
The storefront window was peculiar. I encountered it in 2012 when I was conducting dissertation fieldwork in Detroit and was struck by the way it seemed to crystallize the deep racial antagonisms that accompanied the redevelopment of Detroit in an era of “late liberalism” (Povinelli 2011). At the center of the window a black arm tightens into a fist and hovers over Detroit’s skyline, which is lit up against a night sky. Seven watches, sold by a company called Watchwear.com, encircle the arm. The arm is a replica of a sculpture in downtown Detroit called “The Fist” that was created as a tribute to Detroit-native heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis and has long been a source of controversy (Gallagher and LaWare 2010). The trompe l’oeil graphic design technique that rendered the display three-dimensional conveyed a dreamlike quality and made the window stand out amidst the other dark and shuttered stores on Woodward Avenue. The display gave new meaning to the concept of window shopping. Ostensibly, the window was set up to sell watches but there was no physical store. Instead, shoppers were encouraged to use their smart phones and a QR code to make their purchases virtually. In reality, though, the elaborate display was less about getting passersby to shop than it was about conjuring a new Detroit. The window served as a simulacrum of a downtown economy that did not exist, at least not yet.

*Beautiful Wasteland* is a superb analysis of the role of popular culture in the production of Detroit as a “postindustrial frontier”. The window is not a focus of Rebecca
Kinney’s *Beautiful Wasteland.* However, I begin this review with it because *Beautiful Wasteland,* in analyzing slices everyday life, signals how one object or exchange can reveal broader narratives, and it provoked me to reflect more deeply about why the window has lurked in my imagination for the past five years. The window represents how the emergence of Detroit as a new economic frontier, as Kinney shows, relies not only on surplus land and labor but also on the production of a symbolic economy.\(^1\) *Beautiful Wasteland,* which sits at the intersection of and makes a rich contribution to geography, urban studies, cultural studies, and the growing field of Detroit studies, focuses specifically on how racial formation takes place within the symbolic economy to shift perceptions of Detroit as a place that was “too risky” to one that is “ready” for investment.

In this way, Kinney helped me to see how the window not only sought to invite capital to downtown but suggested that the city’s “comeback” required the revision of racial representations of Detroit and narratives that capitalism will heal racial injustice.

When “The Fist” was first installed near Detroit’s riverfront, many people interpreted the 24-foot bronzed arm to be a symbol of black power and the city-suburban divide despite the arm’s horizontal rather than vertical orientation and the fact that its commissioning in the 1980s was part of a larger corporate development strategy whereby art was seen as a way to stimulate urban renewal. In 2004, two men from suburban Detroit painted “The Fist” with white paint; they left behind copied photographs of two white Detroit police officers who were supposedly killed by a black man and signed them “Courtesy of Fighting Whites”. This act of vandalism symbolized the fear of others within urban space as well as efforts to whitewash the city through redevelopment (Gallagher and LaWare 2010). Thus, it is poignant that in the window display 40 miniature fists positioned below

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1 She borrows the term “symbolic economy” from Sharon Zukin to describe “the intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital” (1995:3, quoted on p.127).
“The Fist”, each donning a watch, were not black but various skin tones of white, black, and brown. The crowd of arms raised their fists upwards to support Detroit’s revitalized skyline and in doing so recast the symbolic imagery of “The Fist” and Detroit away from black power toward a celebration of multiculturalism.

Beautiful Wasteland contributes to a growing conversation in geography and urban studies around what Cedric Robinson (1983) called “racial capitalism”, the idea that racism is not a byproduct of capitalism but constituent to its logic. Kinney argues that the “concept of frontier operates in Detroit as a marker of anticipation of the city’s ascent … the underlying assumption is that space is being ‘underutilized’ but that with the right new people, or new ideas, or new infusion of cash, the city can be returned to its former productivity” (p.xx). In Kinney’s conceptualization of the frontier, she builds on Neil Smith’s argument that the urban frontier is advanced through the “collective owners of capital” (1996:xvi, quoted on p.xx) to show how the market is entangled with racially coded narratives that condition places for death and rebirth.

Beautiful Wasteland stems from Kinney trying to make sense of her own experience growing up in metropolitan Detroit. A Korean adoptee, Kinney was raised by a white family in Royal Oak, a predominantly white suburb directly north of Detroit. In an intensely segregated region where the black-white binary is pervasive, Kinney’s affective experience of racial difference led her at an early age to begin asking questions about the city-suburb divide and why the two communities were so different. When she left Detroit, she kept trying to make sense of the city’s segregated landscape. Her inquiry eventually led her to earn a doctorate in Ethnic Studies from the University of California, San Diego. Around the early 2000s, she noticed a change in the way people talked about Detroit. In casual conversation, when Kinney mentioned where she grew up, people began to respond enthusiastically: “I hear amazing things are happening in Detroit” (p.ix).
Beautiful Wasteland unpacks this shift in the cultural conversation through an analysis of “seemingly straightforward slices of everyday life”: a thread on the website City-Data.com called “I found my old house in Detroit”; the photographs of well-known social documentarian Camilo José Vergara; Chrysler’s “Born of Fire” commercial that played during the Super Bowl XLV in 2011; two documentary films, Daniel Falconer’s Deforce (2010) and Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady’s Detropia (2011); and, finally, how ideas of “hunger” underwrite the redevelopment of Detroit. The book’s chapters are organized around these “slices”; each stands in for a different cultural narrative that surrounds Detroit. The City-Data.com website is about narratives of exodus. Vergara’s photographs are about narratives of ruin. The Chrysler commercial, narratives of rebirth. Detropia and Deforce, narratives of possibility. And “hunger” is about Detroit’s rise. She analyzes each narrative for how the concept of frontier operates and racial formation happens.

