Reckoning with Regionalism: Race, Place, and Power in Urban History

Elliott J. Gorn (2018). *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till*. New York: Oxford University Press, 299 + xi pp., illustrations, notes, index, $27.95 (cloth).

Brian McCammack (2017). *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 364 pp., illustrations, notes, index, $49.95 (cloth).

Brian Purnell, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (2019). *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North: Segregation and Struggle outside of the South*. New York: New York University Press, 331 + vi pp., illustrations, notes, index, $30.00 (paper).

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"When we gon' wake up and realize it's really real? They did the same thing to Rodney King as Emmett Till."

—Young Moose, Baltimore rapper, "No Sunshine" (Freddie Gray), 2015

"You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 2015

The American city was built on White supremacy and racism—from north to south and east to west. Recent scholarship on race and place contributes to our understanding of how oppression manifests differently in certain places and contexts while remaining part of the same overarching system of racial segregation, a "national cancer" as the editors of *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North* frame it in their introduction. The works under consideration here explore the complex ways people and power move throughout the United States in order to better see structures of oppression when we rethink the regionalism of racism and the stories we have grown to accept as part of American history. Our cities look the way they do because of this cancer, which has metastasized from north to south. The very foundation of the modern American metropolis is built on racism and violence; it is not an import from some place outside. To truly see our cities, we need to grapple with the pervasiveness of systematic oppression and the complex layers of racism upon which they are built. The process of reckoning with regionalism and racism may also provide pathways to envision more equitable cities in the future.

These books are about mobility between the North and the South, or rather what moving through these different regions, both physically, metaphorically, and symbolically reveals about

power, race, and political economy in the United States. And power and race equal racism. Many urban historians do and should want to address how regionalism and racism work, mostly in hopes of making racism and oppression more visible in intellectually honest ways so we, as a society, can begin to dismantle it. Race, place, and power are not abstract ideas; they produce violence and break bodies. Segregation and racism undergird our political economy and social and cultural experiences in the United States. Racialized violence occurs again and again because Americans, as a society, have lacked the will for a real reckoning in the twentieth century, which is the period where all of these books focus. To deal with the many forms this legacy of racism takes, we must look directly at the roots of the violence, delve deeper into our narratives, stories, and myths, and grapple with who does and should have a right to the city.

In Chicago in 1919, a group of African Americans attempted to enter Lake Michigan at a section reserved for White beachgoers. A young African American teenager named Eugene Williams was floating by on a raft with his friends and crossed an invisible racial line in the water. From shore a White man threw a rock and hit Eugene Williams in the head. The teenager fell into the water and drowned. The police arrested an African American protester rather than the White man who threw the rock. The unrest that was set off in the streets of Chicago following the incident lasted five days and left nearly forty people, mostly African Americans, dead.

This incident pulled from Brian McCammack's *Landscapes of Hope* came to be known as the Chicago race riot of 1919. McCammack explores how southern African Americans who moved to Chicago during the first wave of the Great Migration from 1915 to 1940 used nature to inhabit and create hybrid "landscapes of hope" in the city. However, as the death of Eugene Williams shows, these hopeful and natural cityscapes were also places of racialized violence. Black southern migrants brought both their deep connections to the land and hopes of escaping southern systems of White supremacy. But, as McCammack writes, "Chicago was increasingly becoming a city that resembles the Jim Crow South that migrants had escaped, accelerating and hardening segregation trends established during the Great Migration years even as some other racial barriers were coming down" (p. 114). As some barriers go down, others go up; but they are connected to the same system. Urban greenspaces offered some hope as African Americans claimed spaces as their own, but the parks and beaches in Chicago were also contested environments where different races collided in sometimes deadly ways. Eugene Williams may not be well known outside of Chicago. But, Emmett Till, a son of the Great Migration to Chicago, became a national icon of "southern" racism, "knowing your place," and intense extrajudicial violence going unpunished.

