H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alesia Montgomery. ***Greening the Black Urban Regime: The Culture and Commerce of Sustainability in Detroit (Great Lakes Books Series).*** Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020. 332 pp. $34.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-8143-4651-8.

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In her new book, ***Greening the Black Urban Regime***, Alesia Montgomery has effectively woven together urban anthropology, African American studies, and political ecology to produce an original and rewarding ethnographic account of twenty-first-century Detroit, Michigan. On one level, ***Greening the Black Urban Regime*** can be read as a richly detailed analysis of race, class, and urban environmental politics in a very specific time and place. The bulk of the book's narrative builds on Montgomery's fieldwork in Detroit in 2010-13, primarily but not only in the gentrifying neighborhoods in and near downtown, although the book includes material from subsequent research trips and wide reading in Detroit and global history. On another level, it is a broader contribution to urban political theory whose insights can be applied and tested in a wide variety of other cities.

Over the past decade, urban anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have produced a burgeoning literature on "green gentrification," examining local contexts where environmental politics (from struggles over parks, farmer's markets, and bike lanes to industrial pollution, public transit, and disaster recovery) collide uneasily with struggles against the pricing out and over-policing of poor and working-class people of color. The anthropologist Melissa Checker has coined the term "sustainaphrenia" to describe the contradictory commitment of mayors like Michael Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio to both green redevelopment and the relentless intensification of rents and property values. In the United States, much of the critical literature on these topics has focused on the coastal gentrification hotspots of New York City and the Bay Area, although scholars have applied the concept to cities as diverse as Chennai, Seoul, Huangzhou, and São Paulo.[1]

Montgomery examines these tensions in a Rust Belt city where gentrification is less space-extensive and rent-intensive than in coastal cities, and where African Americans remain the overwhelming majority of the population, despite a recent influx of disproportionately white professionals. But Montgomery has done more than bring Detroit into green gentrification debates dominated by coastal case studies. As she notes in the first chapter, "this is not another book about greenwashing or gentrification or eviction or harsh policing" (p. 5). While Montgomery observed all of these phenomena in her fieldwork in Detroit, she is as interested in African American agency as she is in oppression, exploitation, and dispossession. As she observes, "Detroit—the largest majority black US city—has much to teach about black agency" (p. 28).

As a work of theory, the book's most original contribution is to synthesize recent work on race, class, and urban environmental justice with an older literature on "Black urban regimes," a concept first introduced by political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. in a 1988 essay and revised for a chapter in his 1999 book, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*.[2] To my knowledge, Montgomery is the first scholar to explicitly put these literatures into conversation, and the result is a refreshingly nuanced and multidimensional account of urban environmental politics. Montgomery brings the kind of fine-grained intraracial class analysis to debates about urban greening that scholars like Mary Pattillo, Michelle R. Boyd, and Preston H. Smith II have done for housing.[3]

During the 2010-13 period at the heart of the book, Detroit was under the administration of Mayor Dave Bing, the last of an unbroken line of African American mayors in Detroit that began with Coleman Young (1974-94), and continued through Dennis Archer (1994-2001), Kwame Kilpatrick (2001-08), and interim mayor Kenneth Cockrel Jr. (2008-09). Governing in the aftermath of the subprime mortgage meltdown, the near-collapse of the US auto industry, and the resignation of Kilpatrick amid a storm of corruption scandals, Bing adopted a "right-sizing" agenda called the Detroit Works Project (DWP), rechristened as the Detroit Future City (DFC) plan in 2013. Not unlike the Urban Land Institute's plan for post-Katrina New Orleans, DFC controversially combined the discourse of urban ecological sustainability with the planned decommissioning of predominantly African American neighborhoods which had already been suffering from decades of disinvestment and cuts in municipal public services.[4]

Coming after a series of contentious public forums which activists criticized as undemocratic and pseudo-participatory, DFC coincided with the mass dispossession of African American homeowners through predatory subprime and tax foreclosures; a downtown redevelopment process dominated by a small group of white male billionaires led by Dan Gilbert; and the imposition of an unelected emergency manager on Detroit in 2013-14 by Governor Rick Snyder (who earned national notoriety in the contemporaneous Flint water crisis). This was a period when Detroit experienced the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, the suspension of democracy under state takeover, and a water service disconnection policy so cruel and inhumane that it was condemned by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

These events, occurring in a Black-majority city surrounded by mostly white-majority suburbs, under a white Republican governor, were inevitably racialized. So, too, were the politics of green redevelopment in Detroit during the same period. As Montgomery makes clear, the beneficiaries of Detroit's transformation in the 2010s were disproportionately white, while the victims were disproportionately Black. However, she is too astute and careful an ethnographer to paint a dichromatic picture of good and evil or gain and loss in the city. Instead, she describes "a complex political dynamic as the white middle and upper classes return to the financial core of central cities, interacting with whites (some destitute) who never left these cities and African Americans of all classes (including black gentrifiers and an affluent old guard with long-established enclaves)" (p. 13). Montgomery is no less interested in the role of African American politicians, entrepreneurs, and middle-class professionals in the politics of "right-sizing" and green redevelopment than she is in that of blue-collar workers, working-class retirees, and the homeless and precariously housed. She also introduces us to Asian American, Latinx, Native American, and white Detroiters of varying class backgrounds and with varying roles in the city's political, economic, and cultural landscape.

