

*Book Review Symposium*

**Brandi Thompson Summers**, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5401-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4696-5400-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4696-5402-7 (ebook)

*Black in Place* provides a powerful contribution to Black geographies and geographies of gentrification. Grounded in an insightful analysis of the transformation of an historic Black commercial corridor in Washington, DC, Brandi Thompson Summers develops an analytical framework to more fully comprehend the aestheticization of Blackness under regimes of contemporary capitalism. The centerpiece of her analysis is “Black aesthetic emplacement”, which frames Blackness as an infrastructure of gentrification, one principally concerned with controlling, defining, and naming space for the benefit of white people (p.22). This concept extends pre-existing scholarship, which recognizes the ways racial capitalism requires Blackness to be productive, to consider the ways that, through aestheticization, Blackness has been rendered productive for capital without the presence of Black people. Centered on DC’s H Street corridor, the book traces the ways Blackness is operationalized to fortify public order, organize landscapes, and foster capital, all while neoliberal market forces push Black people out of the city.

Through the arc of H Street’s development, Summers teases out how struggles against state repression are ultimately struggles over Black space. Indeed, the uprisings that erupted within many majority-Black cities in the summer of 1968 drew upon resonant experiences of Black urban life. Defined by segregation, high unemployment, and disproportionate incarceration rates, on the one hand, and prolific music, food culture, politics, and play, on the other, Summers uses the term “chocolate cities” to link these urban geographies to the political and cultural imaginations of the civil rights and Black Power periods (p.xii). In other words, these cities had in many ways become Black colonies within the United States. While Summers’ analysis focuses on the specificity of government and

corporate abandonment in Washington, DC, she largely eschews engagement with the parallel processes in other chocolate cities within the US and how these uprisings drew practical and imaginative inspiration from the wave of colonial independence movements around the world. From this perspective, I contend that the uprising in “riot-proof” DC, which led to the most physical destruction of any city in the US, demonstrates how struggles over Black space may ultimately be struggles over state and corporate hegemony.

In this broader context, the DC uprising was a fundamentally transformative event, illustrating a global crisis for a political economy predicated on the ability to contain Black life within Black space. In response, the federal government, like many other imperial powers, began to adopt neoliberal logics of governance which linked the recovery of the H Street corridor directly to the machinations of the market. This concretely manifested in zoning ordinances, increased policing, and (dis)investment practices that re-entrenched state and corporate control of the corridor and led to the rapid devaluation of the neighborhood. This devaluation initiated a feedback loop that reified Black urban space as violent, aberrant, and disordered in the public consciousness. As Summers notes, “the modern, postindustrial city requires ruin to justify the imposition of order” (p.62). Under regimes of neoliberalism, this order arrives in the form of private investment and a law and order politics intended to reorganize the neighborhood to enable the continued extraction of profit. By putting this reorganization within a context of growing Black revolutionary culture in the United States and abroad, I think Summers’ analysis can be extended to illustrate how neoliberalism also works to disrupt the networks of radical Black and working-class social, spatial, and political power that had developed in chocolate cities.

These disruptions, and the gentrification that followed, illustrate the ways anti-Blackness is deeply embedded within market processes. Insightfully, Summers articulates these processes as a set of interlocking institutions that reinscribe hegemonic notions of what can be commodified and sold. Though racial capitalism was constructed on the exploitation of Black life and Black space, the racial liberalism inherent in neoliberal logics of development reincorporate both into the market on new terms – developing mechanisms to profit from the affect and aesthetics of Blackness while disposing of Black

people. This turn to aesthetics was essential for the continued hegemonic control of chocolate cities, enabling wealth extraction from Black space while systematically dismantling and co-opting the radical Black political power inherent in dense Black geographies. Thus, when non-Black people begin to move to the city and the land begins to regain exchange value, municipal commercial revitalization programs place H Street into a diversity discourse that makes Blackness one of many inflections, serving to enhance prospects of development *and* depoliticize the corridor as a site of radical rupture. Put another way, as the spatial aesthetic of Blackness becomes productive for capital it is immediately put to work generating profit, while seemingly more generously incorporated into the state apparatus as a way to control a revolutionary spatial imaginary. This manifests in every mayoral administration from Mayor Marion Barry's focus on Black entrepreneurship in 1977 through Muriel Bowser's redevelopment of the Southwest Waterfront. Thought through this way, *Black aesthetic emplacement* helps explain both the displacement of working-class Black people in DC, and the co-optation of Black politics for neoliberal ends that Summers notes throughout the book.

A helpful intervention, this framework provides a foundation for understanding the stakes of our current post-riot moment, which has surfaced the contradictions of Black life under the violence of neoliberal governance. As elected officials and corporate champions from DC to Detroit paint "Black Lives Matter" on city streets, an eviction crisis and disproportionate rates of COVID-19 illustrate a different material reality for their Black residents. More than that, the radical political potential from the 2020 protests has been largely funneled into calls to support diversity in the political class and the valorization of an idealized Black past and present that elides the state repression and continued abandonment of Black people. A neoliberal approach to politics, this process of deradicalization recalls one of the business owner interlocutors of *Black in Place*, Anwar Saleem. Though his intention may be noble, Saleem embodies the ideal neoliberal subjectivity in his desire to monetize Black history while attempting to increase investment in the corridor, "thereby defining the successes and failures of Black businesses according to the logic of the market" (p.100). His acquiescence to the neoliberal hegemonic order not only functions to contain the Black businesses and people by subjecting them to the whims of

a market predicated on Black exploitation, but it also serves to contain the possibilities of Black politics and Black life.

In her conclusion, Summers asks “What world do these uprisings and movements allow us to imagine?” (p.176). Though she approaches an engagement with these possibilities, her analysis never explicitly engages with the revolutionary Black political organizing that persisted through decades of devaluation and the ongoing gentrification of the corridor. Her conception of Black aesthetic emplacement clarifies the neoliberal mechanisms that perpetually hinder the development of a Black spatial imaginary, but she leaves an examination of this spatial imaginary relatively unexplored. From this vantage, future lines of inquiry might explore how organizers and activists re-imagine Black space *through* the struggle to end neoliberal exploitation and the aestheticization of Blackness. Perhaps this may even gesture toward the limitations of local Black spatial imaginaries that do not engage with the global regimes of racial capitalism that keep Black people locked into and out of space. Though this research would need to navigate the ongoing commodification of Black struggle, these attempts at Black aesthetic reclamation may prove fertile ground for understanding the next chapter for the post-chocolate city.

In the same way Black lives have always mattered for the development of the modern world, the spatial aesthetics of Blackness now matter for the post-chocolate city: as a commodity to be exchanged on the market. The malleability of Summers’ framework provides a platform to consider not just the ways Blackness is deployed to raise capital in cities, but in suburbs, online, and any location where Blackness leaves an aesthetic imprint. As an artful exploration of the value of Blackness to a commercial corridor in the US capital, *Black in Place* offers critical engagement with the ever-evolving forces attempting to extract value from Black life and shape Black futures.

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