
Alesia Montgomery’s *Greening the Black Urban Regime* connects the contemporary project of “greening” to the continuing processes of racial capitalism. Through the eloquent prose and rigorous scholarship befitting a self-described “ethnographer with one foot in the social sciences the other in the storytelling craft of the griot” (p.15), Montgomery seamlessly weaves together interdisciplinary scholarship with what she calls “folk accounts”. The central aim of the book is to situate the greening of the historically black urban regime as a continuation of ongoing cycles of minoritization. Montgomery defines “urban greening” as “revitalizing old industrial cities with ecofriendly infrastructure, industries, and amenities” (p.21). More than simply one policy or plan, Montgomery’s research sheds light on how various efforts to “green” the city operate hand-in-hand. For then-Mayor David Bing, the City of Detroit, and billionaire developers alike, “[u]rban greening was a colorblind proposal that many people considered good (morally, aesthetically, financially)” (p.106). Montgomery meticulously examines Bing’s efforts to sell the city the idea in public speeches and community meetings beginning in 2010 by tracking the roll out of his controversial “rightsizing” proposal “to both battle blighted neighborhoods and create jobs”(p.103), which many residents viewed as the latest form of forced removal. As the city markets “greening” on a citywide scale, Montgomery shows how a shifting emphasis on green development – like urban parks, community gardens, organic cafes, and farmers markets – can be wielded as a tool of eviction, forcing the removal of longtime black elders from a Section 8 building along Capitol Park, a location that is deemed desirable for green development. By historicizing the shifting landscape of 2010s Detroit within larger cycles of racial capitalism, Montgomery reveals the ways in which the process of urban greening is derivative of prior projects of segregation and urban renewal.

For Montgomery, the idea of greening itself is not the problem, as she highlights the ways in which responsible stewardship of the land, parks, green space, and fresh food have been
part and continue to be part of the practices of city residents. Montgomery adds to the existing research documenting the work of longtime Detroit activists who have been and continue to be stewards of the land (Quizar 2018; Safransky 2014). By drawing the long history between the work of the historic Housewives’ League of Detroit – a black women’s organization founded in 1930, which “urged black housewives to use their buying power to fight for affordable and healthy food and to help black-owned businesses survive the Great Depression” (p.159) – and the contemporary organizing of people like Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network – which centers neighborhood gardens as “a way to build community, further collective self-determination, and heal spiritually” (p.159) – she amplifies the ways in which black Detroiters enact antiracist critiques of the food system based on black freedom. By showcasing the work of community land stewardship as an act of self-determination alongside developer land grab as an act of capitalist accumulation, Montgomery is able to parse out the ways in which the marketing of the “green city” as amenity marginalizes historically black residents and communities – a reenactment of the same old white supremacist city in new eco-friendly packaging. For Montgomery there is a marked distinction between an environmentally just city and a green city.

Greening a city “cannot solve structural injustices and can do unintended harm; as low-income areas go ‘green’, they attract the affluent, which can drive up rents and displace longtime residents” (p.23). This is the connection to the long system of racial capitalism and the minoritization of black people, even and most devastatingly in what Montgomery defines in Historically Black Urban Regimes (HBURs). The forces of the white supremacist machine are strong and interconnected. Montgomery, echoing the work of activists and scholars of the environmental justice movement, argues that “to save lives, it is not enough to reduce carbon; we also must end threats to dignity and freedom” (p.28). Montgomery herein sheds light on how, even as Detroit was receiving accolades in the media for its “come-back” and its “new green city plans made through public-private partnership” (p. 24), the city was facing down emergency management, bankruptcy, and the human rights crisis of water shutoffs. She dives deep to look at structural- and organizational-level failures that led Detroit to crisis, and amplifies those that
have long been on the ground fighting for self-determination and the right to dignity and freedom. By revealing the contemporary “power constellations” influencing the growing (or shrinking) of cities today, she draws for us the long cycle of disinvestment, reinvestment, community organizing, and activist practices that have intersected and intertwined in the modern HBUR.

