Free space is valuable space: lessons from *Chocolate Cities*

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ABSTRACT
In our reading of Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life as a work of liberation sociology, we discuss contributions to Black critical thought and praxis this book uniquely makes. Hunter and Robinson craft a Black-owned analytical approach by rezoning the United States map into a charting of African American social and cultural milestones. To apply the re-centering methodological and theoretical innovations this book encourages, we extend its themes to the contested racialized terrains of literacy and education in the US. One contemporary response to systemic educational racism, Black homeschooling, is reconceptualized as a resistance movement. Inspired by the provocative work Hunter and Robinson have done, we situate the Black homeschooling within the tradition of critical Black thought, and its enduring emancipatory warrant.

Our comments reflect a close reading of *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* as a work of liberation sociology, an application that furthers "human emancipation from exploitative and dominative structures" (Feagin, Vera, and Ducey 2015, 262). To do so, we first comment on the contributions to Black critical thought and praxis this book uniquely makes. Next, we turn to a potential application of the methodological and theoretical innovations this book shows by considering the racial history of US education. Finally, we extend the book's themes by reading anew a resistance movement within US education: homeschooling as practiced by African American families.

As an innovative work in urban sociology, *Chocolate Cities* continues the important goals of liberation sociology. Hunter and Robinson (2018, xii–xiii) "provide a different way of seeing Blackness, Black places, geography, the past, present and future. This is a book about the enduring and overlapping connection that is Blackness and Black people here, there, and

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globally everywhere". This book is centrally about how Black Americans have made and still make spaces for themselves, everywhere in US urban and rural landscapes. The authors develop this original and provocative sociological account not only through statistical data but also through narratives and imagery of real people in authentic urban and rural settings. They foreground a mix of documentation, including stories of real people like Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, and contemporary Hip Hop artists like Mos Def.

In his previous book, *Black Citymakers* (2013), Marcus Hunter provided a cutting-edge effort in sociologically informed analysis of complexities of Black life in urban areas. There he does an astute job of tracking socio-historically the growth and decline of a famous Black neighbourhood, Philadelphia's seventh ward. With an eye toward broad structural changes such as deindustrialization and Black residents' responses to urban renewal and housing problems, Hunter crafted a central argument that places urban Black residents at the heart of major city developments.

Building in part on their conceptual and empirical work for *Black Citymakers* and Robinson's (2014) *This Ain't Chicago*, Hunter and Robinson have developed in *Chocolate* Cities a broadly appealing book accenting yet more original analysis of African Americans and US cities. Their analysis indicates well that they are leading social scientists not only in examining deeply and realistically the movements, neighbourhoods, culture, and lives of Black urbanites but also in challenging conventional urban social science analyses and enhancing re-theorizing with regard to the realities of systemic urban racism inherited from the past, and still operative. This original book on US cities is eloquently written and should entice many readers inside and outside academia into deeper understandings of the realities of urban African America.

A key theme about urban Black issues is dramatically underscored – that for African Americans the "South", as place and cultural reality, consists of the *entire* US expanse below Canada. "Our current maps of Black life are wrong" (Hunter and Robinson 2018, 3). We must go well beyond the regional and urban maps of conventional social science and examine "how Black people made and live within their own maps, whether in response to and/or in spite of institutional discrimination" (19). In recent years we have seen good trade and scholarly books on the famous Black urban migrations, such as the Great Migration from southern to northern cities in the mid-20th century (e.g. Isabel Wilkerson's (2011) *The Warmth of Other Suns*), but that is only one of many migrations made by African Americans since the seventeenth century. From that era to the 1960s there was much forced, and some significant voluntary, migration long before that Great Migration – and indeed there is much Black movement going on in the present day.

"To dance our way"[1]

Using personal narratives and other cultural material (e.g. music and musicians, other artists, intellectuals), Hunter and Robinson demonstrate how Black migrations greatly changed US urban spaces, including those of Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Memphis, Los Angeles, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Dallas, among many others. Numerous "northern" cities with modest Black populations, over decades, became substantial "Chocolate Cities". They became part of a broader Black demographic and cultural "South". This book demonstrates, with much digging into forgotten social science and literary data, that the US is "Black" as well as "White" at its urban core.

