**Book Review Symposium**


In *Beautiful Wasteland* Rebecca Kinney takes on the task of examining how representations of place are part of the racialized political economy. She explores the kinds of work that images, such as photographs, commercials, and documentaries, and words, such as magazine covers and newspaper headlines, do in preparing or interpreting a place for its role in cycles of investment and disinvestment and how racialized tropes and violences are part and parcel of this process. This is a welcome addition to studies in race and political economy, given that narratives of places change over time, sometimes relatively imperceptibly in localized ways, sometimes in very prominent two-minute Super Bowl commercial kinds of ways, as she illuminates.

In the book’s chapters, Kinney takes the reader through an original analysis of particular examples and moments of popular culture, from the online discussion board to a detailed analysis of visual representations of Detroit, and argues that they variously highlight or ignore the racialized past and present that undergird Detroit’s cycles of boom and bust. Throughout she draws from academic accounts of Detroit, such as Thomas Sugrue’s excellent book *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), along with popular representations, such as magazines and newspapers and documentaries, demonstrating a significant breadth of material about Detroit. In fact, the endnotes contain a key contribution in and of itself: a rather comprehensive bibliography on Detroit. And, as Kinney suggests, this may be one of Detroit’s moments, as it has become popular for its “ruin porn” or its “rise from the ashes” story, and thus the contribution from a “native” metro Detroiter, as she names herself in the book, is certainly
welcome. In fact, place-based studies, where the task is to use our academic tools to understand a place—rather than using a place to illustrate a theoretical claim—should be celebrated.

But Kinney’s book is no uncritical celebration of place. In fact, she is highly critical of the representations of Detroit that she includes in her analysis. Her critique is largely around the ways in which racialization processes and accounts are missing from the memories and representations of everyday Detroiter and others who take on the task of representing Detroit, such as artists, documentary filmmakers, and marketing firms. The persistence of white privilege and institutionalized racism is, for Kinney, missing in many of the narratives about Detroit—particularly the city’s present and future—that she sees as increasingly neoliberal, privileging individual, wealthy whites, and dismissing or even erasing the majority of Detroiter who are black.

I find the goals of the book and some of the analysis a compelling corrective to taken-for-granted representations of place. I am left with questions, however. One key concern involves the degree to which the material that Kinney offers as archetypal representations of Detroit is broadly significant or meaningful. That is, it is unclear how important the examples Kinney uses to explore the silenced racialization processes that have made and remade Detroit are, or how or in what ways they represent broader public conversations about Detroit that Kinney claims they do. For example, in her first empirical chapter, she examines an online discussion on the website City-Data.com, a real estate forum in which users participate in various conversations about places in the city. She highlights the dialogue wherein a former white Detroit resident recounts locating the home of her childhood, only to discover a foundation and porch but nothing else of it on a block that was also largely disinvested. The purpose of her post on the discussion board was to see if others had a similar experience. The discussion, which Kinney examined as a series of approximately 80 entries on the City-Data.com website, gets heated, as coded and not-so-coded language is used to suggest that this nostalgic person blames people of color for destroying her home and neighborhood, and ignores her own complicity as a person of whiteness and privilege—
which enabled her family to exclude people of color from the neighborhood in the first place. This roughly 80-entry discussion took place in 2010, and the degree to which it is a representative example of the broader Detroit narrative, as Kinney suggests it is, or even how typical the City-Data.com forum participants might be, is unclear. In addition to the online debate, Kinney analyzes the photographs of Camilo Jose Vergara, drawing from both the depiction of Detroit in actual photographs (which are included in the book), which show the “beauty” of the ruins of Detroit, and also from the photographer’s notes from various exhibitions in which he explains his work. But again, how significant is this photographer’s imagery (and understanding) of Detroit in dominating representations of the city? Likewise, the remaining empirical chapters, including one on the representation of the “food scene” in Detroit, involve a series of magazine articles and television segments, which, in a cynical reading, could be seen as Kinney cherry-picking to make her point. And then there’s that two-minute Super Bowl commercial: how important are those two minutes in remaking Detroit as a site of wealth?

Another question I have is about Kinney’s implicit expectation of enlightened political subjectivities among Detroiters. And here I refer to, once again, that discussion board on City-Data.com; for that initial poster who lamented the state of her childhood home, Kinney draws from scholar Renato Rosaldo’s (1993) concept of “nostalgic imperialism” to critique this woman’s implication in the whitewashing of Detroit. I am left wondering, though, how often individual memories can reasonably be expected to reflect structural imperatives. I mean, it takes a semester or more of intensive reading for many of my students to begin to comprehend the structural forces of institutionalized racism and its imbrication with capitalism—and they have Sugrue’s The Origins of the Urban Crisis to very clearly demonstrate these dynamics. What could reasonably be expected of everyday Detroiters to understand their own role in institutionalized racism and racialized capitalism?

Kinney is also critical of the documentary makers’ decision in Deforce to move from exposing the deleterious effects of such structural forces on the city to then conclude with a
series of conversations with local Detroiters who are involved in the drug trade.¹ Their comments, as depicted in the film, suggest that they had a choice to leave the streets. When discussing her brothers’ murders, Queen, a longtime Detroit resident featured in the film, reflects, “I can’t say this ‘hood is to be blamed. They chose that life, it didn’t choose them” (quoted on p.104). Kinney attributes this representation to a weak conclusion of neoliberal individualism: that the filmmakers end up backing away from their claims of Detroit as a product of a long history of white privilege and instead conclude with a narrative of individual choice and self-help. Again, what are the reasonable expectations of the political subjectivity of street Detroiters? Or perhaps a more interesting approach would be seeking to understand the process of political subjectivication in the first place. Kinney aims her critique at the decision making of the artists and creators of these media—not, of course, Detroiters interviewed or depicted in the films—but some of this feels hollow to me. 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?

This leads me to my final point: what are the representations that challenge what Kinney points out as dominant narratives? Are there activist groups or “right to the city” campaigns in Detroit? It strikes me as relatively easy to be frustrated by a Chrysler commercial and its depiction of the city—and I do appreciate that Kinney alerts us to how representations matter—but I am left wondering where the moments of resistance or counter-narratives or even everydayness are that might offer yet a different, more socially just or hopeful version of Detroit.

¹ See http://www.deforcemovie.com (last accessed 1 June 2017).
References


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