

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)

My first thought when I opened the pages of *Black in Place* in the fall of 2019 was *man, I wish I'd had these words to lean on when I was writing my dissertation*. Dr. Brandi Thompson Summers' book is a profound contribution to urban studies, offering up a language to understand the particular relationship between Blackness, capital, and urban space in the United States. This text contributes to urban genealogies of how profit has been made through the dispossession of Black peoples throughout US history, laying bare the ways that the commodification of Black culture is intricately linked to the production of space within conditions of racial capitalism.

In her thorough telling of how Washington, DC has been developed and re-developed over the past century, Summers reveals the ways that Black presence in DC has been managed so as to produce capital, first through exclusion and enclosure, and now through gentrification and racial banishment. What makes Summers' text different from previous studies of urban dispossession is how she narrows the lens to the insidious ways that Blackness is desired and commodified in this current cultural moment, and how this commodification explicitly fuels the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Black residents in DC. Weaving work on nostalgia and authenticity from studies of gentrification, and linking these to theories of the white spatial imaginary, Summers develops the concept of Black aesthetic emplacement, articulating the way that Blackness functions as an aesthetic infrastructure that is employed and made desirable within neoliberal renderings of urban space. Black aesthetic emplacement names the perverse fetishization of Blackness that is visible in so many urban redevelopment projects. Summers breaks down these phenomena explicitly, illustrating how the gentrifier's desire to live in

proximity to Blackness is coupled with the active re-development of a neighborhood so as to “control, define, and name space for the benefit of white people” (p.22).

Perhaps aligned with the parallels Summers began to draw between DC and her hometown of Oakland, California in the conclusion, I felt myself reading Oakland through the lens of Black aesthetic emplacement throughout. In her discussion of Swampoodle Park and how the NE corridor was being redeveloped according to nostalgic white imaginaries of the city’s past, I was struck by how similar this story felt to the re-emergence of the Temescal neighborhood in North Oakland, becoming a neighborhood emblematic of Oakland’s sudden rise as a “destination” on travel lists beginning in the early 2010s (Cushing 2012). But Temescal’s appearance as an “epicenter” of Oakland’s “art scene” on particular cultural registers has not only obfuscated the long presence of Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian creative geographies in Oakland, but also fueled a sharp increase of housing prices in North Oakland that has coincided with a sharp loss of the city’s Black population.

Temescal has been positioned as a site representing Oakland’s cultural “revitalization” (Scott 2012), and the creative-city-hued gentrification of the neighborhood has been fueled by particular white spatial imaginaries that produce an “active erasure of the space’s most recent history, going back to a time before Black people ‘destroyed’ the neighborhood”(p.118). Popular revivals of Temescal’s history as an Italian immigrant neighborhood emerged in the late 1990s, largely driven by local historian and Temescal resident, Jeff Norman, who produced a series of documentary films, local historical photo exhibitions, and a 2006 text titled “Temescal Legacies”, which document the neighborhood’s historical geographies. The 1998 documentary, “Where We Live: Stories from Temescal”, features 19 elder Temescal residents reflecting on their time in the neighborhood, with the predominantly white Italian narrators recounting the neighborhood’s past as a “great era” back when “we were one big family” and “you could walk the streets at night” (Norman 1998). After 30 minutes of recounting, the documentary reflects on “changing times”, with white Italian residents noting how the neighborhood began to transition when the banks began to leave, when Highway 24 was built, and – with “colorblind” racist coded

language (Bonilla-Silva 2006) – when “there was an element that moved in” and people “got a little bit uncomfortable, you know what I mean” (Norman 1998).

I engage with this documentary here for it produces and romanticizes a particular historical imaginary of Temescal, which as Summers theorizes in detail, justifies the “lingering presence” of particular white ethnic claims to place, a “form of past-making [that] re-centers whiteness by marking territory” (p.118). North Oakland’s Black presence is nearly absent in the documentary, other than three Black Temescal residents whose narratives are hardly given any screen time, often only allowed snippets of narrative that reference how they were not allowed access to many of the businesses along Telegraph Avenue, which the film describes in detail, or how their white neighbors thought that when they moved into Temescal “it was going to be loud music” and “clothes hanging everywhere”. Blackness in this documentary is peripheral, and the 30 year period when Oakland was a Black majority city from 1960 to 1990 is alluded to only as a time when “things got bad” and white residents moved to suburban parts of the Bay Area. Where Blackness does enter the frame is via the lone Black homeowners depicted in the film who are given very little screen time, and one Black Eritrean resident who founded Asmara Restaurant on Telegraph Avenue in 1985 (“people were scared to come here and dine”), and reinforces narratives of how “both crime and fear came to be explicitly linked to Black[ness]” (p.127).