Hunter and Robinson craft a Black-owned analytical approach by rezoning something so abstracted as a US map. In doing so, they bequeath to emerging and older race scholars methodological tools for explaining Black realities such as Malcolm X's famous "south of the Canadian border" principle and common Black mapping methods' foundational premise that "the South is not merely the common geographic location below the Mason-Dixon line. [The South] is … America" (43). Even more important than permission, this self-centering work gives race scholars a mandate to re-center Black realities as valid knowledge production resources. Other encouraging examples of this Black-owned turn in social science include Bracey's (2016, 11) exhortation that "Black movements need Black theorizing", and Liu's (2018) use of Black-generated frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality Theory to take inventory of recently lauded social science literatures. Considering the structural obstacles previously confronting the kind of intensive Black theorizing that *Chocolate Cities* models and emancipates (e.g. Black theorists' being excluded from academic positions with power to bestow legitimacy), it is not surprising that such ungeneralizable and incomplete explanations as last century's prominent "assimilation" theories were uncritically advanced (Scott 1973). "We were not in the room for the peer review, but we are re-viewing these things now", some scholars from previously marginalized groups might be inclined to say.

In addition to methodological contributions, Hunter and Robinson make explicit a public-facing epistemology derived from African American cultural production. There are cautionary tales of "pencil and paper" discrimination (41), which signalled that a more sophisticated structural aggression awaited those Black migrants who might have hoped to leave the South's oppressions behind. There are lyrical "midnight trains" to "simpler places and times" (see 54) that signal that the story of Black uplift is not unidirectional, but often just a round trip from one "South" to another, and back again. There is also the racial realism of Tupac Shakur's editorializing his "learn-to-be-a-nigger-scars" (108). Hunter and Robinson accent throughout the relatively obvious theme of "Black density", the Black Villages that

take form as a "critical mass of Black residents sharing and taking up space". They also demonstrate the less depicted urban "Black Soul" – the ways in which these "South" – shaped cities have long served as "sites of historical and contemporary Black cultural production and dissemination" (e.g. the Harlem Renaissance, Detroit's Motown, Memphis' Stax Records). The message to academics could be that if we are to take up the mandate of a more public sociology, *all* the public's epistemologies should be resources for scholarly theorizing.

One of the key innovations of *Chocolate Cities* is how Hunter and Robinson (2018) conduct "asset-based social science on Black communities" (xi). They exceed conventional urban social science's limiting framing of Black life – framing that up until about the 1990s overwhelmingly viewed Black communities in heavy deficit (i.e. "ghetto") terms they critique. Counter-framing done by marginalized people is disruptive to strategies white elites, academic and non-academic, have for maintaining dominance (Feagin 2010). Liberatory exhortations have always put critical-thought leaders at risk. For liberatory social scientists in the tradition of DuBois, the perils have career-limiting consequences (Morris 2015). Institutionalized white positivist supremacy in scholarly journal publishing has been powerful enough that many scholars of colour have adopted survival mechanisms like speaking in acceptable vocabularies and displaying signals in one's work that (mostly) white positivist-oriented editors and reviewers will view as legitimate (Feagin, Vera, and Ducey 2015). Emancipatory social scientists have to circumvent academic conditioning that accents seeking the permission and approval of such extant white scholarly structures.

"Out of our constrictions"

Although scholars of colour like Hunter and Robinson can today exert more intellectual agency than before, it is unwise to misread or compress the historical context for African American intellectual life. Black literacy and numeracy have *always* been contested terrain in the United States, especially in the slave/Jim Crow states of the traditional South. Because literacy might have facilitated "liberty" via the ability to forge passes or decode escape plans, enslaved African Americans risked severe punishment if they demonstrated that intellectual capacity (Williams 2005). The very existence of literacy and other Black intellectual capital has historically implied a critique of racist power relations. Critical Black thought has always had an emancipatory edge.

Today, in response to widespread problems in US public schooling, increasing numbers of African American families are choosing to provide for children's education through critical homeschooling – that is, "a form of private education that is parent led and home based" and "does not rely on either state-run public schooling or institutional private schooling" (Ray 2015, 72).

Although many parents cite religious reasons for homeschooling, African American parents additionally report distinctive race-related motivations (Fields-Smith and Williams 2009; Ray 2015). African American parents report they want to shield their children from "negative experiences in schools" and "low teacher expectations due to negatively held race-based stereotypes" (Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013, 272–273). While the general US homeschooling movement is sociologically significant because it signals resistance to the state, the African American homeschooling movement is an even sterner critique of the US state's systemic and institutional racism.

There is hardly a more ubiquitous Black presence in today's US cities than in public education systems. This institutional schooling, under control of the hegemonic state that has institutionalized most racial segregation, has been touched by the same forces as for chocolate cities, chocolate villages, and the other "Souths", yet is an area of spatial arrangements and negotiations not explored fully in this book. Let us reflect briefly on this significant omission.

