Book Review Symposium


Author’s reply
Thank you to Joshua Akers for organizing an “Author Meets Critics” session for Beautiful Wasteland at the 2017 AAG. I am grateful to Josh, along with Katherine Hankins, Jessa Loomis, Sara Safransky, and Patrick Vitale for offering such rich and generative critique at the AAG and in their written comments. I am thankful to Antipode for publishing these five reviews and providing me space to respond.

My response is structured around three primary themes that the critiques collectively raised: 1) the role of cultural representations in the production of space and, in particular, the ways in which these representations are framed in ethnic studies and cultural geography; 2) the presumed absence of what my readers term “actual”, “everyday”, or “street” Detroiter, and what is revealed by their desires for the presence of the preceding; and 3) the presumed absence of resistance in my book and what is revealed by my readers’ desires for resistance.

Beautiful Wasteland is an interdisciplinary project of ethnic studies, urban studies, and cultural geography that locates culture as a site to understand how an enduring investment in racialized space created and continues the national myth of rise, decline, and rise. Safransky situates the book at the intersections of these fields and how this location illuminates its focus “on how racial formation takes place within the symbolic economy”. Loomis also sees the interdisciplinary work at hand when she writes: “In excavating the racialized logics and narratives that underpin the rise, decline, and rise again of Detroit, Kinney’s book makes an important step in suturing the whitewashed history of Detroit to the practices, policies, and
people that are so often absent from official and vernacular narratives of the city”. Vitale notes that “[Kinney] is not a geographer or a historian, but she draws deeply from both fields”. The value Vitale finds in this is that *Beautiful Wasteland* counters “thingification”, disallowing one to “look at Detroit and see prairies and abandoned houses, not the flight of capital from the city, institutional racism, or speculative investment”, which recalls Laura Pulido’s assertion that “abandonment is not produced solely by capital flight, but depends upon culture and ideology” (2016: 8).

Yet, as a study rooted in ethnic studies, the primary ambition of *Beautiful Wasteland* is to show how institutional racism remains invisible, and most often to and for those who stand to benefit from it. Rather than “a place-based study” as Hankins situates it, or a Detroit project about race, *Beautiful Wasteland* is a book about race with Detroit as its case study. As I will discuss below, the central work of the book is to analyze how white privilege and systemic racism are operationalized in the cultural narratives we tell. Although *Beautiful Wasteland* is part of what Safransky calls “the growing field of ‘Detroit Studies’”, I urge readers to see its primary work as an exploration of the production and reproduction of “the white spatial imaginary” through cultural narratives of place, an exploration that reveals the ways in which “racism takes place” through interconnections between discursive and material productions of place (Lipsitz 2011).

As the readers of *Antipode* are undoubtedly aware, the disciplinary relationships of geography to ethnic studies and ethnic studies to geography are, as Pulido once suggested, relationships in which we “are largely talking past one another” (2002: 44). In the 15 years since Pulido voiced this concern, there is much work that suggests the disciplines have become more in tune, as Loomis and Safranksy point to, through the theoretical framework of “racial capitalism”. Although I don’t explicitly engage Cedric Robinson’s framing, Loomis and Safransky both read *Beautiful Wasteland* alongside Robinson’s idea that as “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racist directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably
permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (2000: 2). However, as this idea is being widely embraced across the disciplines, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017) cautions that “‘racial capitalism’ can be misunderstood as about what happens when capitalism encounters Black people”; similarly, Laura Pulido warns that “conceptualizing racism as a material/discursive formation that produces differential human value and is embedded in the global landscape, is quite distinct from conceptualizing it as additive” (2016: 7). Rooted in the Black Radical Tradition, “racial capitalism” reveals the logics of systemic racism as an organizing principle of capitalism and colonization (Da Silva 2001; Kelley 2017; Robinson 2002). Beautiful Wasteland engages Jodi Melamed’s (2011) framing of “new racial capitalism” which is key to showing the ways in which official anti-racisms have been adopted into the project of racial capitalism in the post-WWII liberal world order. This frame is important as the case studies of the book show how, through culture, the persistence of institutional, cultural, and systemic racism operates, even in the period after racism is officially “over”.