Greening the Black Urban Regime is divided into six parts, whose titles alternately evoke the Hebrew Bible, the annals of the Roman Empire, and African American folklore: “Empire and the Garden” (part 1), “Paradise Lost” (part 2), “Redemption” (part 3), “The Forum” (part 4), “Consilium Principis” (part 5), and “Naming the Baby” (part 6). In each part, consisting of two to five chapters, Montgomery blends vignettes derived from ethnographic fieldwork and autoethnography; critical reviews of the academic literature on cities, race, class, and sustainability; reflections on nature, history, and philosophy written in a poetic style influenced by magic realism; and qualitative data analysis. Montgomery’s approach is eclectic in the best sense of the word, and therefore difficult to summarize. Rather than trying to encapsulate all the book’s chapters in this review, I will focus on two of the book’s major themes: the relationship between Detroit’s Black urban regime and “urban greening,” and the politics of language (particularly what Montgomery calls “justice-speak”).

Montgomery begins part 1 with a pointed question: “Why Doesn’t Black Political Power Save Black Lives?” While updated for the era of Black Lives Matter, Obama, and Trump, Montgomery’s question echoes a central paradox identified by Reed in his original 1988 essay, “The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints.” As Reed noted, “black regimes” —which he defined as “black-led and black-dominated administrations backed by solid council majorities”—governed thirteen US cities with populations over 100,000 by the mid-1980s. On the one hand, this indicated a high-water mark in local political representation for African Americans since the Reconstruction era. On the other hand, despite the high hopes that their elections inspired, Reed observed that “black mayors have been unable to affect the high levels of poverty and unemployment that characterize the cities over which they preside.”[5]

Reed challenged both the liberal pluralist celebration of Black mayors as the culmination of “ethnic succession”—following the footsteps of groups like the Irish in Boston—and moralistic radical denunciations of them as sell-outs. He credited them with reducing (although hardly eliminating) police brutality, as Young did by abolishing the murderous STRESS police unit, and with implementing affirmative action programs in city government and contracting. Although Reed argued that their “racially redistributive” effects were concentrated among the African American middle class, he noted that these policies produced some benefits for working-class and poor residents. However, he explained how Black mayors’ ability to help the latter was constrained by deindustrialization, the loss of white and later Black middle-class residents to the suburbs, and the hostility of suburban whites to regional resource sharing with increasingly Black inner cities. Moreover, Black mayors were no less committed than their white predecessors to a “growth machine” logic that privileged capital over labor and upward over downward redistribution. They did so for both structural reasons (reliance on corporate elites for investment to generate jobs and tax revenues, access to municipal credit, and campaign contributions), and ideological ones (the hegemony of what Reed called a “pro-growth framework” in ruling-class social networks and the mass media).[6]

Writing from the perspective of Detroit in the 2010s, Montgomery describes a situation which is both similar to and different from that described by Reed over thirty years before. As Montgomery shows, the high rates of poverty and unemployment among African American residents, and the power of white corporate elites to shape development, had not only persisted since the era of Coleman Young. If anything, both had intensified. What was new was the convergence of two recent trends: the “return” of capital and the white middle class to the urban core, and the process of “urban greening,” in which Black elites like Harvard-based architect and DWP consultant Toni Griffin, and Detroit Riverfront Conservancy CEO Faye Alexander Nelson, played key roles. Montgomery uses the term “urban greening” broadly, to describe everything from the proliferation of organic food shops, urban farms, and bike share stations to the rhetoric of sustainability in the DWP and DFC. In Montgomery's telling, while racism, class inequality, and corporate power shape the politics of urban greening in Detroit, they do not entirely determine its character. For Montgomery, urban greening is neither an innocuous cure-all nor a mere Trojan horse for white supremacy and neoliberalism. Rather, it is a terrain of contestation where activists and everyday residents challenge "the deceptive multiracial rainbow of elite alliances" for control over the city's future (p. 32).

