
In *Beautiful Wasteland* Rebecca Kinney offers a sweeping cultural analysis of the images and symbolic landscapes that have made and remade our imaginary of the city of Detroit. The iconic birthplace of America’s aspirational object, the automobile; the backdrop for the origin story of the American Dream; the embodiment of 20\textsuperscript{th} century hopes and dreams about industry, modernization, and progress; a city like no other, Detroit. Throughout her book, Kinney digs in to this narrative of prosperity, ingenuity, and the American spirit by questioning the cultural imaginary of Detroit. She interrogates myriad representations of Detroit including an online housing forum, photographs, two documentary films, a 2011 Super Bowl commercial campaign, and more recent efforts to re-brand Detroit as a home for urban pioneers seeking refuge from rising rents in beloved cities elsewhere. Kinney examines these narratives and asks what realities are being created by photographers, ad executives, and billionaire boosters, all people who have something to gain by creating Detroit in their own image. *Beautiful Wasteland* traces the changing narrative of Detroit from a city of the American Dream to a city of decline, emptiness, and ruin, and then back again in contemporary narratives of downtown Detroit’s revitalization, renewal, and rebirth.

Part of the success of *Beautiful Wasteland* is that it offers specific examples of the devaluing of land and homes held by black families, and the persistent exclusion, marginalization and erasure of people who do not appear to be white from Detroit’s story. 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 the city
to the practices, policies, and people that are so often absent from official and vernacular narratives. In so doing, Beautiful Wasteland offers an analysis of the workings of racial capitalism in the development of one US city (Kelley 2017; Leong 2013).

In the first chapter of the book, Kinney examines an online housing forum in which past residents of Detroit reminisce about their former homes. This website contains discussions of primarily white residents who are nostalgic for a past they left behind. Kinney interweaves her analysis of contemporary nostalgia for white neighborhoods and a white past with the history of housing segregation visible in public housing policies and longstanding discriminatory and predatory mortgage lending, including the racialized implementation of the GI Bill which almost exclusively subsidized homeownership for white veterans. Kinney’s analysis adeptly explains how these narratives rest on a foundation of naturalized and implicit white privilege and construct an incomplete yet hegemonic version of Detroit’s past (p.7). In examining the revisionist history of retreat, economic ruin, and left-behind homelands, Kinney shows how commentators long for a return to a different time, a better time, a time of overt segregation in Detroit.

In this chapter, Kinney examines the work of the moderator of the online housing forum who enforces the norms of conversation with banal statements like “Back on topic folks” (p.35). Kinney argues that these corrective statements construct the forum as a space for remembering past neighborhoods, but not for examining the structural racism that allowed white people to accumulate property in Detroit. In her analysis, Kinney illustrates how the moderator neutralized critiques about white privilege and racialized economic decline by policing the scope and purpose of the forum. By using posts from residents and the conditions of polite speech enforced by the moderator alongside the structural elements, such as segregated and discriminatory housing policies and lending practices, Kinney’s writing helps to make visible the policies and practices that are absent from residents’ partial accounting of Detroit’s past.

Later in the section titled “We are Refugees: Remembering White Flight” Kinney examines the common refrain “We had to leave” in order to push into the racial logics underpinning the white exodus from the city. She explores how bloggers employ the language of
“refugees” (p.21-22) in order to question how white residents cast themselves as blameless migrants, as if they were victims of the very housing system in which they had only benefited. Here, Kinney successfully draws from bloggers’ own words to demonstrate how “loss” is experienced when the privilege granted to you by the color of your skin, a privilege that you did not ask for, or pay for, but expected, feels like it has been revoked. By examining how these bloggers frame the active non-choices of their exodus, Kinney’s analysis reveals how people stage the conditions of their victimhood, the terms of how they were made to do something they did not want to do, or otherwise could not afford to do, but did anyways.

In the context of Donald Trump’s recent election, the sentiment expressed in these blogs felt all too familiar. The scripts convey the idea that white people are victims, that they have been denied what is innately theirs, that something that was promised to them has disappeared or been taken, or that their invisible privilege gets them a little less than it used to. Taken together, this section lays bare the ideological commitment to whiteness, to the valorization of white bodies, and the logics that code spaces based on who is physically present and whose presence counts in the development of Detroit (see also Bonds and Inwood 2016). It is here that Kinney’s contribution shines; in its clear analysis of the cultural tropes and narratives that scripted Detroit’s recent history, Beautiful Wasteland demonstrates the importance of critical scholarship that documents and theorizes how the privileged transfigure themselves into the marginalized and how oppressors frame their personal narratives in such a way as to appear as the oppressed. Of course, the blog is a single artifact of racist thinking and white willful ignorance, which makes it difficult to determine how pervasive these sentiments are in this context (see also Katherine Hankins’ review in this symposium). However, Kinney’s analysis is successful in that it allows readers to trace psychological and institutional investments in whiteness that are often difficult to access and document.

Moving from the narratives of Detroit’s heyday, Kinney examines the visual imaginary that represents Detroit’s decline in Chapters 2 and 4. In Chapter 2 Kinney examines the works of photographer Camilo Jose Vergana who portrayed the city as a pastoral landscape, a place of ruin, and an empty space ready for someone else’s Model T dreams. In this section, Kinney
draws loosely on Neil Smith’s (1996) work on the revanchist city and the frontier (p.53)–likely an all-too-brief foray into geographical thought and theory for the dear readers of Antipode–in order to argue that in visualizing Detroit as an empty landscape, the artist’s gaze frames Detroit as a place ready to be reborn by pioneers, or, rather, venture capitalists who hope to profit from investing in a risky city that is easy to sell.

