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ANTIPODE

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)

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand writes, "a city is not a place of origins. It is a place of transmigrations and transmogrifications. Cities collect people, stray and lost and deliberate arrivants. Origins are rehabilitated and rebuilt here" (2001: 62). She is writing about how the city changes people, no matter where they come from. In a (multicultural) city, "a torturer in Chile becomes a taxi driver, an English thief becomes a stock hawker, an Eritrean warlord becomes a bicycle courier" (ibid.). In this way, cities collect but they also rewrite narratives about who people are and what they can do. Cities quite literally change lives.

If cities collect people and rehabilitate their origins, is it possible that cities do the same with neighborhoods and streets, reimagining what they were, who they are for, and what they can and will be? Brandi Thompson Summers' *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* addresses this question. In critical analyses of how "diversity" and "authenticity" (which are simultaneously politically charged and presumed neutral) are deployed, Summers explores how cities capitalize on the transmigrations and transmogrifications that Dionne Brand writes of – not to improve the lives of all inhabitants but to choreograph a different script for moving, living, and being in the city. Using Washington, DC's H Street corridor as a site of exploration, Summers walks us through how H Street's origins – particularly those related to Blackness – are contested, sanitized, and reimagined in efforts to "revitalize" it. While there are many noteworthy ways in which Summers teaches us about how these contestations and reimaginings occur and impact both the commercial corridor and long-time Black residents, I will comment on three.

In the first chapter, "Capital Reinvestment: Riot, Renewal, and the Rise of a Black Ghetto", Summers recounts the history of H Street vis-à-vis the 1968 uprisings and several policy failures that primed H Street for the type of gentrification that is occurring today. In it, she describes not only the material losses that were attributed to the uprisings but also the association of Blackness with deviance and unruliness, therefore making H Street a risky investment from the city's point of view. This sentiment has been echoed across space and time and in other capacities. In 1967, the cover of *Food Topics*, a leading supermarket trade magazine, featured two photographs. The top photograph shows a seemingly normal day with a police car driving down a commercial corridor in the foreground. The bottom photo shows flames reflected in a storefront's window. It bears the caption "The Inner City…The Riots…". Inside, articles about Detroit, Newark, and Watts reflect on what is to become of "inner cities" after the riots. Who would want to rebuild? Who would invest? Over 50 years later, *Black in Place* offers us answers: few will invest immediately but long-time (Black) businesses will continue to try to provide for neighborhood residents despite city neglect. Years later, citing its own neglect and disinvestment, the city will address its previous sins without offering repair; its patience will be rewarded with public-private partnerships that "clean up" what it helped destroy through both direct and benign neglect. Thus, part of the experience of the city and one's experience in the city is one of waiting. For residents, as Summers points out, there is a documented history of waiting for better, adequate services. For the city, there is the waiting for a prime time to invest in H Street's (re)development. What binds these two forms of waiting is a knowing that some bodies, some spaces, and some things will not make it to the other side of it.

A second contribution *Black in Place* makes is its attention to the ways restaurants and food get taken up in the reimagining of and fight for city space. This shines especially in how Summers writes about Cluck-U, a Black-owned restaurant that opened on H Street in 2006. When it opened, the restaurant garnered pushback from the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission who argued that "the restaurant was simply another fast-food establishment and was unwelcome along a corridor that was making great strides to raise its standards and transition

from 'a strip trying to shed its bedraggled past' to become 'a gleaming urban paradise'" (p.124). Despite offering chinaware and tableware, Cluck-U did not seemingly fit the standards of the "new" H Street, likely because of the denigrative associations of fried chicken with Blackness that, as Psyche Williams-Forson (2006) argues, very rarely take into account the stories Black people have to tell about ourselves. Thus, the owner's personal history with H Street (his grandparents lived nearby) mattered little, because the restaurant did not fit the burgeoning narrative of an H Street that was distancing itself from Blackness. It is the contradictions here – the construction of H Street as an authentic, diverse space that embraces history while actively opposing a Black-owned restaurant that attempts to honor the owner's connection to the area – that shine through in Summers' writing.

Lastly, *Black in Place* asks us to reconsider what gentrification processes mean for how we think about belonging and home. Though Summers is writing about the impact commercial transformation has on H Street's Black residents – past and present – I am struck by the absence of the word "home" throughout the text. I do not understand this to be an error or fault. Instead, in its scarce usage, Summers offers a quiet, implicit invitation to consider one of the central thrusts of the book: that developers, city officials, and gentrifiers employ nostalgia, or a longing for a "home" that no longer or never existed (p.90), to recast H Street as a "vibrant" area with a multicultural past and present. But for whom? As Summers shows, shifting notions of what is "cool" alongside the movement of capital and (white) people create conditions in which Black space is constantly surveilled, threatened, and at risk of being erased. *Black in Place* searingly documents and demonstrates that "Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes" (Brand 2001: 25). How does one make home in the middle of a haunting? *Black in Place* suggests that even if it is possible, it is always-already a fraught process.

Black in Place is essentially about commercial gentrification and the ways diversity, authenticity, and Blackness get deployed in the spatial transformations of H Street in Washington, DC. In her specificity, Summers writes a book that avoids overgeneralizations. Yet,

Black in Place also invites us to consider what H Street teaches us about transformations happening in cities all around the world. The book is an interrogation of what cities do – “erase history or reinterpret it” (Brand 2001: 78) – and who and what they are willing to sacrifice in the process of *becoming*.

References

Brand D (2001) *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage

Williams-Forson P A (2006) *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

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