Montgomery focuses specifically on the narratives of the changing downtown core of what she defines as a historical black urban regime (HBUR), “a US City that by 1990 (1) had elected its first black mayor, (2) had roughly 40 percent or more black residents – a percentage large enough to sway local elections, and (3) had a total population over one hundred thousand” (p.16). By focusing on cities that are majority black with downtown cores that are becoming increasingly white, Montgomery carefully points out that although she is studying the changing city, her project is not about gentrification in and of itself. Rather, her aim is to analyze the process of minoritization. And while gentrification is one symptom of minoritization, to focus on gentrification in and of itself is to lose the forest for the trees. Her intention here is to show the ways that the urban regime has been shaped and continues to be shaped by processes of minoritization. Montgomery argues that, “as capital and the white middle class return to the core of central cities, minoritization decapitates the black urban regime and disciplines black residents for our supposed deficiencies in morals and intelligence” (p.69). It is not new, and greenwashing at this particular time participates in the “justice speak” that continues the processes of minoritization. “The wedding of urban greening to fiscal austerity in HBURs is novel, but minoritization is not new” (ibid.). Montgomery’s research analyzes the particular ways in which minoritization is occurring in HBURs, identifying 15 HBURs in the US, with Detroit the primary example and case study throughout the text. She argues that by taking these 15 cities as a collective we understand what is happening in Detroit as both highly specific and generalizable. For Montgomery, HBURs are linked both to the American struggle for “democracy” that produced genocide and enslavement, and also to a struggle for freedom – the possibility for black self-governance and self-determination. They are part of both, which points to the intertwining
connections. Montgomery’s book analyzes “the (mental | material) structures that shape this struggle as capital and the middle class return to HBURs” (p.249).

Although Montgomery brings in research on other HBURs throughout the country, she centers her study in Detroit, where “the struggle for collective freedom and well-being persists” (p.31). Montgomery writes that “I came to Detroit – the fiercest of the black urban regimes, a city much vilified yet whose ballads became the Soul of communities across the United States – to learn why a century and a half since slavery, five decades since black mayors took office in major US cities, many African Americans remain in crisis, still struggling for spatial agency” (p.18). And we see evidence of this struggle in the coalition building and conversation efforts that Montgomery documents and historicizes in the pages of the book. Greening the Black Urban Regime is a project that bridges disciplines, time, and space to converge in and around the city in the 2010s. And as readers we are brought into the room as Montgomery invites us to sit and listen as she brings together “folk accounts”, scholars, artists, and the ancestors into conversation with one another.

Although not a Detroiter, she calls her perspective that of a “familiar stranger”. Montgomery’s presence on the street and in the room enables her to draw such a vivid portrait of Detroit in the early 2010s, a period of deep transition for the city and the downtown areas that she renders with particular precision. Montgomery inhabits the city as both home and research site from 2010 to 2013 after she is told by one of her Michigan State University students, a Detroiter, “that Detroit had been a victim of ‘drive-by research’ and that I needed to move to the city if I wanted to understand its streets” (p.ix). And in this extended research residency, Montgomery is able to map and record in detail the seasonal cycles of change in the Cass Corridor and along the riverfront at a time when the city itself is in the lead-up to one of its largest upheavals – the State of Michigan’s declaration of a state of emergency in Detroit, its placement under an unelected, state-appointed manager, and the ultimate restructuring into bankruptcy. Although she could not have predicted how momentous the years would be, her record of the meetings, community events, and on-the-ground activism at this time reveal how communities of color organize, survive, and make time for joy even, and especially, in the face
of austerity. Montgomery narrows in on the specific details of each of the people she speaks with – the music teacher, a bicyclist, longtime activists – and as readers we feel as if we too are sharing space and are witnesses to these conversations. Montgomery’s work is a model for not only scholarly inquiry, but also for how to craft and do the work of listening to a city, to your respondents, to the ancestors.

References


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