As part of her inquiry into Vergana’s photographic depiction of the city, Kinney focuses on how the artist removes humans from the frame, strategically erasing over one million people in order to mythologize Detroit’s decline as one of depopulation and abandonment (p.44). Throughout her writing, Kinney pauses to note the contradictions of the once hyper-visible black population that has been intentionally removed from the frame. She invites the reader to consider which residents have been rendered into the background, not as people actively shaping the city, but as occupants whose presence only has meaning when put in relation to white flight; black existence in the city is narrated through white absence, or is not legible at all. A particularly convincing piece of evidence of this erasure is Vergana’s artist statement in which he recalls visiting a building that he proclaims dilapidated, despite being occupied. He said: “Left to decide whether or not the building was a ruin, I took another look at the faded gold star against the black polished stone and decided that it was” (quoted on p.58-59). The artist flippantly proclaimed the building a “ruin” and used his power of authorship to recast Detroit’s story by removing the lives and the livelihoods that persist, despite his insistence otherwise. In examining the narrative power of images in photographs, documentary films, and commercials, Kinney makes the case that rather than allow Detroiter’s to control their own representation, Vergana and others appear hell-bent on advancing their own interpretation of the city.

The final part of Beautiful Wasteland examines contemporary narratives that script places as devalued, risky, and yet ready to be discovered again. As part of this, Kinney examines the settler mentality that has narrated Detroit’s recent ascent. In these stories are echoes of other geographies and other recent histories–post-Katrina New Orleans, for example, or Pittsburgh and its neighboring town, Braddock. The idea that these places are frontiers or laboratories for social experiments is a pervasive fiction. These cities are seen to be hibernating, waiting, or even
preparing themselves for pilot projects and innovation funds, as if they should be beckoning, calling out, and enticing capital with their concessions. In this framing, Detroit would not exist without visionaries, angel investors, and eager college students ready to cut their teeth as volunteers and underpaid interns—missionaries ready to save the city.

One such investor is mortgage tycoon and Detroit native son Dan Gilbert. In 2014 Gilbert moved his company, Quicken Loans, from metropolitan Detroit to downtown as part of his strategy to rebrand Detroit and develop its “symbolic economy”. Kinney briefly examines how Gilbert frames Detroit’s latent potential and questions his role at the helm of Detroit’s revival, including discussing how he has been gobbling up Detroit real estate at fire sale prices. The more significant point, for me at least, is how Quicken Loans, as one of the largest non-bank mortgage lenders in the United States, is fueling Detroit’s new economy on loan payments circulating back to the city from homeowners around the country. While Kinney begins to connect the “logics that financed racialized investment that enabled white suburbanization … and deemed primarily black Detroit as ‘too risky’ for investment” with the idea that Detroit is a good investment once again (p.128), she does not tease out the relationships between these historic dispossessions and contemporary practices of Quicken Loans, which has be criticized for its underwriting processes as well as using Federal Housing Administration insurance to shield itself from these risky lending practices (Creswell 2017). In order to broaden our understanding of capital’s return to Detroit, we need a more nuanced analysis of these interrelated processes. Indeed, the illusive and abstract world of finance should not be allowed to divorce the history of financial dispossession that Kinney documents in her book from the reality that the return of the American Dream to Detroit is likely being built on the backs of aspirational homeowners struggling to keep up with the untenable terms of their Quicken subprime mortgages.

While Kinney examines how the imaginary of Detroit’s past and future are scripting its redevelopment, this chapter would have benefited from a more active critique of the inequalities that exist and are being perpetuated in this seductive renewal. Relatedly, the subtext to this chapter is Kinney’s own apprehension about what this development means for her and others who stand to benefit from these changes—Kinney herself acknowledges that she is a customer of
Whole Foods, despite critiquing its Detroit branding strategy in the pages of her book (p.140). Indeed, it seems impossible to critique urban amenities, creative city logics, and gentrified ideas of the good life as long as many academics are personally invested in and desire this version of the city. Perhaps it is this writerly tension that makes this chapter seem to be the most ambivalent, even as the contemporary moment is exactly when readers could mobilize Kinney’s analysis to contest Detroit’s representations in real time.

Kinney’s project is successful at documenting and describing the cultural logics and ideological formations that normalize racism and the workings of racial capitalism in Detroit. As such, *Beautiful Wasteland* offers an important reminder that we need scholarship that lays bare the co-constitutive forces of accumulation and dispossession, and offers counter-narratives that challenge the veneer of a coherent story to instead tell the intertwined, uneven, and contingent histories of those who are burdened and those who benefit. Left unresolved, however, are questions of how Detroit’s recent rise is particular, and how we might understand Detroit as part of larger, familiar processes of capital mobility, devaluation, speculation, and gentrification. In sidestepping these important questions, *Beautiful Wasteland* offers few directions for more overt political critique or action. That is, 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.

If our tools of critique are sharp enough to understand the power of representation and the endurance of narrative, so too should our actions be in reconfiguring their logics; the tools of cultural analysis that Kinney employs need to be marshaled in real time, alongside a keen attention to the workings of racial capitalism. Thankfully, radical and critical geographers have a long history of this type of praxis. Indeed, recent scholarship focused on the workings of racial capitalism (Derickson 2016, 2017; Gilmore 2007; McKittrick 2011; Ranganathan 2016; Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Roy 2016) provides a useful and important compliment to the cultural analysis advanced in Kinney’s book.
References


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