Near the end of the book, Montgomery reflects on the 2013 election of Mike Duggan, the first white mayor of Detroit since Roman Gribbs (1970-74). Montgomery argues that "Duggan's election ended the semblance of a black urban regime, but black control of the city was already over" (p. 245). This certainly rings true, although it raises questions about what "black control" meant in the past and when precisely it ended. Montgomery rightly notes that "Dan Gilbert and a few wealthy white businessmen steered Detroit" by 2013. She might have also added that, even before Governor Rick Snyder placed Detroit under the unelected emergency manager Kevyn Orr, Michigan's state government had taken over the Detroit Public Schools in 1999, despite the fact that the district was running a budget surplus, and proceeded to create a $17.2 million deficit while closing dozens of schools and reducing enrollment by over half. The state of Michigan had also already imposed emergency managers in the Detroit suburbs of Ecorse in 1990, Hamtramck in 2000, and Highland Park in 2001, where they privatized core city government functions and slashed public services to the bare minimum (policies that emergency managers would repeat in Flint in 2011-13, leading directly to the mass poisoning of city residents). Even before Dan Gilbert spent billions buying up downtown properties, taking advantage of the post-2008 collapse in property values—to which his firm, Quicken Loans, contributed by selling hundreds of fraudulent subprime FHA loans in the city—local democratic representation in metropolitan Detroit had already been hollowed out.[7] Montgomery is correct to argue that these developments were long in the making.

Still, the question of when Detroit's Black urban regime "ended" remains debatable. As the Detroit scholar and artist-activist Gloria House argued in her 1991 book, ***Tower and Dungeon: A Study of Place and Power in American Culture,*** Detroit's white corporate elite never left Detroit after the 1967 rebellion. As House documented, they fortified the downtown business district, as exemplified by the Renaissance Center (opened in 1977), even while disinvesting from the surrounding city. House viewed the protection of such hyper-surveilled citadels of wealth and power, and the post-rebellion buildout of the carceral state in places like Jackson State Prison, as intimately linked and profoundly racialized processes.[8] One advantage of the Black urban regime framework is that it keeps such continuities in view, while placing them in a perspective that acknowledges the power of African American elected officials and entrepreneurs. In highlighting intraracial class inequalities that pluralist and nationalist perspectives tend to paper over, it also problematizes the concept of "community" as applied to racial representation in politics. Indeed, it begs the question: to what extent (and for whom) did "black control" of Detroit exist under Coleman Young?

I do not pose this question to suggest that Montgomery is wrong that Detroit's African American elected officials lost power well before Duggan's election. Clearly, the mechanisms of municipal self-government were increasingly hollowed out in the 1990s and 2000s. Rather, I submit that the periodization and character of Detroit's Black urban regime remains an open question in need of further investigation. Here, Cedric Johnson's concept of the "half-life" of Black urban regimes may be useful for understanding Detroit in the post-Young period. For Johnson, the “half-life” refers to a transition period between an earlier wave of Black-dominated urban regimes overtly committed to racial redistribution, albeit on terms that skewed toward the middle class, and “a multicultural, corporate-centered growth coalition impervious to traditional appeals for racial redress.”[9] This helps make sense of Dave Bing’s brand of technocratic-entrepreneurial rhetoric, which Montgomery revealingly contrasts with the populist language of Coleman Young in a chapter entitled “State of the City” (pp. 97-108).

In this section as in others, one of the strengths of *Greening the Black Urban Regime* is Montgomery’s meticulous attention to language and the structure of narratives about Detroit. In the book’s methodological appendix, Montgomery explains that she “prioritized harvesting the *naturally occurring speech* (chats, tweets, blogs, ephemera, public meetings, street performances) deployed to shape views and practices.” She is “more interested in observing how people actually use symbolic, social, and material resources in social struggles than in recording how they frame these struggles to me as a researcher” (p. 258). In one chapter, Montgomery uses the lapsarian concept of a “narrative of the fall” to explore how Detroiters from various backgrounds—Black, white, Latinx, and Asian American; working-class, middle-class, and wealthy—tell stories about Detroit’s past in relation to its present (pp. 75-92). In others, Montgomery introduces readers to Michael, a forty-something former auto worker who views the world as a battle for survival (pp. 93-96); compares the moral philosophy of Black and white business owners in the Corridor (also known as the Cass Corridor, recently rebranded as Midtown) (pp. 133-153); examines how urban farmers, nonprofit staffers, artists, and musicians conceptualize African American liberation and democracy (pp. 155-172); and scrutinizes the agendas of urban planners, developers, and politicians (pp. 175-228). In these chapters, Montgomery strikes a difficult balance between taking her subjects’ ideas seriously and recognizing the vast inequalities that exist between people like Michael, middle-class professionals, and the city’s power elite.