A great strength of Beautiful Wasteland is the way Kinney’s selection and analysis of these everyday exchanges shows the complexity and multi-directional relationships among the past, present, and future of Detroit. The book begins by comparing two magazine cover photographs of the city from The New York Times Magazine in 1990 and Time Magazine in 2009 to capture the shift in the collective imaginary about Detroit and the ways anti-black racism shapes narratives of the city’s decline and recent renaissance. Throughout the book, Kinney is concerned with racial coding in popular culture, particularly how the concomitant return of white people to Detroit and disappearance of black people are represented in comeback narratives. Whereas the 1990 magazine image represents a city “marred by grotesque remains and pathological residents” (p.xv) the latter image dwells on the city’s emptiness and ruin—conjuring a “beautiful wasteland” (p.ix).
The anthropologist Anna Tsing encourages us to see frontiers not as places but as imaginative projects. She argues that the frontier asks “participants to see a landscape that doesn’t exist, at least not yet. It must continually erase old residents’ rights to create its wild and empty spaces where discovering resources, not stealing them, is possible. To do so, too, it must cover up the conditions of its own production” (2005:68). In this sense, then, Beautiful Wasteland does the critical work of uncovering: it uncovers how the market is entangled with cultural narratives that shape the “structures of value” that condition places for death and rebirth.

Kinney’s attention to the “structures of value”, a term she doesn’t explicitly theorize, shapes the way she reads the affective landscape in Detroit and her deft conveyance of the emotional power of cultural narratives. Kinney’s “structures of value” strikes me as akin to Raymond Williams’ (1977) “structure of feeling”, but racism is central for her. Whereas Williams developed the concept of “structure of feeling” to capture how meaning and values are lived and felt in ways that are simultaneously structured and fleeting, inevitably moving forward while always being historically and political informed, Kinney’s concern is with how societal values are structured by the history of racial formation and racism in the United States, how they evolve over time, and how racialized structures of value contribute to determinations about whether places are deemed wastelands or frontiers.

In the 1920s and 30s, Walter Benjamin became fascinated by the decline of the Paris arcades. The arcades were enclosed passageways between buildings that were retrofitted for merchants to sell industrial goods to a rising Parisian consumer class in the 19th century. For Benjamin (1999), the arcades embodied the industrial revolution, capitalism, progress, and modernity. They encouraged a new leisurely form of shopping determined more by desire than need (Friedberg 1993). With the rise of department
stores, the arcades fell into disuse; Benjamin was interested in them as objects whose use had outrun the dream of their design.

While vacant windows in downtown Detroit suggest a city that has outrun the dream of its original design, the virtual window—with the multi-racial, watch-clad arms in black power salutes—is noteworthy because it signals the way capital flows are returning to stake a claim to Detroit by exploiting racial difference. The Watchwear.com window display occupied 1528 Woodward Avenue, which had recently been acquired by Dan Gilbert, the founder and chairman of Quicken Loans and a real estate titan in Detroit. He bought 1528 Woodward and another building on the street that also housed a virtual window display from Detroit’s Downtown Development Authority for only $337,500 each, further solidifying his real estate holdings in downtown. The window illuminates how private investment in Detroit’s urban core, as Kinney argues, hinges on the production of a symbolic economy in which the disappearance of black bodies and the visibility of white (or multiracial) bodies is critical. As Kinney writes: “this shifting demographic profile, and its oft-touted manifestations—cool young urbanites and their DIY businesses—serve as the rationale for why Detroit is a ‘good’ investment” (p.128).

Whereas the arcades drew the consumer’s gaze, the window does too; but like the examples Kinney offers, it is about more than getting people to desire the watch as commodity. It’s about desiring Detroit as commodity; it hails the viewer to gaze at the multiracial crowd lifting up a glistening skyline and imagine what Detroit could be.

Such a gaze is overdetermined by how Detroit has become an object of intense national and international fascination in the past decade. A number of scholars have critiqued dominant narratives about the city in terms of discourses of “ruin porn” and the “blank slate” as well as those that celebrate the city’s renaissance (see, for example, Apel 2015; Herron 2007; Leary 2011; Millington 2013; Safransky 2014). However, Kinney’s careful attention to narratives and popular culture as sites of racial formation adds
something important to these discussions. She helps us to think critically not only about the images and stories that we see, hear, tell, and share about the city, but also about the ways racism is deployed and redeployed through them helping to give rise to uneven development—racially valued and racially devalued space—in an era of pervasive colorblindness.

As Kinney writes in the introduction, one of her primary motivations for writing *Beautiful Wasteland* was to dispel myths, which she often hears from her students, that racism is over. She accomplishes this goal and much more. *Beautiful Wasteland* is a theoretically sophisticated but readily accessible text that would be wonderful to teach in upper level undergraduate or graduate courses on a range of topics including urban studies, popular culture, and critical race studies. It could be paired with a variety of classroom activities that would lead to rich discussions; for example, students could watch the Chrysler commercial, conduct their own analysis it, and then read Kinney’s. But *Beautiful Wasteland* should not be confined to the university classroom. It will be of great interest to a general readership from Detroit enthusiasts to lay urban historians to those concerned with the state of race, racism, and inequality in America.

References


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May 2017