

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)

Author's Response

I would like to first thank Jovan Scott Lewis for initiating and organizing this review forum, and my critics, Margaret Ramírez, Ashanté Reese, and Juleon Robinson for their thoughtful and generous reviews of *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*. While the forum was first planned as an author-meets-critics session at the 2020 annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in Denver, the unexpected arrival and devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic rendered our plans obsolete. That being said, I am especially grateful for the time my reviewers spent sitting and thinking with the book in the midst of our seemingly apocalyptic conditions.

When I set out to write *Black in Place*, I wanted to make Blackness legible to social science. In other words, I sought to explore the complexity of Blackness and its relationship to the organization of cities, rather than using Blackness as a variable to explain behavior. I called on social scientists and humanities scholars to grapple with how multiple and interlocking representations of Blackness have all replaced, to some degree, Blackness as servitude, Blackness as inferiority, even as white power remains firmly in place. As a feature of our post-civil rights conjuncture, power, for its own legitimacy, requires at least anodyne representations of Blackness. I wanted to know how and why Blackness still (or perhaps doesn't) matter in a city that has built its social and political identity on Blackness; a city where the Black population was

shrinking as quickly as the days passed. My questions were not simply about the significance of race. Growing up in one of California's few "Black cities", race, in particular, had been firmly planted in my mind as significant to the political, economic, cultural organization of cities. I was familiar with the designation of Blackness as peripheral to the city, or as Ramírez points out in her review, the Blackness of the city is recognized as the temporal period when "things got bad". Coming to DC, however, I realized the importance of Blackness on a different scale.

Race is a slippery and convoluted term, one that is often studied by virtue of its effects – like the impact of racism on structural inequalities. Because of its slipperiness, race becomes more and more challenging to measure in everyday life. *Black in Place* investigates how Blackness, as an instrument of race, has operated within the context of historical and contemporary contestations over Black place and space. My overall interest continues to be the complex and varied struggles that are taking place over the meaning of Blackness. My conceptual engagement with Blackness stems from my acknowledgement of the formulaic confounding of race matters in the US with Blackness. Moreover, I agree with Sharon Holland's (2012: 4) astute observation that "when we see and say 'race', regardless of how much we intend to understand race as being had by everyone, our examples of racial being and racist targets are often grounded in *black matter(s)*". Conceding the historical ties between race and Blackness, this routine provided me with an opportunity to consider how something as laden with politics as urban development can, through a series of well-manicured projections of Blackness, take on the appearance of race neutrality.

In *Black in Place* I balance "positive" connotations of Blackness with the obliterating realities of ongoing displacement. Even though displacement is a central axis of both academic and popular treatments of gentrification, I hoped to also unpack the dialectic of Black banishment and incorporation; recognizing the ways that exclusion operates in the form of constrained options. My accounting of the productivity and viability of Blackness, brought me to

Black aesthetic emplacement as the shortest means to incorporate a Black face, body, or voice in order to indemnify the state, planners, and developers from criticism. Throughout my writing of the book, I remained mindful of how AbdouMaliq Simone (2017) surmised that the Black city is both an anachronism and the proper place for the Black resident. In my excavation of capital unmaking the “Chocolate City”, I offer an analytic lens through which we can witness and interrogate the current political realities of corporate implicit bias trainings, feckless appeals for police reform, university diversity and antiracist programs, race-based presidential (and vice presidential) appointees, or any of the assorted ways white power remains lightly veiled under specks of color. Even more affirming uses of Blackness tend to be two dimensional, for, as *Black in Place* shows, diversity means the erasure of politics. Blackness in the marketplace needs to be that which “sells”, that which can be easily transacted by the holders of capital. Thus, absent some kind of redistribution of wealth, the bulk of urban America’s investors, landlords, and consumers will continue to be white.

