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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Blair A. Ruble. *Washington's U Street: A Biography*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010. xviii + 410 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9800-6.

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Commissioned by Mary Beth Corrigan

Ruble's groundbreaking work, *Washington's U Street: A Biography*, grapples with the mixed legacy of one of Washington, DC's most important, yet sorely understudied, commercial corridors. Ruble carefully constructs a biographical history of U Street in northwest Washington that highlights the accomplishments of everyday people in the neighborhood, while simultaneously giving life to the area's buildings, streets, and educational and cultural institutions, particularly those of the African American community. This comparative urban history builds upon the work of Washington scholars such as Constance McLaughlin Green and Howard Gillette.[1] The interdisciplinary nature of the book allows the presentation of issues relevant to several academic fields including urban, cultural, and political studies.

The book is arranged chronologically from antebellum Washington to the first decade of the twenty-first century "New You." The "New You" is defined by election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States, a moment that was celebrated in the streets at the intersection of 14th and U streets. The introduction to the book establishes the idea of U Street as a "Contact Zone," a motif that Ruble continues to employ throughout the work. Washington, Ruble argues, is more than the L'Enfant Plan. A central point to Ruble's work, one that is consistent in other studies of Washington, is the political, social, and cultural ambiguity of the city. Ruble shares urban historian Carl Abbott's belief that Washington defies definition by virtue of its function as the seat of the federal government and geographical location between North and South.[2] The city manages to elude any one frame of reference, and Ruble diligently creates a narrative that describes a strong and vibrant local community with long-established ties to the African American traditions of the South and the distinct lifestyle of the nation's capital.

The chapters in *Washington's U Street* are divided thematically in addition to the chronological organization of

the book. The initial two chapters, "Ambiguous Roots" and "A City 'Like the South,'" trace the roots of black residents in the city before, during, and after the Civil War, emphasizing the migratory patterns of blacks leaving southern states for Washington. Ruble situates Washington within a network of three cities that include St. Louis and Baltimore that had a black population consisting of a majority of free blacks by the outbreak of the Civil War. Contraband camps set up during the Civil War and the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau also added to the early important presence of blacks in the city. Ruble therefore refutes the idea that Washington became an important center of African American life only beginning in the early twentieth century. This point is significant to Ruble and other scholars of Washington history such as James Borchert, Kathleen Lesko, Valerie Babb, and Carroll R. Gibbs because it emphasizes the contributions of free and enslaved African Americans to early life in the republic.[3]

The third and fourth chapters, "Confronting the Nation" and "Black Broadway," document the rise of the U Street area as a destination point for the politically vocal "New Negro" black intelligentsia and for a variety of entertainment venues hosting the freshest young talent. U Street in the early twentieth century provided the scene for mingling between Howard University professors such as Carter G. Woodson and Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington. Ruble argues that thoughts, ideas, and innovations happening in and around U Street were a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance, with some of the same minds noted for their contribution to Harlem's distinct period of cultural production actively engaged in creative and political work in Washington.

The final two chapters, "Chocolate City" and "The New You," confront the political and racial turbulence of the 1960s, argue against the narrative of decline in the 1970s and 1980s, and tread carefully through the complexities of the rapid contemporary gentrification in the

neighborhood. Ruble does not demonize major antagonists in these decades such as Marion Barry and the gentrifiers who transformed the neighborhood. Instead, he presents a full portrait of the complicated racial tensions and political economy in the nation's capital.

This important book seeks to redefine and emphasize the oft-overlooked and complicated local history of the nation's capital. Ruble creates a dialogue about the sense of place and rootedness of the neighborhood that engages similar "cultural contact zones" in destinations as varied as the calle Corrientes area in Buenos Aires, Asakusa in Tokyo, and Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. This comparative methodology serves the function of debunking the myth of Washington as a one-dimensional exceptional city, anomalous and incomprehensible.[4]

In addition to Ruble's comparative approach to urban studies and Washington history, he employs a particularly useful and innovative way to bookmark the end of each section. He highlights two influential protagonists during the time period covered in the chapter, pulling out richer detail on particular individuals, and reemphasizes the connection of individuals to the institutions of the U Street area and the nation. His research also builds on the work of other important scholars of Washington history and melds sources such as the fictional literature of Edward P. Jones, doctoral dissertations from local universities, District of Columbia Office of Planning pamphlets, and *Washington Post* articles to create a fuller picture of the way U Street has captured the literary imagination, prompted development studies for the city, and is understood within the local context.

Rigorous research was required for the production of this book; however, there are a few areas for improvement in the organization of the materials. The dissemination of the information is often repetitive within and across the chapters. Additionally, there is a tendency to allow the narrative chronology to flow past the argumentative point of a sentence or paragraph. There are moments in which Ruble highlights a particular institution or person in a specific time period, continues to discuss

at length contemporary issues regarding that institution, and then returns to talking about institution/person in the past. This weakens the narrative and makes it difficult to follow.

Despite these few issues, Ruble's argumentative voice in matters pertaining to the local/national dichotomy of life in the nation's capital is clear. This book, as a biography of a place, is a testament to the telling of stories of the people of U Street, and as such, it advocates for their stories to be heard. By giving life to the people and times of the neighborhood in such rich detail, Ruble is laying the groundwork for an argument about the resilience of human nature in the face of discrimination—be it racial, gender-based, or political.

Notes

[1]. See Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); and Howard Gillette Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, DC* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[2]. Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, DC, from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[3]. See James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); and Kathleen Lesko, Valerie Babb, and Carroll R. Gibbs, *Black Georgetown Remembered: A History of Its Black Community from the Founding of "The Town of George" in 1751 to the Present Day* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

[4]. Ruble has previously published books on comparative urban studies including *Creating Diversity Capital: Transnational Migrants in Montreal, Washington, and Kyiv* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), and *Second Metropolis: Pragmatic Pluralism in Gilded Age Chicago, Silver Age Moscow, and Meiji Osaka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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