Elliott Gorn uses a narrative approach to history in *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* to explore why this story retains such power. Gorn also analyzes the place-based politics of this specific extrajudicial killing. "The Till story was about race and segregation, of course, but also about big cities and small towns, and about the victors of a long-ago war looking down their noses at the losers" (p. 82). Gorn delves into characters located in specific places and times but reads them through the long lens of history. Gorn's stated goal is to "tell the Emmett Till story well, and to take it seriously as a story" (p. 4). Competing narratives based on the same story are the foundation for our understanding of history, political economy, law, and culture and the analysis of these narratives speaks to how power works and for whom.

Gorn, as many historians before, understands that memory is not always reliable and that our narratives, and cultures, are formed by the ways and the reasons that we remember and forget. But there is an important distinction between a misplaced memory and "willful myopia" (p. 42),

and all misremembering is not innocent. Gorn makes the point that while many White people claim to remember seeing the brutally jarring images of young Emmett Till's mangled face in his open coffin back in the 1950s, the images actually were not published in the White/mainstream media at the time. Black newspapers were the only ones to publish the images that Till's mother Mamie Till Bradley wanted to "let the people see." It was not until reflecting back on the civil rights movement in the 1987 documentary *Eyes on the Prize* that White Americans were forced to confront the disturbing image of a young, innocent teenager lynched for perhaps whistling at a White woman. Yet, White America has never truly reckoned with these images. Police shot and killed Tamir Rice when he was only twelve years old, two years younger than Till was when he was killed. Gorn shows that while we can analyze recollections and primary documents, sometimes what actually happened gets lost in the telling of the story. Of course, some moments in the past will never be fully known by historians. But Eugene Williams drowned in the waters of Lake Michigan in Chicago, Illinois in 1919 and Emmett Till's mangled corpse surfaced in Sumner, Mississippi in 1954 and Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police in Cleveland in 2014.

The story of Emmett Till continues to capture the contemporary imagination because it is tragically similar to the stories of many young Black men today at the hands of the police. Gorn points out, "Our contemporary bloodletting takes place more often in the segregated North than in the South, and police, not civilians, are the killers. Urban racism and poverty form the backdrop, not Jim Crow sharecropping" (p. 292). Yet, how different are the structures of "Jim Crow sharecropping" and "urban racism and poverty" really? As McCammack shows, southern migrants fleeing the structural racism of the South did not escape racism but instead found a different form of it and adapted accordingly in their continued fight to claim space and dignity in the city.

The Strange Careers of Jim Crow North: Segregation and Struggle outside of the South [*Jim Crow North*], the most radical of these books in rethinking history, challenges urban historians to consider the ways in which Jim Crow was born in the North and then migrated to the South. Much more than a revisionist origin story, the editors and authors in this collection grapple with the ways we misremember and its consequences. The introduction to the anthology reads like a manifesto calling for a new way to see race, place, and power, reminding readers that "creating a system of segregation and oppression through law and policy without explicit racial invocations is an age-old northern strategy" (p. 26). Gorn makes a similar point that "all of the high-horse condemnations of the South masked the urban North's own brand of segregation" (p. 250), but *Jim Crow North* delves deeper and gets more specific. In the introduction, editors Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis write: "The southern story continues to hold sway, in part because it makes racism a regional malady rather than a national cancer, expressed in violence and epithets rather than policy imperatives and political sway" (p. 3). The story of Emmett Till's lynching in Mississippi has the cast of characters and tropes straight out of a gothic southern novel, while northern apartheid often hides within the boring and tedious oppression of bureaucracy. This process is similar to how David Graeber's *Utopia of Rules* (2015) unearths bureaucracy as structural violence. "Police are bureaucrats with weapons," he writes.[1]

The authors in *Jim Crow North* show the various ways non-southern racial violence has been perpetrated and points out that using the lens of Jim Crow North "not only helps Americans think differently about the North but also helps them to reconsider one-dimensional understandings of the South and southerners" (p. 7). The authors understand that racism and segregation take different forms in different regions, but paradoxically "Jim Crow, outside of the South, coexisted, even thrived, alongside efforts to reform its worst manifestations in social and

political life" (p. 3). How the bureaucratic racism of northern cities hides behind laws, rules, and its own smug claims to inclusion is exposed in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's recent *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (2019). Taylor's meticulously researched history of how during the 1970s the federal government colluded with the real estate industry on "predatory inclusion," essentially extracting wealth from a poor Black people, often women, by offering access to insured mortgages and the American dream of homeownership in unequal ways that blamed poor people for the failures of the very structural system that exploited them. Predatory inclusion is part of the Jim Crow North because the concept "captures the failures of racial liberalism and its premise that inclusion into American democracy through the vehicles of citizenship, law, and free market capitalism could finally produce fairness and equality for its Black citizens."[2] Young frames the rejection of the social contract and the focus on "states rights" or "local control" as central issues that defy region. She writes:

This was not only a matter for the South, but a critical matter for the North as well. These tensions, impervious to regional distinction, had been laid bare in the ongoing struggle over school desegregation, as bitter in Boston as it was in Little Rock.[3]

Seeing these connections in *Jim Crow North* and *Race for Profit* pushes us toward a new way of seeing power at work. The concluding section of Taylor's book "Against Homeownership," which like Ta-Nehisi Coates's "A Case for Reparations" and *Jim Crow North*, asks Americans, as a nation, to completely rethink our foundational narratives and how to reckon with our past.[4] Reckoning with regionalism and how racism and inequality work is a difficult project to undertake but one that should be central to the field of urban history.

An important conclusion for urban historians from *Jim Crow North* is that Americans must see the structure of U.S. racism as rooted in American liberalism and the American city.

Understanding this racial system necessitates seeing its roots in modern American liberalism; it requires understanding how this system lay at the heart of the creation of the modern American metropolis, was fortified through liberals' defining their cities as *not-the-South*, gained steam after World War II made cultural explanations the necessary ways for liberals to talk about race, and was challenged by black people across the twentieth century. (p. 26)

The "difficulty of seeing" the Jim Crow North is framed using Charles Mills's philosophy of "structured blindness." The inability to see historical actors of the past is similar to Young's argument in *Race to Profit* that women, specifically Black women, have long fought against these complex forms of oppression and been ignored. Yet, Taylor writes that these struggles are not "hidden" as much as they are "marginalized and forgotten."[5]Historical actors, ranging from Black mothers to Black Panthers, have long resisted these forces of oppression. McCammack quotes W. E. B. DuBois's defiant advice to "stand erect in a mud-puddle and tell the white world to go to hell, rather than lick boots in a parlor" (p. 251) to show the unyielding focus of migrants to Chicago on claiming space and dignity. A central thread through the chapters in *Jim Crow North* is that "laying claim to a Jim Crow North takes seriously the ways generations of black writers and activists framed and theorized their own cities as places marred by 'Jim Crow' policies" (p. 10). The more Black agency and activism is foregrounded and White supremacy lurking below the surface is exposed, the experiences of those who inhabit the American metropolis will be more accurately remembered. Remembering is a central part of urban history. The editors of *Jim Crow North* explain that such historical reckoning is "increasingly urgent" today:

To see the history that made the American ghetto, the prison industrial complex, the racial wealth gap, and the crisis in urban education today is to see how the Jim Crow North thrived through explanations that blamed the victims of racism for the causes *and* the effects of racism . . . Perhaps, most important, we cannot, or do not, see the history of the Jim Crow North because our scholarship and policy makers have long dismissed the critiques and protests that northern black activists made about the origins, causes, effects of, and solutions for the social conditions in which they lived. (p. 11)

Such a process is similar to how the general public dismissed claims by residents in overpoliced and underserved neighborhoods concerning police brutality until videos and corruption were clearly unearthed through cell phone and body cameras. Even then, a reckoning with such violence still is unfulfilled in the twenty-first century.

All of the texts under consideration here push urban historians to grapple with how we remember, which is a major aspect of how we do our research. To quote Gorn:

We think of memory [like history] as beginning in clarity then fading with time, but it is rarely so simple. Terrifying events get repressed while things that at first seemed fleeting or ephemeral grow in importance as the years pass. Conversations that felt inconsequential come flooding back, filled with new meaning. Remembrance of things past suddenly brings whole epochs into sharp focus. We reconstruct memories belatedly, imperfectly often through the needs of the present. (p. 249)

Memory itself can be segregated as Gorn shows: "For years, decades, Emmett Till's memory was segregated, whites mostly forgetting, many blacks remembering and turning it into a weapon of liberation" (p. 268). How do we decolonize our own memories and bring that process into the research we create? Gorn writes that most popular history is "not terribly sophisticated" and that "heritage tourism [can be] seen as a path to community revival" (p. 290) but it rarely offers scholars or the public a way to rethink or decolonize our minds.

