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Akira Drake Rodriguez, Diverging Space for Deviants: The Politics of Atlanta’s Public Housing, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2021; 268 pp.: ISBN: 9-780-8203-5951-9, US$114.95 (hbk); 9-780-8203-5952-6, US$36.95 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Ted Rutland, Concordia University, Canada

Under racial capitalism, urban housing is necessarily an arena of capital accumulation and racial management. This remains the case even when the direct profit motive is removed – when housing is ‘public’. In the United States, public housing was intentionally segregated along racial lines for much of its history, while the siting of new developments reinforced racial segregation and opened new terrains of accumulation elsewhere in the city. Racist policing and surveillance, meanwhile, turned Black public housing into what Shabazz (2015) calls an ‘interstitial space’ between the community and the prison.

But public housing, precisely because it concentrates residents oppressed by class and race, is also a site of racialised class struggle. Akira Drake Rodriguez’s Diverging Space for Deviants shines a light on these struggles in 20th-century Atlanta. Drawing on rich archival sources, she situates public housing at the centre of competing social forces. Throughout the period, decisions about public housing were controlled primarily by the urban regime, a network of political, business and community leaders that was itself an arena of struggle and change. Public housing tenants, though they were never incorporated into a regime, nevertheless exercised power in various ways. Tenants’ associations, the book shows, provided a vehicle for marginalised or ‘deviant’ political interests to be expressed and advanced, at times allowing tenants to reappropriate the deviant space of public housing and ‘diverge’ its intended form and use to meet their objectives.

The book begins in the Jim Crow era. While Atlanta dubbed itself ‘the city too busy to hate’, white racial violence shaped its development in both mundane and spectacular ways. Following a campaign of white racial terror in 1906 (euphemised as a ‘race riot’), white and Black elites found a common interest in a form of urban development that would use racial segregation to dampen white violence as the Black population increased. The city’s first approved public housing development, University Homes, was born in this context and expressed the dominant mode of development.
Constructed between 1933 and 1937, University Homes was located on the boundary between a Black neighbourhood and the Central Business District, thereby hardening the division between the two zones. But the development also provided an opportunity for Black elites like Morehouse College president John Hope and social worker Alonzo Moron to shape the city. In a context of Black disenfranchisement in the South, these actors were able to tap into federal funding under the Public Works Administration to build new housing, as well as new amenities like a library, a recreation centre and an auditorium. These amenities were in University Homes but were open to the wider Black community. As Rodriguez argues, public housing in this context provided a political opportunity structure for Black elites to represent and advance the interests of the Black community.

None of this directly created political space for ordinary Black Atlantans. The latter were excluded from all decisions regarding University Homes, and those who became tenants of the development were subject to what Connolly (2016) calls ‘spatial uplift’ – efforts to bring their behaviours and family structures into line with bourgeois norms. In a context of Jim Crow modernity, poor and working-class Black people were ‘deviant’ in relation to both white and Black norms.

The situation of deviant Black people changed after the Second World War. The ending of the all-white Democratic primary in 1946 partially enfranchised Black residents, while increased federal funding expanded the number of housing developments and the kinds of tenants admitted to them. Whereas University Homes targeted normative, two-parent households, post-war housing admitted largely families headed by a single mother. The latter ultimately become the major leaders of public housing tenants’ associations for the next half a century, creatively turning deviant spaces into political agency and, often, a better life for tenants. Just as public housing provided a political opportunity structure for poor Black women, the history of tenants’ associations provides a unique scholarly opportunity. Like Williams’s (2004) book on Baltimore, Drake’s work enriches scholarship on public housing, certainly, but also provides a valuable political history of poor Black women.

