

Intergenerational Black Perspectives on Economic Exploitation in the South

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Collier is the founder of The Lighthouse|Black Girl Projects, an organization that advances the sociopolitical outcomes of Black girls and women in the rural southeastern part of the United States. She has worked as the director of youth initiatives for the Children's Defense Fund—Southern Regional Office and has been awarded fellowships from the Novo Foundation, Northwestern, and Poynter universities. Ed Whitfield is a radical economist who works for the Fund for Democratic Communities (F4DC) and chairs the board of Southern Reparations Loan Fund. Collier and Whitfield dialogue about the failure and myth of integration, economic disparities in education, workforce development, community activism, and capitalistic investment in racial housing disparities.



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This interview is part of the series for PJSE's special issue 'Has capitalism destroyed Caste and Race; does capitalism equalize or perpetuate age-old inequalities?'

Noel Didla: *How has capitalism impacted housing?*

Ed Whitfield: Housing development and gentrification are the short answers. While a general characteristic of capitalism is the free motion of capital to go wherever it needs to get the highest rate of return, the construction of housing remains a local activity deploying capital for the creation on local projects where labor will have created new value to be accumulated by the developer who is generally a local capitalist.

This newly created value will become the local housing stock which when it is sold, this value again becomes a larger pile of money seeking the highest returns. Given the working of supply and demand, the new house is often sold above its value, creating a speculative increase in addition to the value added by the labor of working people.

Local development is dependent on local incentives and local regulatory policies to assure the profitability of projects. This is the reason nearly every local government in the country is run by developers. With the decline of industry, local development provides a constant need for the local

deployment of capital that is needed to replace the depreciating housing stock and provide for the general growth of the population.

The problem is that you can make more money building expensive houses, so the average housing prices are constantly climbing except in times of crises. This pushes poorer people out of their homes and away from the communities that are becoming nicer and gaining more and more amenities while increasing amounts of people who can no longer afford to remain in their own neighborhood.

Noel Didla: *How has capitalism impacted public education for Black children?*

Natalie A. Collier: Back in high school, one Saturday morning, a couple hundred of my schoolmates and I split up across the city to compel the voters in my hometown to vote favorably for a bond issue to improve the facilities of the public schools. The school needed more money and a favorable vote would mean an increase in the citizenry's property taxes until the bond (a loan, of sorts) was paid off. I didn't quite make the connection then, but the investment in public schools in the United States is based on the tax base surrounding them. This is a setup for a public education system with Black and white, a little grey. The Black and white, as it were, impacts Black children and white children drastically.

Capitalism, which is more concerned about profit than people or places, sacrifices wellbeing for expansion, value for things. Therefore, its concern is not the education of Black children (any children, for that matter) but the maturation of the investment. There is no real investment. If those children are Black and poor, lack reinforces the lack of value, investment, opportunity and even access to the aforementioned. Then somehow, the systems in place expect students to transcend these deficits and become productive citizens who contribute positively to society... or does it? James Baldwin admonished, "Education is indoctrination if you're white, subjugation if you're Black."

One might intuit the solution to this is integration—Black people, white people and everyone else together happily learning. Succinctly: no. The financial resources that allow one to live in a community where schools are well-resourced don't necessarily equal access, cultural compassion and where whiteness is uplifted as the standard bearer.

Alas, the bond issue passed with more than the required 60 percent and the community still rallies behind the only public high school in my hometown. There's something to be said for that.

Ed Whitfield: The singular logic of capital expansion requires an education system that promotes social tranquility within the country while providing trained participants in the exploited population. This means that the education system must produce enough skilled people to fit into the appropriate cogs in the gears of the overall economic and social system, but not so many that they would feel that domestic capitalism's inability to profitably make use of them reveals a problem with the nature of capitalism. Instead, the capitalist education needs to create winners and losers. It does this very effectively, with the losers thinking that they, and not the system, are at fault. People who think that there is something wrong with themselves and their communities

are not the same kind of social problems they would be if instead, they knew that they personally are not at fault. Rather it is capitalism's inability to derive sufficient profit from them that keeps them locked out of the successful economic mainstream.

Somewhat arbitrary barriers are erected inside compulsory schools, and some children are told in words and deeds that they will never adequately bridge those barriers.

Race is a convenient demarcation helping to establish up front who is to be most disadvantaged. Subtle cultural bias can be expanded into full-fledged educational apartheid when a regime of strict, high stakes testing is put in place, and many black children enter the race for economic success handicapped from the beginning.