The film concludes with residents reflecting on how the “infusion of new residents” suggests that the neighborhood is “making a comeback”, with “people coming in who are committed to transforming what was once a great neighborhood once again into a great neighborhood” (Norman 1998). The white spatial imaginary frames the documentary, drawing a clear parallel between the neighborhood’s period of white Italian presence and bookending it with the positive tone it ends on discussing incoming residents. As Summers describes, “cities are able to evoke authentic narratives of place if they effectively create the experience of origins” (p.117) and “‘social homesteaders’, gentrifiers who want to maintain a piece of the past as representing the social or cultural heyday of the neighborhood, [play a role in] ... negotiation over what spaces, structures, and people have value” (p.116). Norman’s production of historical

texts of Temescal in the 1990s-2010s reflect broader narratives that influenced the “revitalization” of the neighborhood, evoking an imaginary of an “authentic” Temescal that offered a white cultural logic that accompanied the neighborhood’s redevelopment.

The “revival” of Temescal from the late 1990s onward has drastically shifted the commercial district along Telegraph Avenue, the epicenter of what is often being referred to in cultural mentions of Temescal. As Nicole Montojo and Beki McElvain (2015) document in depth in their case study on North Oakland, the “Temescal/Telegraph commercial corridor” has seen significant change since the early 2000s, with 49% of businesses turning over between 2007 and 2014. The researchers note that the new businesses appear to “cater to a new local demographic – one that differs from the clientele of replaced businesses. For example, several African/African American hair salons and barber shops are among the replaced businesses, which reflects the decline in African American residents throughout the MacArthur Area” (Montojo and McElvain 2015: 67). As Summers outlines in detail in her discussion of the H Street corridor, this commercial displacement is part and parcel of larger patterns of displacement that have been dispossessing low-income Black residents in the residential blocks that surround Telegraph Avenue. Just adjacent to the Temescal/Telegraph corridor, on the opposite side of Highway 24 and the BART train tracks, the Longfellow neighborhood of Oakland lost 400 Black households (a 30% decrease) between 2000 and 2015, more than any other neighborhood in Alameda County during this same period (UC Berkeley Urban Displacement Project 2018: 4). This mass displacement of low-income Black residents is fueled by multiple layers of dispossession that have targeted North Oakland, including the high rates of evictions and foreclosures between 2005 and 2015 (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2016), the implementation of the North Oakland gang injunction in 2010 (Ramírez 2020a), as well as the “revival” of the Temescal/Telegraph commercial corridor and subsequent gentrification of the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

All this is to say that it is not the “revitalization” of the Temescal corridor alone that has provoked the displacement of Black households in North Oakland, but as Summers so clearly lays out, the evoking of nostalgia to “re-brand” neighborhoods and make them more palpable to

white residents is a violent erasure of Black geographies and cultural life. As with the H Street corridor and Temescal, the re-telling of a neighborhood's history, Summers writes, "positions it as an ethnically and racially diverse space that was momentarily decimated by an overwhelming wave of Black degeneracy. In other words, Blackness does not represent the 'truth' of the area; instead, Black bodies are woven into the diverse fabric of the space ... it is the discursive production of a nostalgic multicultural past that regulates Blackness in this urban space" (p.92). This temporal fragmentation is premised upon white supremacist renderings of urban space that clutch onto "multicultural" narratives so as to render illegible Black spatial imaginaries of Oakland. Efforts to frame Temescal's new "renaissance" as a return to white multicultural pasts naturalize the violence of redevelopment, gentrification, and other forms of racialized dispossession. These white supremacist renderings of North Oakland assert dominance over Black claims to space, imposing historical framings that privilege white immigrant presence as the purveyors of the original "truths" of the city, all the while perpetuating forms of neoliberal and settler colonial urbanism.