By analyzing an internet web board alongside the existing historical data about race-based exclusion to home ownership, my point was not to show that certain users are incorrect in their nostalgia, but rather how the invisibility of “whiteness as property” persists both in law and cultural narratives (Harris 1993). Geographers and ethnic studies scholars alike would agree that space is produced materially, in cultural representation, and in practice, its representations and productions should be understood as conjoined (Lefebvre 1991). Yet, as Sherene Razack cautioned, there is risk in doing interdisciplinary work as it necessarily means “a partial and incomplete access to each discipline” (2002: 7). However, since race and place are material and discursive co-productions (Voyles 2015) and racial projects “come into being and are sustained through a wide number of practices” their study demands interdisciplinary inquiry (Razack 2002: 7).

In Beautiful Wasteland I suggest that culture is a place to locate contradictions that arise in both the production of space as well as in the most prominent critique my critics here wage. Akers writes that Beautiful Wasteland, as “a work of cultural studies, […] is an analysis that
primarily dwells on the representation of space rather than its production”. By situating the book as such, however, Akers misses my larger point that culture and cultural representations of space are central to the discursive and material production of space. I see this as a moment that demonstrates geography’s sometimes overdetermined emphasis on the materiality of place. Or, as Katherine McKittrick states, “[g]eography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space ‘just is’, and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive” (2006: xi). Razack further explains the hazard of an overly material focus as it suggests that “the attraction to the concrete is also bound up with the hope that we can pin down something about racialization processes that are directly experienced as spatial” (2002: 5-6). Drawing from McKittrick and Razack I suggest the seduction or attraction of the materiality of space enables the idea of a spatial, rather than systemic fix to racism. A geographic desire for emplacement incorrectly fixes the complexity of the discursive production of space. Therefore, to suggest that dwelling on the representation of space is not part of the production of space is to miss the fundamental work of the book: that the representation of space is central to its production.

But this is a critique that Akers is not alone in waging. Akers, Hankins, and to a lesser extent Loomis seem to be looking for more than “cultural studies”. Indeed, perhaps this is one of the disciplinary differences enacted in these reviews: that the importance of “culture” in the production of material place is not adequately addressed in Beautiful Wasteland. Hankins asks: “What, exactly, is a productive representation of Detroit? What could satisfy Kinney’s desire to see the complexity of race and class and place depicted in popular media?” Such questions miss the point of my critique, which is to suggest that all cultural representations are both productive for what they reveal and challenge about cultural narratives and inadequate to changing systemic inequities. The cultural productions I engage in the book are important because of their banality and ubiquity. The point is that these slices of everyday life and conversation are precisely the non-exceptional ways in which narratives of institutional racism are carried forth as “just is” and solidify as dominant narratives. My point is not to suggest that a two-minute commercial is an
archetypal example of Detroit or that its depiction is “right” or “wrong”; rather my analysis of this and other cultural narratives illustrate Helen Heran Jun’s suggestion that “irrespective of intention and impulse, every text can be read for the inevitable contradictions it attempts to manage or reconcile” (2011: 5). These stories are created by people—anonymous web posters, photographers, advertising copywriters, filmmakers, journalists, and many others. These are the narratives the continually circulate in our everyday lives. Although the national narrative suggests that the law is the ultimate arbiter of inclusion, as Lisa Lowe reminds us, “culture powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget” (1996: 2). Therefore culture opens up a place to see what cannot be accounted for in the spaces of law, to show for example how exclusion continues even when it is no longer legal to discriminate in housing.

I now turn to the presumed absence and expectations of representations of what are termed by my readers as “actual”, “everyday”, or “street” Detroiters, and what is revealed by their desires for the presence of the preceding. Akers writes: “The minimal number of Detroiters, or actual Detroit residents, is the most striking.” Hankins asks: “What could reasonably be expected of everyday Detroiters to understand their own role in institutionalized racism and racialized capitalism?”; and continues: “what are the reasonable expectations of the political subjectivity of street Detroiters?” First, I remind readers that “actual” Detroiters do appear in each and every chapter of the book. I suggest this misremembering reflects expectations about who counts and does not count as “Detroiters”, “actual Detroit residents”, “everyday Detroiters”, or “street Detroiters”. When my readers claim that these categories of people are minimally represented in Beautiful Wasteland, I want to know specifically who and what these imagined subjects are. Indeed, while Detroiters like Eminem, Dan Gilbert, Mike Ilitch, and Charlie LeDuff do not count as “everyday Detroiters” to Akers and Hankins, they are all Detroiters and/or metro Detroiters and appear in the chapters of the book.¹ Moreover, the people who participate in the