A more fleshed-out picture of US chocolate cities needs to have more children's faces put to it. For each census statistic showing where urban or rural Black folk were in 1940, there is correspondingly revealing history of educational resources (or lack thereof) available at the time. For each urban Black population shift and surge in the famous 1960s and 1970s, there were racial issues around neighbourhood schools that set elements of daily life in motion. Then as now, all issues around urban spatial arrangements from real estate redlining to racialized gentrification have public classrooms in their midst. Each issue foreshadows or reflects what happens to the schoolchildren of Black families, who are too often negative post-industrial employment statistics. Given their integral role in urban communities, yet their still colonial-esque operating racial hierarchies, public schools and their outcomes, gaps, and defectors must also be explained by more emancipatory research like that of Hunter and Robinson.

Because spaces for the Black teaching cadre were the first to be gentrified (Fairclough 2004) as a consequence of one-way desegregation, chocolate villages are often missing many Black elders. If the Black village is "the fundamental unit or nucleus for chocolate cities and Black geographies" (Hunter and Robinson 2018, 59), traditionally white-designed classrooms and curricula have never provided that kind of village. What good is a village without elders "committed to Black education, uplift, and self-determination?" (61). A principal use of Black intellectual space is resisting the permanence of such white dominance. For the first moment in the history of African life in the Americas, a wide swath of the Black population holds in their homes and villages, enough intellectual capital to be able to educate their children as they see fit. The pregnant "agencies" of Black Americans about which anti-lynching

activist Ida B. Wells so eloquently spoke (see 63) are come to fruition – at the hands of Black parents engaging in homeschooling.

"Here's a chance"

Over time and across circumstances, that which is emancipatory is highly context-dependent. When one considers that African Americans have histori- cally been a mostly "self-taught" (Williams 2005) people, much homeschool- ing can be read as Black resistance and critical thought. The Black critical tradition has always been in dialectical relationship with prevailing white racial framing (Feagin 2010) and unbalanced racial-power relations have shaped the content of Black critical thought and action. Strategies for effica- cious action have expanded, as in recent Black movements leveraged through social media, or retracted, as in the case of the post-Reconstruction white backlash against Black achievements after the US Civil War. Some actions have been invented in the moment, as with some twentieth century's civil rights movements. Others, such as African America's insistence on self-deter- mined literacy and intellectual development, have taken long-enduring forms – from courage to dare to learn to read, to critiquing legitimated societal knowledge, to disputing racially framed narratives offered by white-domi- nated institutional schooling and its hegemonic curricula.

If through the use of a public-facing epistemology, like that of Hunter and Robinson, Black critical thought can be understood as socially distributed messaging that deconstructs the many racist tropes of white-normative systems of oppression, it is clear that, generally speaking, Black homeschoo- lers are advancing a counter-system project of reframing and extending African American intellectual achievements. Homeschooling parents have responded to the contested history of Black people's education with an agented self-centering similar to the liberating scholarship of Hunter and Robinson.

In terms of forgotten US histories and sociologies, Hunter and Robinson demonstrate that cities are not just places with Black "victims" of oppression, but also centers of great resistance to oppression, places where Blacks have organized *regularly* in centuries-old Black Freedom struggles. "Majority-Black projects, blocks, schools, encampments, plantation fields, farms, churches, neighborhoods, and homes have been key to forming and sharpening the small axe that is Black power" (124). Sadly, these battles for Black power have always been fiercely dialectical, for whites push back against the resist- ance of the Black "South" to city development with urbanized weapons like "urban renewal" (James Baldwin's "Negro removal") and the contemporary gentrification seen in virtually every city Hunter and Robinson assess. Indeed, in our view, they might in future work place more emphasis on this important theme of Black urbanites' central contribution to Black movements

for social justice – a theme that is explicit or implicit in many of the examples and quotations from African Americans they cite.

We should add too that, from a more academic urban-sociology perspective, this book does yet other important things. It directly or implicitly provides a critique of much conventional social science theory of cities – in particular, in suggesting the ways in which W. E. B. Du Bois and other Black urbanists have provided alternative perspectives and methods for understanding US cities. They thus provide an important reframing of prevailing "urban growth machine" theories of development that overly stress the power of white elites in making US cities. Research on these important urban development and change issues seems to be in decline in major areas of social science today. We find it refreshing to see the innovative empirical and theoretical work that Hunter and Robinson have done to tell a much more realistic story of the urban migrations and lives of African Americans, both past and present.

Note

1. Brief heading phrases are quoted from Clinton, George, Junie Morrison, and Garry Shider. 1978. "One Nation Under a Groove." *One Nation Under a Groove*, Long-playing record album. Produced by George Clinton.

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