



Kimberley Kinder, *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8166-9707-6 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8166-9709-0 (paper)

In the summer, Dale cuts the grass of vacant houses on his block. In the winter, he shovels their snow. Gene tries to make empty houses on his street look occupied by planting flowers, trimming shrubs and decorating them for the holidays. Edna hangs white curtains in her windows so she can leave them closed but still see activity on the street. In Ellison's neighborhood, where half of the street lights no longer work, he and his neighbors leave their porch lights on all night. Such everyday practices are the focus of Kimberly Kinder's *DIY Detroit*, an account of how urban residents "self-provision" in response to inadequate city services, depopulation, and disinvestment, and the effect of these practices on the social and spatial logic of the city. For Kinder, the Motor City, which declared bankruptcy in 2014, epitomizes these trends and serves as a sort of cautionary tale. If there is one argument to take away from *DIY Detroit*, it is that self-provisioning should not be romanticized in an era of neoliberal urbanism.

Kinder illuminates a particular kind of informality: self-provisioning strategies that Detroit residents use to maintain and compete for control of "gray spaces"—a term borrowed from Oren Yiftachel (2009)—near their homes. Whereas Yiftachel uses it to refer to spaces that reflect colonial relations and the ways new urban regimes are expediting what he describes as "creeping apartheid", Kinder's usage is more theoretically and historically circumscribed. For her, gray spaces are in-between spaces that public officials and private owners have neglected. Think abandoned buildings and overgrown parks. In Detroit, there are many such spaces. In 2016, city officials categorized over 150,000 houses as "vacant" or "abandoned". Kinder argues that gray spaces frequently become sites of competition, for example, between residents trying to maintain their neighborhoods and scrappers scavenging houses for metal and other valuable material. Drawing on surveys, participant observations, and interviews, *DIY Detroit* chronicles the ways residents manage and try to gain control over gray space in three Detroit neighborhoods

(Brightmoor, Springwells Village, and MorningSide). The book chapters are organized around six different collective self-provisioning strategies that Detroit residents use to “make do” in neighborhoods without services: recruiting new residents; protecting vacant homes; repurposing abandoned spaces; domesticating public works; improving public safety; and producing new knowledge.

While Kinder is mostly interested in an uptick in self-provisioning in US cities in the wake of the late 2000s through early 2010s Great Recession, she situates the residential stewardship practices that are the focus of *DIY Detroit* within a longer history that goes something like this: Before the rise of the modern city, self-provisioning was a norm evidenced by the commonness of urban homesteads, backyard gardens, volunteer fire brigades, and informal room rentals. By the mid 20th century, self-provisioning began to wane. Municipal roads, waterlines, fire trucks, and other urban public works became more widespread, zoning laws became more stringent, and rising incomes and welfare programs provided alternatives for people who previously provisioned for themselves. In the 1970s, self-provisioning resurfaced as deindustrialization, welfare cuts, and the rise of unemployment and precarious labor made urban living difficult. Its reappearance was particularly pronounced among people of color who often lived in segregated neighborhoods and faced precarious labor positions. To counter municipal neglect, they exchanged food, clothing, childcare, and car rides, participated in street cleanups and neighborhood watches, and organized housing redevelopment campaigns. In the 1980s and 1990s, the privatization of city services from street maintenance to ambulance services, waste management, and drug treatment centers led to increased residential vulnerability and, thus, an expansion in self-provisioning strategies. The 2008 subprime mortgage crisis and slew of municipal bankruptcies that followed marked a new self-provisioning apex: not only were residents taking it upon themselves to self-provision, they were now being encouraged by nonprofit organizations, governments, and activists to “self-sacrifice their time, bodies, and

emotional energy cleaning trash and organizing safety patrols in their chronically underserved neighborhoods” (p.27).

A great strength of *DIY Detroit* is the care with which Kinder captures the minutiae of the stewardship practices residents use to “make do” in neighborhoods where the government has withdrawn or neglected public infrastructure and they can’t afford the cost of private services. Such a grounded portrait of everyday life serves as a sort of counter narrative to the national and international media attention lavished on the city in recent years that has too often offered up crude and misunderstood portrayals of its “empty” landscape and supposed renaissance. The book also makes a timely contribution to urban studies by drawing analytical attention to urban informality in global North cities. Informality, commonly understood as economic relationships that fall outside of the formal sector, such as petty trade, unsanctioned shelter, and nonpayment of taxes, is often studied in the global South, but has received less attention in the global North (Schindler 2014). *DIY Detroit* provides a ground-level view of what the growth of informality as a new “mode of metropolitan urbanization” (Roy 2005) means for residents and for deepening stratification within cities between the haves and have-nots. It is not a rosy picture.

