

*Book Review Symposium*

**Brenda Parker**, *Masculinities and Markets: Raced and Gendered Urban Politics in Milwaukee*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8203-3511-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8203-5032-5 (paper)

I was thrilled to organise an author-meets-critics session for Brenda Parker’s new book, *Masculinities and Markets: Raced and Gendered Urban Politics in Milwaukee*, at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Boston last year. Over the past decade, I have taken inspiration from Parker’s fierce intersectional feminist analysis of neoliberal urban planning trends, including the globally-replicated “creative city” framework. Indeed, I remember reiterating the arguments she outlined in her chapter “Beyond the class act: Gender and race in the ‘creative city’ discourse” (Parker 2008) to feminist activist and artist friends resisting the rise and spread of these policies in Toronto from around 2006 onwards. At that time, we wondered, what is with all this “creativity blah, blah, blah” (McLean 2014) as public arts funding bodies slashed operating grants that supported organisations making space for under-represented artists of colour, Indigenous artists, feminist artists, and queer artists. Meanwhile, progressive planners, philanthropists, artists, and think-tanks rushed to “reinvent” the city’s downtown core with corporate-sponsored festivals and community-engaged arts interventions. Parker’s writing offered a much-needed critique that cogently broke down the intersectional dimensions of what post-colonial feminist scholar Dia Da Costa (2016) calls the creative city’s “seductive violence” as we grappled with these contradictions.

Over the past decade, Parker’s research has continued to bring feminist criticality, as well as care-full and caring analysis, to urban studies. Drawing from black feminist thought, antiracism, and Marxist debates, as well as theories of governmentality, she has consistently challenged the persistent race and gender silences in both mainstream and critical debates on

neoliberal policies. She has also examined the limits of feminist approaches for making sense of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Moreover, inspired by Sarah Ahmed (2017), she has also encouraged feminist scholars to reflexively approach their work as “feminist killjoys” and to continually question the ways that policies that bring joy to some often deepen exclusion for others.

In *Masculinities and Markets*, Parker continues her commitment to feminist theory and praxis in a rich analysis of historic and ongoing gendered and raced exclusion in Milwaukee. Importantly, the book’s introduction starts with a quote by a low-income mother: “just this one time, you leave your child in the car while you go to work. You swear you will never do it again. But you can’t afford to lose your job or get your benefits sanctioned, so you do it” (p.1). By giving voice to a working mom struggling to survive as a caregiver in a moment when both the public and private sector punish working class, racialized communities, Parker sets up the book’s main objective: to address the lack of fine-grained gender and race analyses in scholarly discussions about neoliberal urban policies. Addressing power broadly, and in relation to multiple, intersecting inequalities, *Masculinities and Markets* investigates the myriad ways that capitalist discourses and material practices influence urban policies and development, housing, labour, and everyday social reproduction.

Refreshingly, Parker does not shy away from challenging feminist approaches that can sometimes reproduce dominant power relations, what Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) refer to as the “White Feminist Fatigue Syndrome”. In Chapter 1, the introduction, Parker puts her killjoy ethos into practice as she critiques feminist urban research work that overemphasizes the “situated” at the expense of structural arguments. She also calls out feminists “privileged by race, geography, and other power relations” (p.9) who sometimes “fail to include or credit other voices and perspectives; make claims that don’t match others’ experiences; are blinded by their own privilege; or engage in voyeuristic or violent descriptions”. To challenge such tendencies, Parker mobilizes her “imperfect, but aspirational” Feminist Partial Political Economy of Place (FPEP) approach that combines these four dimensions: (1) a focus on intersectional power relations in cities; (2) nuanced

qualitative research and reflexive, humble, partial, and “slow” scholarship (Great Lakes Feminist Collective 2015) approaches to knowledge production; (3) a reliance of feminist theories of relationality to examine structural inequalities, as well as to uncover opportunities for activist interventions and solidarities; and (4) the use of feminist theoretical tool kits as strategies to “observe, interpret, and challenge material-discursive power relations in complex and revealing ways” (p.5).

In Chapter 2, a theoretical overview, Parker charts the ways neoliberal values have grown to predominate urban policies in the United States. Addressing the persistent silence regarding intersectionality in urban studies, she provides a broad, US-wide analysis of the ways market-oriented policies are reliant on and reproduce historic and ongoing class, race, and gender inequalities. A particularly valuable resource for teaching, this chapter lays out the intersectional dimensions of shifts from Keynesian era policy models to contemporary urban development initiatives that promote autonomy, competition, and consumption. Drawing from black and Chicana feminist theorists, she discusses how her FPEP approach recognizes how power is “articulated, embraced, and resisted differently by different bodies and institutions” (p.10). This chapter also grapples with the difficulties of applying intersectional approaches to urban studies in a complex discussion that includes insights from Kimberlé Crenshaw, Katherine McKittrick and Jasbir Puar, among others.