¹ The idea of “metro Detroiter” links to the idea of the metropolitan region, outside the city of Detroit. When I was growing up, metro Detroit was used to reference the primarily white and more affluent Detroit suburbs, drawing a distinction between Detroit city and the Detroit metropolitan region. In a local context this distinction codes for
web board, or in the documentary films, or in the Chrysler commercial, or in Vergara’s images and narrative are also Detroiters. Part of the work of the book is to show how the narrative power structure of the city unfolds through the stories by and of these Detroiters, both the exceptional and the everyday. Akers suggests *Beautiful Wasteland* falls into the trap of seeing the city and suburbs as two distinctly separate regions, even as I actually seek to disrupt this binary, showing in particular the porousness of the metro region for those with mobility and whiteness. Here, too, I suggest that there is also a false binary in the suggestion that an archetypal “everyday” Detroiter exists. Perhaps the desire for “actual”, “everyday”, or “street” Detroiters on the part of some readers of *Beautiful Wasteland* mediates a desire for Black Detroiters, and/or poor Detroiters, and/or activist Detroiters. If this is true, then this desire is one that the book interrogates insofar as it argues that the dominant and widely disseminated narratives of the city are narratives about the possessive investment in the invisibility of whiteness and institutional racism in Detroit, both by outsiders and Detroiters who most benefit from the legacy of systemic racism.

More specifically, I would ask Hankins to articulate what she is signaling by the idea of “street Detroiters”: is this a variation of “everyday Detroiters”? In both cases, I want Akers and Hankins to more clearly render the subject they are producing/referring to. If, as I have suggested, this subject is the non-elite, black or brown, working-class, poor, or activist Detroiter, I would push back that no Detroiter is accountable to me or anyone else’s expectation of political subjectivity. Although I agree with Hankins that it takes some of our students “a semester or more of intensive reading […] to begin to comprehend the structural forces of institutionalized racism and its imbrication with capitalism”, the incredulity with which she lobs the question “What could reasonably be expected of everyday Detroiters to understand their own role in institutionalized racism and racialized capitalism?” is patronizing at best. Even as some (but not all) “actual”, “everyday”, or “street” people don’t use academic jargon, countless work by our suburban/city location. The murky designation of what the metropolitan region is has different “official” meanings, but is primarily used to refer to the three-counties–Wayne, Oakland, Macomb–that includes the suburban communities within about a 35 mile radius to the city of Detroit. Detroit is part of Wayne County, Michigan.
colleagues proves again and again that marginalized people not only articulate the systems of their oppression (Escobar 2016; Eubanks 2011; Smith 1999) and in Detroit specifically (Boggs and Boggs 1974; Boggs with Kurashige 2011; Montgomery 2016; Quizar 2014; Safransky 2014; Ward 2016; We the People of Detroit 2016), but also have rehearsed this articulation again and again across all registers of knowledge—in homes, schools, shop floors, union halls, social organizations, planning meetings, community centers, all levels of government, and to academics for purposes of their scholarly research. Indeed one of the most internationally respected black radical philosophers of the 20th century, James Boggs, was himself what Hankins might be pointing to as a “street Detroiter”: a black, southern, working-class, high school graduate, who migrated north riding the rails in the 1930s (Ward 2016: 307-310, 25-27). While Boggs was an exceptional individual, it is clear from the work he engaged in and the legacy of five decades of theoretically rich writing and place-based activism that he and Grace Lee Boggs created in Detroit with other “street” Detroiters and intellectuals alike that everyday people can and do articulate their political subjectivities.

