beneficiaries of urban renewal and to the communities of color that were displaced by renewal; for the latter, urban renewal carried out as blight removal was the latest instance in a long history of urban dispossession.

In the 1980s and '90s, especially in Rust Belt cities losing population, blight

removal was separated from urban renewal to become a wholly subtractive demolition project, framed in the language of austerity urbanism.[43] Elected officials taught citizens to understand this demolition as a form of progress—a way to "downsize" or "rightsize" shrinking cities, adjusting the supply of houses to the reduced demand for housing, as well as to securitize "intact neighborhoods" from the threats presumably presented by blighted areas.[44] In Detroit, for example, Mayor Dennis Archer pointed out that "when you say you're going to tear down abandoned houses . . . it creates an enormous pride in the city."[45]

Yet rightsizing through blight removal relied upon two elisions. First, "blighted" homes were conflated with "abandoned" and "vacant" homes—a conflation that overlooked the many people who homesteaded in otherwise-empty homes.[46] Second, "depopulation" was conflated with "surplus housing," as if the dramatic drop in the city's population would be correlated with a dramatic increase in housing availability. This conflation overlooked the affordability of housing—the fact that housing is only available if it is affordable. The blight removal policy that developed as a consequence of these two elisions thereby yielded the destruction of increasing numbers of homes precisely at a time when the need for affordable housing was steadily increasing in cities across the United States.

Detroit and "Blight Emergency"

Since the 1950s, Detroit has been shaped by an extremely large outflow of middle-class white and black families to the surrounding metropolitan region—an outflow structured by the decline of auto manufacturing in the city and concurrent movement of industry to Mexico, Canada, and Asia, racial fear on the part of white Detroiters, the postwar development of the metro region, and the global shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production and consumption. Consequently, the city has been the site of ever-expanding demolition projects posed as blight removal. These projects were themselves expanded in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis; for example, Major Dave Bing initiated his tenure in 2010 with the ambition to demolish 10,000 of an estimated 33,000 vacant homes in the city. In his first "State of the City" address, Bing doubled down on the elision of blight and vacancy: "Blight is more than an eyesore. Abandoned and dilapidated buildings are hotspots for crime and a living reminder of a time when the City of Detroit turned a blind eye to owners who neglected their properties. Tonight I am unveiling a plan to demolish 3,000 dangerous residential structures this year and setting a goal of 10,000 by the end of this term."[47] What appeared to be a military-scale program of demolition when it was announced soon appeared to be a merely preliminary effort. After Michigan's governor placed Detroit under "emergency financial management" in 2013, the city's appointed emergency manager declared what may be the first and only "blight emergency" in American urban history.[48] The ensuing

program of blight removal was radically expanded, as well as privatized along with many other city services in the context of the emergency manager's austerity urbanism.

The key actor in the privatization of blight removal was Dan Gilbert's Detroit Blight Removal Task Force. In its own words, the task force "brought private, philanthropic, nonprofit, federal and state partners together with the city."[49] Indeed, the bright colors, infographics, highlighted taglines, and other reader-friendly features of the *Task Force Plan*, released in May 2014, were precise registrations of the status of the *Task Force Plan* as a private initiative requiring public advertising, rather than a public initiative to be collectively debated and decided upon.[50]

The *Task Force Plan* radicalized Detroit's historical deployment of blight as a means to raise public fear and render blight removal a management of that fear. According to the task force, its "definition and methodology for classifying property as 'blight' incorporates the concepts of physical blight, economic blight, the public's interest in protecting the health, safety, and general welfare of people in its communities, and the preservation of property values"; these "concepts" were drawn from the State of Michigan's definition of "blighted property" and the City of Detroit's ordinance governing "dangerous buildings."[51] The survey commissioned by the Task Force discovered 84,461 "blighted parcels" among 377,602 surveyed (figure 16.4).