Narrative-based history, when done well, presents us with a new way to remember, which also entails new ways of seeing moving forward. The most exemplary recent example of a new way of seeing urban history is Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), which allows the African American women of U.S. cities to speak in ways historical scholarship has not achieved before. Hartman writes in the introductory "A Note on Method":

Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.[6]

Hartman's work reckons with race, place, and power and takes gender, sexuality, and class as part of her project and creates one of the most haunting and memorable works of scholarship so far in the twenty-first century. She centers marginal voices from the past with both research and imagination to produce a "narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia."[7]

Gorn's final chapter, "You must never look away from this," which is an allusion to the Coates quote that begins this essay, also attempts to reckon with the archives of memory and history. He concludes with a reflection on the controversy surrounding *Open Casket*, a painting featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial by White artist Dana Schutz. The central controversy surrounding the painting was should a White artist profit off of Black pain, is it ethical? Gorn concludes his

book with questions all urban historians should ask ourselves concerning the ethics of our work and its role in both upholding and fighting different forms of oppression, which are threads that run through all of the works under consideration here.

Who "owns" particular stories? Can we truly understand each other across chasms of race or other identities? By what right do the beneficiaries of privilege presume to depict the experiences of those less fortunate? Is there an obligation to identity and condemn oppression across barriers of wealth, race, gender, ethnicity, or other social categories that divide us? When does creative expression become exploitation? Is censorship ever appropriate, especially in our politically charged times? (p. 295)

Like Gorn, the authors and editors of all works under consideration here conclude by reflecting on the role of their research and scholarship in the larger social and political world of now. They all also reflect on the fact that they are writing history and doing research in a critical moment for American memory and politics. Gorn ruminates in his introduction on the fact that he wrote *Let the People See* during the period between Barack Obama's election as the first Black president of the United States and the election of Donald Trump. The editors of *Jim Crow North* conclude their introduction by reflecting on issues of racism deeply embedded in American history and the American city become even more urgent as Donald Trump, "whose racist discourses and practices were homegrown in the Jim Crow North," has become president. And McCammack's book, presumably in press before the election of Trump, ends with a reflection on hope.

McCammack writes: "This was the Chicago into which Michelle Obama (nee Robinson) was born in 1964. A product of the Great Migration, Michelle's grandparent has migrated to Chicago from the South" (p. 255). Even while his book complicates the hope at the heart of the Great Migration, McCammack chooses to end with a reflection of the stories that arise in complicated ways from the ravages of the histories of American racism in the city. He moves his own historical topic into the present and explains: "The South Side's landscapes of hope run through the life stories of Michelle and Barack Obama, just as they do for countless black Chicagoans past and present" (p. 256). He references Obama's presidential library located by Jackson Park, a greenspace important to African American history in the city, and writes that a "central piece of the legacy of the nation's first black president may help write the next chapter in the story of black Chicago's landscapes of hope" (p. 257). However, the final line of his epilogue tempers that hope with stark reality:

Still among the most segregated and impoverished areas in the nation, plagued with school closures, record levels of gun violence, and a police presence that many community members believe hurts more than it helps, Chicago's South Side is in need of hope now as much as ever. (p. 257)

Yet, it is within the slivers of hope that we research and write our histories of the American city. However, we cannot let our own hope blind us to the complex inequalities of the past and the often-overlooked resistance to them. These books and this moment ask scholars of the U.S. metropolis to reckon with our pasts as we write our histories with an eye toward the future.

Notes

1.David Graeber, *Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn/London: Melville House, 2015), 72.

2.Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 8.

3.Ibid., 242.

4.Ibid., 258-62; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "A Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.

5.Taylor, *Race for Profit*, 23.

6.Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), xii.

7.Ibid., xii.

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