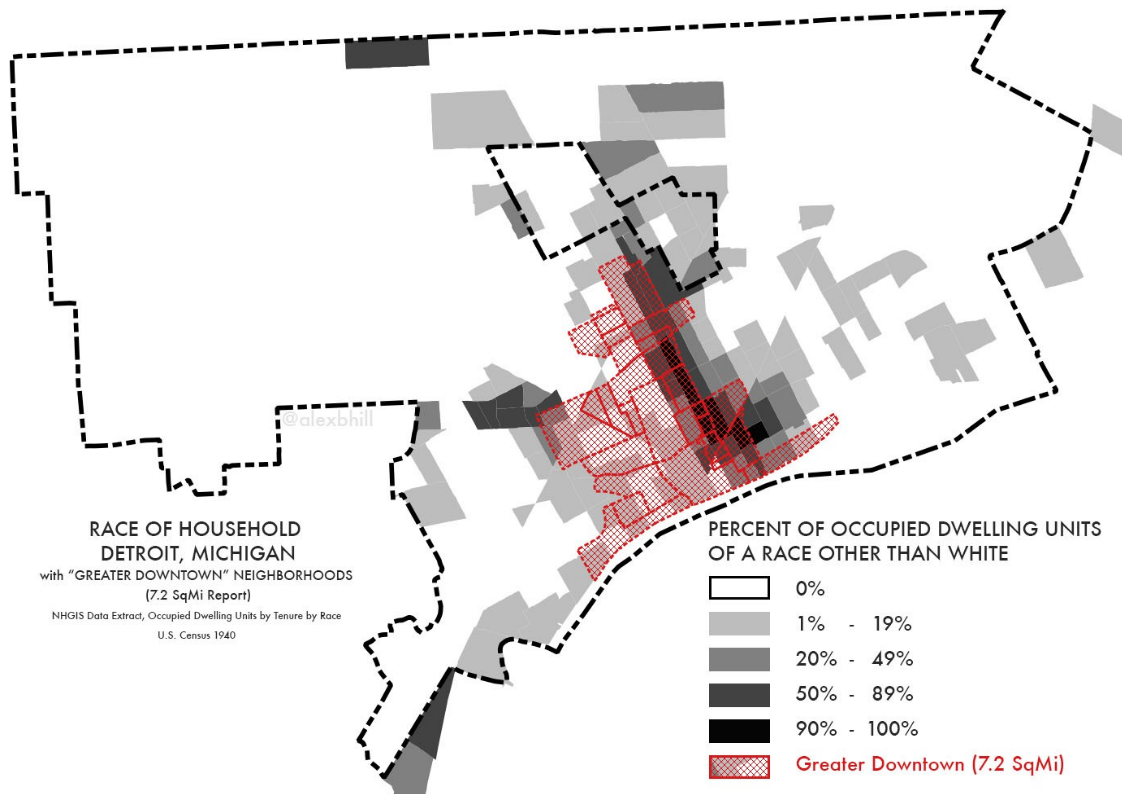
A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Book Review Symposium

Rebecca J. Kinney, *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America's Postindustrial Frontier*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780816697564; (cloth) ISBN: 9780816697571 (paper)

In the opening chapter of Rebecca Kinney's *Beautiful Wasteland,* a book focused on the dissection of the narrative of a new Detroit, a decade of hype and hope, she offers readers a map of race by household in 1938 Detroit. In Kinney's analysis this map plays a relatively minor role, demonstrating the codification of segregation in Depression era housing markets and government programs. It does what Kinney intends, but it also accentuates Kinney's broader argument of urban transition and the production of space or the making of place for whiteness. In her description of the map and its matter-of-fact representation of the city's segregation, Kinney engages with the limits and constraints of an argument that accepts Detroit as container. Though the Southeast Michigan suburbs and its residents appear throughout the book they are often aberrations acting on or in the city of an imagined past or sensationalized present. It is a tension that is present and acknowledged but left largely unexamined in the focus on media production and narratives of an emerging post-industrial frontier of opportunity.



If one were to overlay this 1938 map (above), which shows a stark rectangle of segregation running from the Detroit River at the city's southern edge up the main north-south thoroughfare of Woodward Avenue and ending somewhere near Clairmont Street in the city's North End neighborhood, over the contemporary islands of foundation-led development strategies it reveals the persistent targeting of these particular spaces in the city for transformation, whether through the neighborhood containment strategies visible in the late 1930s or the urban renewal strategies that followed in the post-war years to the contemporary whitening of these spaces through state dependent gentrification. These are in essence the neighborhoods at the center of dis/accumulation and racialization that

buffer the argument in *Beautiful Wasteland*. What Kinney captures is how these spaces serve as models and targets of the frontier rhetoric she examines throughout the book.

A work of cultural studies, it is an analysis that primarily dwells on the representation of space rather than its production. Kinney's critique of the image of Detroit circling in popular and not so popular culture draws from a collection of creative source material such as interview snippets of filmmakers, ad makers, and anonymous avatar comments on a real estate message board. *Beautiful Wasteland* marshals an array of new and old media to examine not only the power of the frontier myth but also its malleability in invoking nostalgia and hope and the insistence by its purveyors on a narrative of race neutrality and unexamined privilege. Yet as a reader, a geographer, and a Detroit resident, I was left wanting deeper insight into both the motivations of these cultural producers and the ways in which these objects were received and interpreted beyond the author.

