

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)

In this political moment, with a racist misogynist real estate developer in the White House and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, it is all too clear how necessary and important Brenda Parker's *Masculinities and Markets* is. In tracing the history of urban development in Milwaukee, Parker explores the persistent exclusion of women from, and the persistent racism in, the work of city planning and policy making, and through her ethnographic work reveals how this exclusion is felt in the lives of working class women, especially working class women of color, exploring "how overlapping and sustained power inequalities and traumas related to and outside of neoliberalism became burdens on their bodies" (p.13).

In tracing the historic trajectory of development in one city, especially one known for its "Sewer Socialism", Parker illustrates that there is very little that is new about neoliberalism. Rather, it builds on and evolved from the racist, sexist, and heteronormative patterns of American urban development. Even in Milwaukee's most progressive era (it had, for example, the first worker's compensation law in the country), what it meant to be a worker and a socialist was to be male. Blacks and Mexicans experienced discrimination in accessing urban programs, and African-American women fared the worst of all. After WWII, what became the Greater Milwaukee Committee was formed, planting the seeds for the neoliberal ideology that would govern the city through to the present day. Its 150 members, none of whom were black or female,

were dominated by business interests that set the agenda for development in the post-war city, building segregation into the urban fabric through highway construction and “blight” removal. There is a direct line from this historical experience to the fact that in our current era Milwaukee is considered the worst place in America to be black. Parker demonstrates that from the Committee’s founding in 1948 through to New Urbanism and the rise of the “creative class”, the city focused on design, real estate, and narrow visions of urban growth that ignored any attempt at social equity.

Rather than a new development, Parker argues that the neoliberal agenda serves to amplify the experience of inequality for African-American women in Milwaukee, intensifying the emotional and bodily experience of precarity. This is the strongest section of the book, and I wish we were able to hear even more from the women Parker interviewed. The balancing act of child care, elder care, multiple jobs, reliance on unreliable and under-funded public transportation, the punitive role of the state, insecure housing, and community work is literally making these women sick. Many of Parker’s subjects were living with pain and disease, and nearly all had experienced bodily abuse, assault, and trauma. Her interviewees made the connection between slavery, Jim Crows, White Flight, segregation, and school restructuring with the violence they experienced at the hands of men, police, and other institutions.

Parker presents the case study of the Park East Redevelopment Plan to highlight the ways in which, under neoliberalism, city governments feel compelled to conform to neoliberal dictates that require generous government subsidies to attract outside investments while starving social services and actively discouraging community participations. Neoliberalism “has stripped away institutional supports while simultaneously maximizing the need for social interventions because of the socially destabilizing effects of unfettered markets” (p.169). This disproportionately affects women, who benefit most from social services.

In this policy climate, the very act of survival is a creative act, one brought into being by sheer force of will. And yet this creativity, the management skills necessary to make the

balancing act work from day to day, go completely unvalued by the creative class ideology, even as creative class workers themselves rely on the labor of women like Parker's interviewees for child care and other work in order to perform their own balancing acts in a work culture that ignores caring work and celebrates a hypermasculinized culture of overwork. Similarly, in the neoliberal discourse of urban development, "a poor woman who accepted nine thousand dollars a year to pay for rent and food was deemed a 'dependent welfare queen'. A rich man who asked the city for ten million in subsidies and had the city hoping for tax revenues years later was an 'independent hero' who was saving the city" (p.151).

In the work of urban planning, there was "little concern with women's absences, and the persistence of patriarchy was rarely countered" (p.171). Unfortunately, many of the same silences exist in academic work about cities. While there is plenty of work that interrogates the injustices of neoliberal urbanism from a political economy approach, too few of these attempt to unpack, or indeed even acknowledge, the role of gender relations, sexism, and patriarchy. To ignore gender it to misunderstand the full complexity and effects of corrosive neoliberalism.

This book is an example of a reflexive, critical epistemological approach Parker calls "feminist partial political economy of place" (FPEP) which attends to raced, gendered, and intersectional power relations and structures, relies on place-based material approaches, emphasizes feminist concepts of relationality, and uses theoretical toolkits to challenge power relations. As such, it is an aspirational epistemology that encourages us to see differently – to see possibilities in places where they don't currently seem to exist. This is a direct challenge to neoliberalism, whose success is based on the assumption by city leaders that there is no alternative and the material creation of austerity to make sure any other possibilities are foreclosed.

Through research like this, the goal then it to forge a "feminist politics of hope" (p.178), one that heeds calls for equity and justice and attends to the needs of social reproduction and caring work. Parker argues that in this we may need poetry as much as politics, with greater

attention to stories and experience than our current political discourse allows. While I wholeheartedly agree, I would have liked to see more of this throughout the book. For example, in a discussion of Milwaukee's labor unions, Parker reveals that certain unions had a history of supporting feminist issues (p.160), but does not go into any depth about them. Similarly, in the context of funding for community organizations as a result of the welfare-to-work program, "feminist-inspired programming often dramatically changed the life experiences for women oppressed by poverty and domestic violence" (p.138), but we don't find out what these programs are or how they could be replicated. Details for things like these are necessary to the "how" of any feminist politics of hope. Perhaps that is for the next book.

This is an ambitious book that traces both the wider trends influencing governance in one American city (and beyond) and the ways in which the resulting policies are written on the bodies of working class women of color. It routinely jumps scales to show both how all politics is local and how structural inequalities are built into cities. Parker provides the subjects to the larger theoretical discussion of planetary urbanism. It is a valuable and necessary addition to any understanding of the neoliberal city and global urbanism and should be cited often in any discussion of neoliberalism, urban development, and gentrification going forward.

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