Chapters 3 and 4 then focus on the historical roots of neoliberal urban policies in Milwaukee and how these approaches morphed into New Urbanist initiatives in the 1980s. Originally constructed through colonizing and capitalist processes that decimated the original Native American population that lived in the city region, Milwaukee was eventually governed by socialists at its official inception. This network of “Sewer Socialists” challenged capitalism by lobbying for better and more equitable urban services from 1900 to 1945. Parker outlines how, even though these projects promoted equality in Milwaukee, they failed to embrace gendered or raced inequalities. After a detailed overview of how race and gender inequalities persisted through the wartime period and the 1950s and 1960s, she shows how the New Urbanist projects of the 1980s that promoted market-centric community-building

reproduced deeply entrenched inequalities. While these planning strategies involved seemingly progressive walkable, mixed-use, and affordable dimensions, they were rarely accessible to Milwaukee's poorest female-headed households and non-white communities.

In Chapter 5, "Could the Violent Femmes Save Milwaukee?", Parker investigates how Milwaukee's history of raced and gendered policies morphed into the "creative city" planning trend that swept the city in the early 2000s. Here she examines how city planners and the Young Professionals of Milwaukee network mobilized this urban development model to lure and retain hypermobile, flexible, and "creative" workers. Embodying the neoliberal framework's emphasis on "consumption, autonomy, and competition" (p.167) the group sought to improve the city's image with superficial urban design interventions and arts projects. Parker also unpacks the contradictory dimensions of neoliberal urban policies in this chapter. For example, even though the Young Professionals promoted some progressive and equity-oriented projects, their fixation on attracting elite talent and "diverse" workers from elsewhere naturalised racialized and gendered exclusion for precarious and low-wage earners barely getting by in the city. The network also supported elite real estate development and amenities that absorbed 70 percent of the city's economic development budget in the mid-2000s.

After interrogating how young white professionals have fixated on transforming Milwaukee into a competitive creative hub, the book's most compelling chapter, Chapter 6, "Getting By in Milwaukee: Amplified Lives and Labors for Low-Income African American Women", uncovers how neoliberal policies violently exclude black women on multiple fronts. Here Parker uncovers the subtle and not-so-subtle ways market-oriented planning regimes undermine social reproduction work, what Cindi Katz (2001: 711) describes as the "fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life". Her vivid empirical accounts show how urban policies that favour downtown redevelopment schemes for elites at the expense of community programs and services result in everyday struggle and exclusion for black women. The women she met with in community centres, at city council meetings, and during activist events work 20 hours a day in low-paying caregiving jobs, they wait endless hours for

social services, and they endure long journeys to food pantries and churches via under-serviced transit. The brutal, everyday violence of neoliberal policies is written on their bodies. However, drawing from black feminist thought, Parker also shows how the body is a powerful site of resistance and that black women are continually resisting such inequalities through discourses of “care, belonging, emotion, and relationality” (p.129).

Parker’s FPEP approach that engages with black feminism is one of the strongest aspects of *Masculinities and Markets*. In particular, I agree with her frustration with some feminist researchers’ tendency to emphasize the situated, the embodied, and the everyday at the expense of critical analyses of structural inequalities. Indeed, as a white, cis-gendered feminist scholar researching arts interventions in a creative city context, I often end up on panels with young, white women researchers writing about DIY arts, gardens, and community arts projects. While such creative engagements point to generative and hopeful ways of building alternatives, sometimes these discussions avoid difficult, critical engagement with coloniality, race, heteropatriarchy, labour, and the fraught politics of who has the privilege to intervene in and “re-invent” urban spaces. Moreover, as a cis-gendered, white feminist committed to social justice research and praxis, I have to be consistently vigilant not to reinforce accounts of violence and marginalization that naturalise a racialized and colonial research gaze. With FPEP, Parker holds white feminist researchers like myself to account by encouraging us to employ tool kits that combine intersectionality and material analyses, as well as slow, careful, and praxis-oriented approaches.

However, as I read *Masculinities and Markets* I couldn’t help but think about the ways neoliberal values that naturalize intersectional exclusion in urban policies are also reproduced in the corporatized university. To what extent did universities and university-private sector think tanks play a role in ushering in the creative turn in Milwaukee? In 2008, the University of Toronto’s Martin Prosperity Institute lured Richard Florida, an enormous influence on Milwaukee’s consumption-oriented urban development. Around the same time the university cut Women’s Studies and Labour Studies courses as a growing cohort of

racialized and gendered adjunct faculty and administrators did the everyday social reproduction work upholding the university.

Moreover, as a junior scholar racing to produce work in an increasingly corporatized university regime, a system that continually reproduces heteropatriarchal values, I wonder about the extent to which researchers like myself can engage in Parker's slow and engaged FPEP approach. What are the roadblocks to practising thoughtful, humble, and detailed research within institutions imposing neoliberal logics? And how can feminists work collectively to contest enclosures within our own places of work? As Parker continues her journey as a reflexive feminist killjoy, I look forward to reading more about strategies for forging research solidarities across sites and sectors.

Overall, for me as a feminist researcher and teacher committed to critiquing exclusionary, market-oriented urban policies, but also charting possibilities and solidarities, *Masculinities and Markets* is a powerful feminist intervention. Conversing and thinking along with black and Chicano feminists Parker advances urban research by charting the everyday ways that contemporary neoliberal policies naturalize historic and ongoing race and gender inequalities in Milwaukee. In "messy and fleshy" detail, she illustrates how urban policies that favour elites result in a lack of services, labour inequalities, and grinding poverty for black women. Importantly, however, she also points to the possibilities of reflexive feminist analytical approaches for unsettling frustrating silences and exclusions and forging solidarities.

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