Turning to my reviewers, I appreciate that Ramírez not only points to the ways that anti-Blackness structures city space, but she makes more explicit how a commitment to diversity and multiculturalism underwrite the perpetuation of the anti-Black city. Her thoughtful and layered analysis of the rebranding of the Temescal neighborhood in Oakland highlights the ways that white settler colonialism is remarked upon so casually, while the impulse to identify the Blackening of urban space as degenerate is, how Ramírez describes it, an “exception”. In many ways, the (re-)narration of Temescal, like Swampoodle Park in Washington, DC, demonstrates how archives understood as textual and visual flourish through their enactment in space. Both demonstrate the ease with which certain spatial narratives feed into the neoliberal aestheticization of space, enabling us to outline the political economy of such historical claims as grounds for development beholden to white cultural logics. I appreciate her engagement with the text as she talks about the “revitalization” of Temescal, more specifically how she weaves my

central analytic, Black aesthetic emplacement, through her discussion of the neighborhood's violent erasure of Black cultural geographies in favor of a white settler colonial logic. As Katherine McKittrick (2006: 9) reminds us, traditional geographies “*require* black displacement, black placelessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays ‘in place’”. In the case of Oakland’s Temescal neighborhood, and in Washington, DC, rebranding strategies for white consumers make the push for “revitalization” appear less violent, since calls for diversity hide the erasure of Black life in abstract representations of a vibrant city.

It is from this emphasis on erasure that I want to connect to the points Reese raises about the cultural logics of authenticity. Reese calls attention to the intricate choreography of city life, and offers a provocative reading of the gentrified Black city as a space of waiting; a place where patience is rewarded with neoliberal urban strategies like public-private partnerships. This space of waiting is more than undervaluing, it is also an active unnoticed, *unseeing* in favor of market demands. For the book, I did not want to focus on how rent-gaps open and close through an ethereal, obscure process, or the ways that the many sufferings that accompany gentrification are described as intentional – like evictions and price gouging. Gentrification, I believe, is a process that is shaped by foreclosed imaginations and the social reinvention of Black space. Instead, I write about the material changes and conditions that interact with institutions, racial conflict, and processes of gentrification to document how these consequences remain deeply structural. Like redevelopment grants that exclude Black-owned barber shops and beauty salons accelerate the presence of “wellness centers” (a well-worn and favorite form of urban, white entrepreneurship), despite these Black businesses continuing to provide for neighborhood residents through continuing neglect, as Reese highlights in her commentary. Even the way people imagine a “Black” space has been structured – predetermined – by interlocking discourses that do not consider diverse or diffuse expressions of Blackness as productive, safe, necessary, or profitable.

Our very neighborhoods, in their design and state management, ultimately reflect those unspoken assumptions.

Finally, I take seriously Robinson's critique that I leave an analysis of a radical Black spatial imaginary virtually unexplored. I did however offer an account of the Black empowerment rhetoric and practices that began to surface in the years leading up to the 1968 revolution. In particular, I elucidate the ways that Black activists, architects, business owners, and residents alike articulated their desire for full-scale change. I argue that they proposed the development of a Black sense of place (McKittrick 2011) – a city that fostered community and communal survival. Nevertheless, in response to Robinson's proposed extension of the book to include an exploration of how neoliberalism disrupted Black radical power developed within Chocolate Cities, I came to discover the myriad ways neoliberal urbanism incorporated a sanitized rendering of Black radical politics to signal performative, empty aesthetic signifiers ("diversity and inclusion") in the planning and development of DC. To that end, the radical elements of the civil rights and Black Power movements used in the interest of urban restructuring got rerouted into Nixonian Black capitalism, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola (Chatelain 2020). This strategic pivot foreclosed a radical future that became more banal and benign, focused primarily on marketing, diversity and inclusion, not radical restructuring.

As I reflect back on the present day, it is hard not to pause and think deeply about this period in our history; the breadth and scale of the 2020 uprisings ("Black Spring") as well as the architecture of activism that has been developed and deployed by various coalitions who center the value of Black life. The 2020 uprisings did not take place in a vacuum. These actions were a response to ongoing inequalities and power dynamics that get played out in public space as the street becomes increasingly privatized and militarized as police are brought in to protect property at all costs. People filled the streets of all 50 states, protesting structural racism, police brutality, and extra-judicial murder by the state in the midst of a deadly global pandemic. Black people

realized the dangers of standing in close proximity with others, but also knew the dangers associated with the disproportionate transmission of COVID-19 to Black, Brown and Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, people were and still are mad, they are tired, and frustrated by a lack of clear leadership and direction from their federal, state, and local leaders. It has become even clearer that the in-placeness of Black labor is keeping white Americans alive while extinguishing Black life at the same time. Returning to Ramírez's question about how Black and Indigenous geographies could unsettle the smart and "creative" city, I think a bigger task is determining how to disrupt the perennial paradox that both Black and Indigenous people face: to be designated as both essential and unworthy at the same time.

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