The critique of the partiality and limits of cultural media in presenting and reimagining Detroit that undergird the book's central themes could also be mounted in examining the argument of *Beautiful Wasteland.* It is a work often caught in the binaries that limit rather than illuminate the city. Kinney works between various divisions–downtown development in relation to neighborhood decline, the suburban gaze on the city, and the inhabitant versus distant observer–to develop her conceptualization of Detroit as a beautiful wasteland, an emerging post-industrial frontier. If we return briefly to the map (above), one of the most immediate physical binaries resting on the surface of this critique, and left unexamined in the text, is the relationship between emerging white enclaves where the artists, filmmakers, journalists and writers producing images and arguments of Detroit as a "beautiful wasteland" use an encampments before they journey into the wilderness of their subjects.

The narrative of hype of a new Detroit that Kinney dismantles seems ever present in external media coverage of the city and in the promotional narratives of city boosters and corporations tied to the place, but the population continues to decline, neighborhoods continue to falter, the suburban fringe moves deeper into the agricultural hinterland, and the region is constantly being reshaped by political and economic maintenance of geographies of white supremacy. Essentially, just as these images and conversations are producing the idea of a beautiful wasteland for broader consumption, the focus on the circulation and construction of developmentalist narratives in this work cannot account for the actual production of this wasteland, the expulsions, dispossession and displacement laying waste to lives and neighborhoods.

One of the most under-theorized and unexamined components of most academic work on Detroit today is its relation to the suburbs or, more specifically, its production in relation to the suburbs. Though the suburbs loom large in *Beautiful Wasteland* they are more a specter haunting Detroit. In the shadows, this geography has an unexamined power as it defines the boundaries of the city in stark racial terms, but also acts on the city through policies and practices. The nostalgia of the message board participants in the first chapter of the book also carries with it a sense of ownership in the lament of loss. This particularly regressive vision of a right to the city is not only present on real estate message boards, it is prevalent among my undergraduate students whose parents or grandparents once lived in Detroit, and in my interviews with young pioneers and social entrepreneurs as they offer variations on this theme of the legacy of belonging, of being a Detroiter (Steinmetz 2008). It is a rhetoric and an articulation of a particular right to the city, of being a Detroiter residing in the suburbs, that is more than nostalgia; it carries an organizing power and morality in its echoes of white supremacist romanticizing of a "way of life" in the US South, or more contemporary white supremacist nostalgia for Southern Rhodesia and apartheid regimes.

In the early 1990s, as South African apartheid was crumbling, Robin Bloch finished an unpublished dissertation at UCLA (he said it remained unpublished because there were more interesting things to do in organizing against apartheid). In this work he argues for a reading of the suburban boom through the 1970s and 1980s as the shift of the central city from the core to the periphery (Bloch 1994). I only bring this up because it centers the suburbs in the story of Detroit as a site to examine in the understanding of the region. But it also makes the rhetorical construction of the frontier captured in *Beautiful Wasteland* operate in multiple registers and meanings of the word. Detroit becomes the edge of the city. Detroit becomes the site of territorial demarcation with border skirmishes and unstable market relations. Detroit becomes a *terra incognita*–an unknown, unexplored land transformed through racial containment and economic violence. As Lynda Schneekloth argued over 20 years ago in her essay "The Frontier is our Home" (1996), it is not the settler, but those in the metropolis that romanticize life on the edge. The frontier is a place nearly always written about from outside. This is where Kinney's analysis is strongest, contextualizing the image of the city and the work of remaking it as a postindustrial frontier in the imagination of those outside the city–in Southern California where she began this project or in the New York editorial offices of *Time Magazine* where decisions were made to embed reporters in Detroit and the subsequent material they produced critiqued throughout the book.

The suburbs also loom large in Kinney's personal narrative appearing throughout the book and in the snippets of biography we are offered on the documentary filmmakers trawling Detroit at the deepest points of the last crisis. Kinney's own experience in relation to the city, as both insider, physically present, and as outsider, a Korean adoptee growing up there, allows for a perspective that reads the contours of racial division in the city with particular clarity. But the documentarians whose films and press interviews she analyzes clearly cannot see the racial privilege of their position. These subjects use their

suburban roots as both claims to an authentic voice or understanding of the region while simultaneously reproducing the trope of the bootstrapping entrepreneur. Kinney carefully works through the lingering focus of these films on individual's black bodies and the condition of the city often centered in the same frame. The long shots of empty lots in television shows ostensibly about food to illustrate how the physical conditions of the city are continually linked to its residents despite the liberal rhetoric of the filmmakers and television producers about opportunity and social justice. In her examination of the dissonance of the image and the rhetoric, Kinney turns our attention to the fallacy of poverty as an individual rather than social issue. It is here that the argument comes closest to breaking the division between producer and subject and illustrating the relational production of decline.

The minimal number of Detroiters, or actual Detroit residents, is the most striking absence in *Beautiful Wasteland*. A few people appear in an early chapter examining the ways race is both addressed and erased in message board exchanges about housing conditions, but these voices do not appear again except through their representation in other media. It is a distance that limits the agency of those living in the city. Kinney offers an incisive critique of a cultural producer's choices, but the editing choices of that producer are left to stand in as the voice of residents. This seems more generative of the discipline and material than author intent, but much like the representations of Detroit under analysis, a meta analysis of the work might engage how this narrative of the frontier is challenged or complicated by, as the acolytes of the Boggs Center (a center for activists founded by the late James and Grace Lee Boggs on Detroit's east side) are so fond of saying, "indigenous Detroiters". It is the challenge of examining the history of a population under siege–one actively being displaced in the tumult of state led gentrification in ten square miles of the city while many others are being expelled in the remaining 130 square miles through displacement without gentrification. It is not only a

narrative of the frontier, but also the physical production of prairies, vacancies, and the actual making of the blank slate so often imagined by the planning professionals and policy consultants contracted to offer another rendering of the beautiful wasteland.

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Joshua Akers
Social Sciences Department
University of Michigan-Dearborn
jmakers@umich.edu

May 2017