The vast majority of those blighted parcels—72,328—were single-family homes: around 20 percent of the single-family homes in the entire city. The *Task Force Plan* proposed that all blighted parcels in the city be demolished and that existing legal and bureaucratic procedures structuring the administration of those parcels be bypassed in favor of an "expedited foreclosure process" and "aggressive eradication timeline." At the moment when the *Task Force Plan* was published, Detroit's population was approximately 82 percent African American; as the latest stage in the history of blight removal in the American city, the plan once again translated racially based socioeconomic disadvantage into public threat and legal offense.

Taking Back "Blight"

The massive wave of mortgage foreclosures, tax foreclosures, and blight removal currently underway in Detroit has led to the public production of knowledge and solidarity around racially uneven dispossession and displacement. While foreclosures, evictions, and blight removal proceed in race-neutral terms of "renewal," "revitalization," and "redevelopment," communities affected by those policies have consolidated around their racially uneven impact. This has produced a "nobody move" movement dedicated to supporting people who have been delivered eviction notices; a series of anti-foreclosure movements, many led by neighborhood asso-

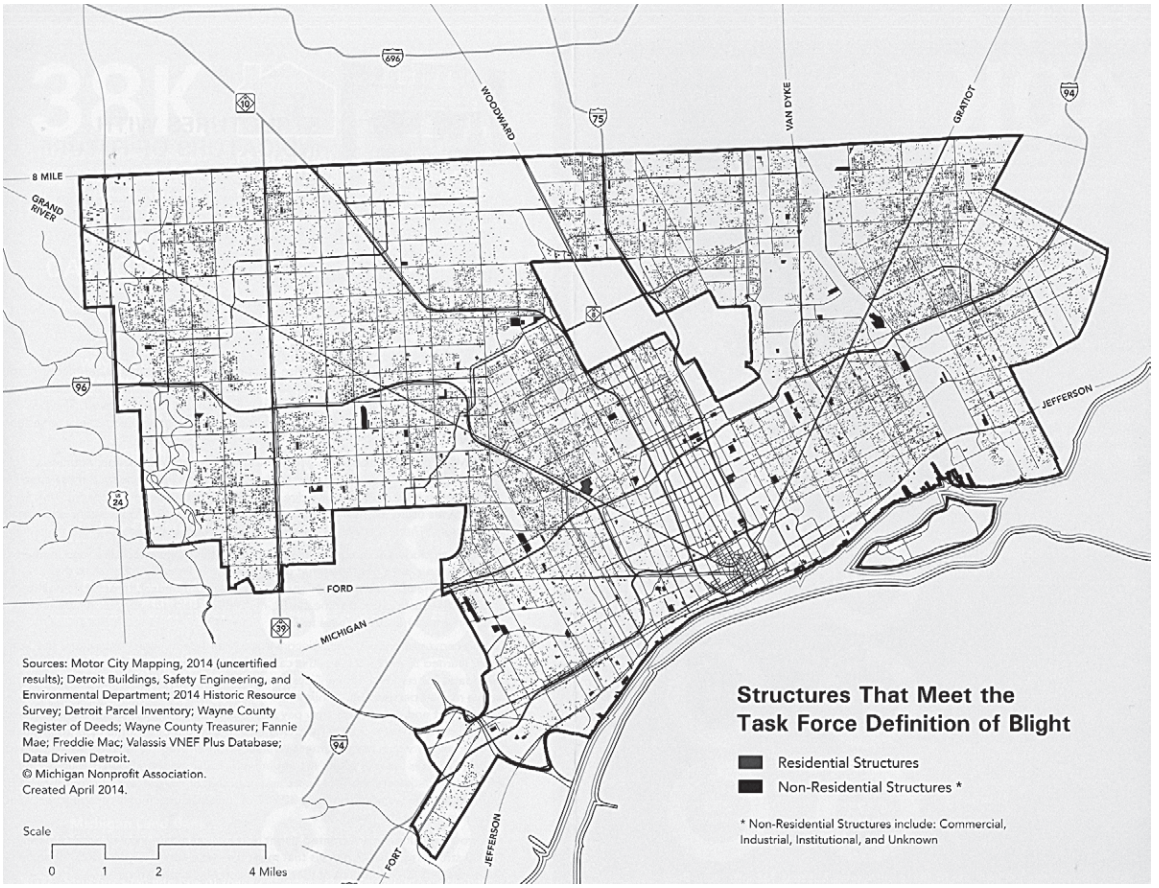

Fig. 16.4 Detroit Blight Removal Task Force, "Structures That Meet the Task Force Definition of Blight," in *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan*, Detroit, May 2014.

ciations; and actions to keep individual homeowners in homes after they have received eviction notices for back taxes or mortgage debts.