This handicap does not need to affect all children within any subgroup in the same way in order to be effective. All that it has to do is create a category of throw away kids who never expect anything from the system so they are less likely to fight for it.

A problem for social movements that care about justice is that the answer to the problem of being locked out of educational opportunities would seem to be to fight to get into it. But the problem is that what is there is not actually good enough for our children. The education available to white middle-class children and above is drenched in a racist history narrative and tools for the maintenance of oppression and exploitation at home and abroad.

We need to build liberatory education, not just fight to get deeper into the system in defense of, and fighting to extend exploitation. Building a liberatory education process is an important part of building freedom. We cannot end racism and capitalism if we continue to deliver our children into the institutions that are instrumental in maintaining both.

Noel Didla: *What is integration in the history of the USA?*

Natalie A. Collier: There is no such thing as integration in the United States of America. There are, however, consistent instances of desegregation. They are so frequent, in fact, that even in 2019, we still find occasions when people laud “The first Black” this or that. If this country were integrated, it would have surpassed any such moments of celebrating isolated moments decades ago. And even if there were places where people of African descent or other people of color were the first representations, it would be less noteworthy because society was actually integrated.

Let's look back for a present example. Henry Billings Brown wrote in his opinion for the court for *Plessy v. Ferguson*: “We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's [Plessy] argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race, the court said, chooses to put the construction upon itself. ... If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.” Oh.

From the time this decision, colloquially known as "separate but equal" was made law in 1896, whether subversively or in court, there have been challenges to this archaic, inhumane, racist but legal ruling. One of the readiest and encouraging examples of this is through education. The quests, despite popular opinion, weren't always about integration, but equal access for state-funded learning.

A friend convinced Oliver Brown to join a lawsuit the NAACP in Topeka, Kansas prepared to file on behalf of a group of seven women. Brown was a pastor and well-respected member of the community. With his well-recognized name as the lead of the suit, the hope was even that and his gender would bring more merit to their cause. The lawyers laid out a case and won, breaking the precedent that had been set nearly 60 years prior.

Capitalizing on this win, Beatrice Alexander, with her children in mind, filed a suit against the Holmes County Board of Education. "The obligation of every school district is to terminate dual school systems at once and to operate now and hereafter only unitary schools," a line in the final opinion stated October 29, 1969.

Progress rarely happens without steps backward. As segregation evaporated, it wasn't because choruses of "Kumbaya" rang in hallways and school gyms across the state. Private academies and citizenship schools popped up, in some places, overnight. In 1964, the Jackson Citizens Council (White Citizens Council) opened its first school and eventually opened four more. In Jackson, during the winter break of 1969, the city was redistricted, ensuring segregation based on zip code. According to archival data, the district went from 40 percent Black in fall 1969 to 61 percent the next fall. And by 1979, what were Citizens Schools became Christian academies—same stories, different headlines. A precursor (and explanation perhaps) of why some have difficulties with the idea of school choice. (Jackson Public School District is now 96 percent Black.)

Integration? Nah.

Ed Whitfield: At the end of the [American] Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman asked a group of Black ministers who have assembled in Savannah GA what they considered to be slavery, what did they look forward to as freedom, and finally whether they wanted to live among themselves or integrated into the white population.

To condense and paraphrase their answer, they said slavery was when someone took by force the product of your labor, that freedom would be having the ability to retain the product of your labor for the benefit of those you cared about, and finally to the question of living among whites all but one said that they didn't want to do so, feeling that the overwhelming animosity between the races wasn't likely to go away and that our people could live and prosper among ourselves. These answers tell us quite a bit about the attitude of our people immediately after being free of the immediate yoke of chattel slavery.

It was years later after a series of betrayals and with the influence of white liberals that integration, rather than financial independence of land ownership was elevated as the key to Black freedom. Only if you accept the idea that power, privilege and wealth will remain concentrated in white

hands that one would put forth that proximity to the community that had enslaved us would be the key to our progress.

Integration of public education, public accommodations and neighborhoods have proven itself to be an elusive goal since the freedom of motion often voluntarily separates people again. The alternative has been coercive regulations (forced busing) that have still not produced the desired equity.

What we need is the power to do the things we must, against any odds and resistance, to meet our own needs, elevate the quality of life in our communities and through our collective democratic ownership of our community's production, distribution, finance, and education, and to retain the product of our own labor for our benefit and the benefit of future generations.