A number of the reviews also mention my own autobiographical relationship to Detroit. In the introduction to Beautiful Wasteland I purposefully claim my legacy as a “metro Detroiter” (n.b. not a “native” Detroiter as Hankins misquotes). I claim this identity not because this gives me expert status, but because of the very real fact that I, a working-class Asian American woman, grew up as an adoptee in a white working-class family that very much benefited from its whiteness as a form of property (Harris 1993). Although my individual experience is not typical, my family’s experience forms a variation of the widely experienced subsidization and mobility of whiteness. For me, the term “metro Detroiter” purposefully highlights the material benefits of whiteness through access to federally-backed racially-exclusionary suburbanization. Akers suggests that the claiming of a “right to the city” or the “legacy of belonging” by those who reside outside of the city is a disingenuous claim to the land, even as he simultaneously critiques the urban/metro binary. This suggestion misses my point that *white metro Detroiters (and the media and culture industries that market to these same consumers) have had an outsized role in*
shaping the narrative of Detroit as “not about race” precisely when race means whiteness. In this way, Hankins’ and Akers’ insistence that the book omits and/or desires too much from “real” Detroiters is a symptom of this pattern of the invisibility of whiteness.

This invisibility of mobility of white Detroiters, as both settlers of racially-exclusionary suburban and urban space in both cultural and material discourse links as well to the final critique I address here, the presumed absence of resistance in my book and what my readers’ desires for resistance reveals. Hankins asks: “Are there activist groups or ‘right to the city’ campaigns in Detroit?” that would yield “the moments of resistance or counternarratives or even everydayness […] that might offer yet a different, more socially just or hopeful version of Detroit.” Loomis suggests that, “in relying so heavily on cultural analysis, the book functions mainly as an explication of Detroit’s myriad representations rather than offering a roadmap for interrupting these processes, in Detroit or elsewhere”. Indeed, there are, as Loomis points out, organizations and groups and critical geographic practices at play that clearly highlight this work, and as I mentioned above, “everyday street Detroiters” are producing their subjectivities in vivid, collective, and politically productive forms. However, Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that activism and research “exist as different activities, undertaken by different kinds of people employing different tools for different kinds of ends” (1999: 217). And although there are examples of successful models of activism and research co-locating, this is not the purpose of Beautiful Wasteland. The call for the inclusion of examples of resistance or activism in a book about the conditions that necessitate these actions primarily serves the purpose of ameliorating the discomfort that the narration of this condition solicits. For me, to represent the work of resistance, given the frame of the book would have appeared tokenistic, mere mollification, or what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) situate as a “settler move to innocence”. Indeed, Tuck and Yang remind us that anti-racist or social justice oriented logic often calls for the redistribution of land to people of color, which suggests that equity comes through equality in the investment and benefits of settler colonialism. And, this is where a possibility for more robust engagement in Indigenous Studies emerges in my work and in the work of geography.
Loomis and Akers both suggest that the frontier is not robustly theorized enough for a geography audience. I agree that there is much more space for the frontier to be theorized; even as I critique the discursive rhetoric of the frontier and its operationalization, I do so without engagement to the work of Indigenous Studies. As Andrea Riley Mukavetz suggests, American Indian Studies “provide research models that do not end with deconstruction. In fact, these research models privilege a language of critique that reconstructs or makes and creates space for present and future generations of knowledge makers” (2014: 110). So rather than a “roadmap” as Loomis suggests, or a deeper explication of the mapping of the city and its suburbs as Akers suggests, perhaps we should heed the call of Razack for an “unmapping” which “is intended to undermine the idea of white settler innocence and to uncover the ideologies and practices of conquest and domination” (2002: 5). It is through an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach that we might together begin to unmap the city and our disciplines.

*Beautiful Wasteland* unpacks how racism operates, and the insidiousness of the rhetoric that “this is not about race” even as there are countless counter narratives in the historical and cultural record. In the work here, I am looking at the ways culture operationalizes the narratives of settlement. That the imaginary of Detroit results in the idea that Detroit is up for grabs. While geography is the discipline where spatiality comes into focus most clearly, making visible how social relations are materialized, *Beautiful Wasteland* opens up a space to see how race and place are co-produced discursively and materially. I am thankful for the engagement and constructive criticism with which my critics approached *Beautiful Wasteland*. Even more, I am gratified that *Beautiful Wasteland* opens up many possible avenues of further inquiry; that it may serve as a location to think and question and analyze how white privilege and systemic racism are operationalized in the cultural narratives we tell about place.
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Rebecca J. Kinney

*School of Cultural and Critical Studies*

*Bowling Green State University*

rkinney@bgsu.edu

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