On a poster from the summer of 2015 advertising a protest to keep Lela Whitfield in her home, it was claimed that "if Lela is evicted, her home will undoubtedly become abandoned and stripped, causing further blight to the community" (figure 16.5). This claim was historical: in the campaign to keep Whitfield in her home, the history of blight in the American city was precisely and strategically reversed. While blight emerged in Detroit, as in other American cities, as a condition produced by the invasion of black bodies into the city, blight here became a condition produced by the expulsion of black bodies from the city. Blighted *homes were thereby reconfigured as* black *homes.*

In Detroit, in the 1960s, advocates of black power proclaimed the city "black man's land" and worked to advance radical self-government by the city's black-majority population.[52] These proclamations were undermined, first by the white

Lela Whitfield has lived in her Detroit home since she was a child. The home belonged to Lela's mother, who took out a reverse mortgage in 2005. Lela's mother passed away in 2010, and the lender foreclosed on the loan. The property has since been deeded to the government-controlled mortgage giant Fannie Mae, which is trying to evict Lela.

Lela is willing and able to buy the home for its market value, Fannie Mae refuses to accept her offer, even though they have already acted illegally by not offering to sell it to a family member. They would rather evict Lela than keep her in her home.

Lela's neighborhood, like so many in Detroit, has been devastated by the foreclosure crisis. If Lela is evicted, her home will undoubtedly become abandoned and stripped, causing further blight on the community.

With support of people on the block, church people, union people, and activists Lela Whitfield plans on staying in her house "by any means necessary."

This is not a new story. Many have experienced and are still going through foreclosures. This fall the biggest tax foreclosure in the history of the U.S. is happening in Detroit. A "new Detroit" is being built while many Detroiter's are losing their home and getting their water shut off. We need to stand with people in our city and neighborhoods to fight the evictions, water shut offs and police brutality.

For Updates, Latest Victories or to Fight Your Eviction:

W: Detroitevictiondefense.org
F: Detroit Eviction Defense
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Free Press Article:
tinyurl.com/pgsd3k8

Lela's Story: youtu.be/C3jKeP0loC8

Detroit Eviction Defense meets every Thursday at 6 p.m Old St. John's church 2120 Russell, Detroit next to Eastern Market

Fig. 16.5 Detroit Eviction Defense, poster protesting eviction of Lela Whitfield, Detroit, July 2015. Image courtesy Detroit Resists.

urban regime and then by the incorporation of subsequent black urban regimes—municipalities led by black officeholders and black elites—in urban development structures that continued to be based on corporate- and investor-centered policies of urban growth and the concurrent predation of working-class communities of color.[53] The reconfiguration of blighted homes as black homes marked a return to the practices and ambitions of radical self-government. Those homes were politicized by the communities who occupied them and transformed from architectural detritus into objects of a political imagination—the imagination of racialized spaces deleted in and by public policy, urban planning, and real estate development alike.

But the reconfiguration of blighted homes as black homes has a historiographical dimension as well as a political one. Resistance opens up repressed and obscured histories; critical architectural and urban histories can articulate architectural and urban dimensions of white supremacy and anti-black racism that resistance emerges from and that conventional histories normalize or ignore. In her analysis of black vernacular architecture, bell hooks argues for what she calls a "subversive historiography" that "connects oppositional practices from the past with forms of resistance in the present, thus creating spaces of possibility where the future can be imagined differently."[54] While histories of blighted homes often mystify the intersections of race and capitalism that yield blight itself, histories of black homes prompted by actions like Lela Whitfield's defense foreground precisely those intersections and might lead into the kind of historiography that hooks calls for.