DIY Detroit seems to be a corrective aimed at those who hold romantic notions of self-provisioning and community governance, particularly those who see it as something that is “inherently revolutionary”. While it’s unclear whom Kinder has in mind, what is clear is that *DIY Detroit* seeks to interrupt arguments that such makeshift practices could be a panacea for contemporary urban crisis. The one culpable party that Kinder identifies are city planners, who, in the late 2000s, started embracing urban informality of a certain sort—like taco trucks and guerilla gardens—for its trendiness, counter-cultural cache, and potential to stimulate revitalization. She argues that such celebrations of informality are misguided because for most urban dwellers self-provisioning is not about counter-cultural reform but survival in underserved cities.

Kinder acknowledges some of the benefits that come from self-provisioning, such as its capacity to strengthen community bonds, solve practical problems, and exert influence on how the municipal government and nonprofits distribute resources, but she ultimately sees it as a “limited coping mechanism” that won’t solve long histories of racialized disinvestment nor combat neoliberal governance. While others may romanticize self-provisioning, most residents only engage in such short-term actions, she contends, because “too few politically viable alternatives exist” (p.201). Instead of spending their spare time managing failed municipal environments, they want neighbors and functional public works. Self-provisioning reflects, as she writes, “the profound political loss of a multigenerational effort to build democracy and public good into urban life” (p.31). For these reasons, Kinder sees it as a “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985) that needs to be connected to other modes of engagement like developing regional taxation, national anti-racism programs, and public policy focused on limiting social inequality. However, *DIY Detroit* does not provide any detailed discussion of historical or contemporary movements for such reforms within Detroit—a city with a rich history of labor and Black radical activism¹—or how such movements might relate to past or present forms of residential self-provisioning. In concluding that there needs to be more civic action, the suggestion is that at present self-provisioning and civic activism are mutually exclusive. Yet many Detroit residents are engaging in *both* self-provisioning and civic activism, such as fighting foreclosures and evictions, campaigning to reform racist emergency manager laws, and working for citywide community benefits agreements and for more accountability in local governance. Given this, *DIY Detroit* provokes a number of questions that other researchers might explore. In recent years, there has been a concerted push for urban studies scholars and urban geographers to engage more with critical race, queer, and feminist theory in order to illuminate the lived

¹ See, for example, *Antipode*’s recent symposium “The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute Then and Now: Commentaries on ‘Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community’”

<https://antipodefoundation.org/2017/02/23/dgei-field-notes/> (last accessed 30 March 2017).

experiences of social difference in place and how people resist oppressive structures (Buckley and Strauss 2016; Derickson 2015, 2017; McKittrick 2013; Oswin 2016). This push is not simply to rectify a gap in the literature but stems from an understanding that how we theorize the city has consequences for how urban futures are imagined and the scope of what is considered possible. Kinder's focus on self-provisioning as a "weapon of the weak" has the potential to illuminate political openings, but might benefit from deeper engagement with Scott's concept.

James Scott's call to recognize the "weapons of the weak" sought to redefine what kind of movements and resistance strategies were considered authentically political. In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott drew attention to how subaltern groups resisted domination in subtle ways that were not accounted for by political science's theories of collective action and focus on revolt and rebellion. Scott distinguished between what he called the "public transcript" and the "hidden transcript". The public transcript is produced when people play the political roles you'd expect them to in public settings. However, if we only pay attention to the public transcript, he argued, we may misread subordinate groups' actions as consent and overlook a dissident political culture that manifests in quotidian struggles and the discursive practices of everyday life.

Given Scott's charge, *DIY Detroit* leaves me with the question of how a study of self-provisioning like Kinder's might look different if situated in relationship to the historical Black experience and collective social struggle. How, for example, would the history of self-provisioning that Kinder offers need to be altered if it also accounted for what we might call "community provisioning"? In the predominantly Black city of Detroit, that would include the Black church, mutual aid societies, economic cooperatives, and the extensive survival programs established by the Black Panther Party (Dillard 2007; Hilliard 2002; Nembhard 2014). Would such collective practices simply be seen as a response to state withdrawal or would we also need to consider how African Americans and other groups have historically been positioned outside the body politic and the ramifications thereof for the strategic ways that self-provisioning or

community provisioning is practiced by marginalized groups in different historical moments? I pose these questions to suggest how other scholars might build on Kinder's rich empirical work and further expand our understandings of the relationship between disinvestment, survival strategies, and resistance.

Ultimately, Kinder has produced a timely and detailed account of how residents are getting by amidst disinvestment. Her ability to bring her characters and neighborhoods alive by elucidating otherwise unremarkable moments and encounters is impressive. *DIY Detroit* is an eminently accessible text, stemming, in part, from Kinder's skill at crafting crisp sentences and her choice to leave citations to the endnotes. Given this, it will be a welcome addition to many undergraduate urban studies courses, particularly those concerned with state retrenchment and conditions of informality in the global North. It is a book that I anticipate will find a wide readership and a home on the shelves of many people ranging from scholars of Detroit and US cities to urban enthusiasts, planners, and theorists of informality.

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