I name settler colonial urbanism here, for the white spatial imaginary evoked by the "revitalizing" of places like H Street and Temescal draws upon particular moments in the settler colonial histories of these cities, when white ethnic populations "founded" particular neighborhoods. In the case of Temescal, what is striking about the name being taken up as representative of a particular white imaginary of place is the etymology of the name itself. In front of Oakland Fire Station No. 8, a half block from the main intersection of the Temescal/Telegraph corridor at Telegraph and 51st Street, a plaque titled "How Temescal Got Its Name" reads:

The word temescal, derived from the Aztec word for "sweat house", was used by Spanish colonists to describe the hut-like structures built by Indigenous peoples for cleaning and ritual practices. Legend has it that the first Spaniards to have explored this area named Temescal Creek after a sweat house that stood nearby. Another theory is that the creek

was named for the temescal erected on its bank by Huchiun [sic] Ohlone retainers on Vincente Peralta's rancho. Whatever its origin, the name stuck, for on an 1840 map we find Temescal Creek identified as the "Arroyo de Temescal o Los Juchiynues".¹

The name Temescal carries with it the very presence of the Ohlone peoples on this land, despite the crude Spanish colonial nomenclature, Arroyo de Temescal translates to Temescal Creek, referencing the structures Huichin Ohlone peoples built alongside the creek that runs through this land. Temescal, as the plaque references, is a Nahuatl word for sweat lodge, the Spanish settlers thus transferring their colonial interpretations of one Indigenous peoples on this continent to another. Los Juchiynues, the latter reference on the map, is the literal Spanish translation of the Huichin peoples, mapped by colonizers in 1840 – their name on their lands. The decision to name this plot of land on Vincente Peralta's rancho "Temescal" instead of "Juchiynues" or Huichin was the first layer of colonial naming that occurred on Huichin lands, this erasure mirroring the genocide that the Ohlone peoples faced as the Spanish and Mexican ranchos were parceled.

The re-emergence of the neighborhood Temescal upholds a white settler imaginary of place that is temporally fixed in a moment *after* the Ohlone peoples were colonized three times over by the Spanish, Mexicans, and US states, and *before* the neighborhood was "momentarily decimated by an overwhelming Black degeneracy" (p.92). This is visible in Norman's revival of Temescal "legacies", which work to render Blackness as the exception, and to frame the place's origin story within a moment of white settlement, and the plaque above frames Huichin Ohlone peoples as a presence peripheral to the founding of the city itself. The revitalization of Temescal is tied to white imaginaries that fixate on a particular moment in which white American settlers solidified their settlement on Ohlone lands as Oakland the city was formed. As the plaque flippantly dismisses, "whatever its origin", "Temescal" now signifies a particular white

¹ See "Temescal", Oakland Wiki; <https://localwiki.org/oakland/Temescal> (last accessed 9 December 2020)

immigrant moment in the place's history, a moment that is drawn in parallel to its current white cultural "renaissance" like two bookends offering up the place's rightful "truths".

Dr. Summer's book *Black in Place* is an instant classic in urban studies, offering a language and an analytic to make sense of the cultural violence that occurs as a neighborhood is redeveloped and how this violence is tied to (anti)Blackness, capital, and race more broadly. Through this discussion of North Oakland, I have employed Summers' analytics, and also offer a means of extending the frame. A consideration of how the urban is also a settler colonial space expands understandings of neoliberal redevelopment and gentrification, pushing urban studies to account for how settler colonial urbanism continues to produce Indigenous erasure and operates in tandem with racial capitalism and white supremacy (Dorries et al. 2019a). By thinking of these processes relationally, and how they structure city space, conceptions of how Black and Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed across space are also brought into relation. Theorizations of settler colonial urbanism (Dorries et al. 2019b) demonstrate how these broader temporal and spatial frames also refuse Indigenous erasure in cities, and complicate notions of the "right" to the city. How might Summers' necessary intervention, making sense of the relationship between Blackness, capital, and urban cultural geographies, be brought into dialogue with settler colonial and Indigenous urbanisms to further trouble naturalized narratives of gentrification? Aligned with Summers' conclusions on Black urban futures (p.176), how might Black and Indigenous geographies offer alternative futures of cities that refuse the violence of gentrifier's "postracial cool" (p.174) and subvert capitalist and settler renderings of the city itself (Ramírez 2020b)? Black and Indigenous creative visions of the urban unsettle the "creative city", at times emerging in forms that cannot be appropriated for profit.

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