In a chapter entitled “Justice-Speak in City Plans,” Montgomery compares the master plans and sustainability plans from thirty-two cities, including fifteen “Historical Black Urban Regimes” (HBURs) and “seventeen non-HBURs that have white majorities or are politically conservative” (p. 231). She ranks them in a “Justice-Speak Index” based on their use of “just sustainability” discourse (a concept developed by urban and environmental planner Julian Agyeman), as measured by references to social equity and climate change. She finds that “severely depopulated” HBURs like Detroit are the most likely to refer to race and class injustice in city plans (pp. 231-232), although “the framing of equity in HBURs that do not have severe population loss is similar to the language of the whitest and the most politically conservative US cities” (p. 241). As for climate change, Montgomery finds that HBURs and non-HBURs have “similar scores,” as do severely depopulated and non-depopulated HBURs (p. 237).

These findings are fascinating, and Montgomery’s explanation of her data-gathering process in the methodological appendix (pp. 262-265) is helpful. Still, this chapter left me wondering about the significance of “justice-speak” in city plans. After all, politicians like Cory Booker can adeptly deploy justice-speak, as Montgomery shows in a quote on p. 239. However, they do so while embracing the neoliberal view, as Michael C. Dawson and Megan Ming Francis have written in reference to Booker, “that the state should have a very limited role in addressing racial and economic disadvantage.”[10] Earlier in the book, Montgomery demonstrates that although some activists and small business owners in Detroit embrace this view of the state, others continue to reject it and demand adequate funding for public education and services like mental healthcare (pp. 143, 148-149). The tension between small-scale voluntarism and large-scale problems whose solutions require public services and social programs is also evident in city plans themselves. As Montgomery observes of city plans, “even when justice is stated as an aim, the definition of justice and the proposed steps to achieve it are often stated vaguely or made to mean less controversial things such as being a good neighbor” (pp. 240-241). To her credit, Montgomery recognizes that justice-speak is not enough; social movement pressure and changes in law and public policy are necessary to transform urban planning. She argues that “cross-place organizing” to compel “federal and state governments to mandate additional local safeguards for racialized and impoverished groups” could lead to “more justice-speak—articulated with greater clarity—in city plans, even in places with local resistance” (ibid). I hope that she is right.

Greening the Black Urban Regime is easily the best ethnographic account available of twenty-first- century Detroit. It is a substantial contribution to urban political theory, African American studies, and sustainability studies, and it is also a good read. Montgomery’s arguments about race, class, and green redevelopment could yield fresh insights if applied to other cities, and not only HBURs. Perhaps most importantly, this book should compel scholars to grapple with the complexity of African American agency in urban environmental politics.

Notes

[1]. Melissa Checker, *The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Joshua Sbicca, Alison Hope Alkon, and Yuri Kato, eds., *A Recipe for Gentrification: Food, Power, and Resistance in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Winifred Curran and Trina Hamilton, eds., *Just Green Enough: Urban Development and Environmental Gentrification* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Kenneth Gould and Tammy Lewis, *Green Gentrification: Urban Sustainability and the Struggle for Environmental Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Alison Hope Alkon, *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

[2]. Adolph Reed Jr., “The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints,” in *Power, Community, and the City: Comparative Urban and Community* Research, ed. Michael Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), 138-89; Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 79-115. Also see the retrospective symposium on Reed’s essay published in *Labor Studies Journal* 41, no. 3 (2016), with essays by Cedric Johnson, Cynthia Horan, Timothy Weaver, and Larry Bennett, with a response from Reed.

[3]. Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Michelle R. Boyd, *Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy in the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[4]. Barbara L. Allen, “Laboratization and the ‘Green’ Rebuilding of New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward,” in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans,* ed. Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 225-44; Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 141-44; Jason Hackworth, *Manufacturing Decline: How Racism and the Conservative Movement Crush the American Rust Belt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 186-97.

[5]. Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 79-80.

[6]. Ibid., 80-105.

[7]. "From the Daily: Money Mismanaged," *The Michigan Daily*, August 12, 2015; Ashley E. Nickels, "Approaches to Municipal Takeover: Home Rule Erosion and State Intervention in Michigan and New Jersey," *State and Government Review* 48, no. 3 (2016): 194-207; "U.S. Sues Quicken for Improper Mortgage Lending," *Detroit News*, April 23, 2015.

[8]. Gloria House, *Tower and Dungeon: A Study of Place and Power in American Culture* (Detroit: Casa De Unidad Press, 1991).

[9]. Cedric Johnson, "The Half-Life of the Black Urban Regime: Adolph Reed, Jr. on Race, Capitalism, and Urban Governance," *Labor Studies Journal* 41, no. 3 (2016): 248-55; 253.

[10]. Michael C. Dawson and Megan Ming Francis, "Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order," *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 23-62; 28.

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