In the 1950s and 1960s, tenants’ associations rallied their constituencies around various issues, from building upkeep to (less invasive) tenant-screening practices. While the urban regime had little interest in public housing beyond its role in containing the Black population, tenants fought for the amenities that would make housing into a home. Their political work ‘diverged’ the spaces of public housing, adding schools, recreation centres, auditoriums, businesses and public transport. Some amenities were more than an end in themselves. As the civil rights movement gathered strength, recreation centres and auditoriums became spaces for voter registration, town hall meetings and popular education. In this way, tenants’ associations produced what Rodriguez calls ‘Black participatory geographies’ – spaces that were transformed through political action, while also providing a basis for wider political agency.

Like the Black elite in an earlier period, tenant leaders used public housing to tap into resources at the federal level, but they also secured local and state resources. Their efforts, especially at the local level, were strengthened by various political alliances. A city-wide tenants’ alliance called Tenants United for Fairness (TUFF) provided a stronger voice for tenants. Founded by a talented welfare rights organiser, Ethel Mae Mathews, the association mobilised around issues of rent, upkeep and tenant representation on public housing boards. In 1969, their
efforts moved the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) to adopt an impressive Tenant’s Bill of Rights. Another alliance, the Citywide Advisory Council on Public Housing, was formed around the same time. Led by tenant activist Louise Watley, the Council coordinated a range of actions in the 1970s, including a nine-month rent strike that finally forced the AHA to repair and maintain run-down buildings.

Tenants also forged alliances with other groups representing Black, working-class interests, thereby producing a broader political base and an approach to city-making that Rodriguez calls ‘Black feminist planning’. In one of many examples, an impressive tenant leader, Mary Sandford, built links with the NAACP and various labour groups to fight for more equitable public transport. When these efforts succeeded in obtaining a new ‘spur line’ to Perry Homes, it benefited public housing tenants along with many other Black and working-class residents. Various political alliances involving public housing tenants eventually helped to get the city’s first Black mayor elected. Maynard Jackson, elected in 1973, used the power of the municipality to expand Black employment and political participation. His first term as mayor was perhaps the heyday of tenant activism in Atlanta, a period of radical politics and important political gains.

Not surprisingly, the tenants’ associations fared worse in the 1980s and 1990s. Ronald Reagan’s ‘Contract with America’ gutted federal funding for public housing, while a more entrepreneurial urban regime under Atlanta mayor Andrew Young sought to regenerate municipal revenues by launching a vast revitalisation programme that put public housing in the crosshairs. Meanwhile, an expanding federal war on crime, a rising local murder rate and a spate of high-profile child murders combined to intensify policing and criminalisation throughout the city, but especially in public housing.

While changes like these are well documented, Rodriguez shows how tenants’ associations either complied with or contributed to them. When the city signed an agreement with the Atlanta Police Department to patrol public housing, no tenants’ association protested. When the AHA moved to ‘modernise’ University Homes, an action that would reduce the number of units and impose a stricter screening process for tenants, the only tenant to speak up worried that ‘undesirable tenants’ would be allowed to return after the renovation. When a new basketball league and summer camp required participants and their parents to be tested for drugs, the move was supported by tenants.

This shift towards a more conservative and carceral politics, Drake argues, is explained partly by the shrinking political opportunity structure of the time. There were, for example, no drug treatment options for youth outside the criminal punishment system. Tenant support for the drug-free basketball league and summer camp made sense in a context of limited opportunities, as youth arrested on drug charges could be referred to the programmes rather than to youth detention.

The 1990s were the death knell for public housing and, thus, a political opportunity structure seized by poor Black women. With the introduction of the federal HOPE VI programme and the 1996 Summer Olympics on the horizon, the AHA went at public housing with a bulldozer. While housing was certainly in disrepair, the AHA’s renovation was both physical and social. After renovation, developments would contain just 30% public housing (the rest was market rate) and public housing tenants would be subject to an expanding set of carceral and humiliating practices like the requirement that they –
poor tenants – perform 60 hours of community service each year.

In a book that centres Black women, Rodriguez takes care to stress that the three major architects of these changes were elite Black women: the mayor, the head of the AHA and the chief of police. Their actions could be described as an embrace of the era’s neoliberal ideology, but they also suggest a return to the uplift politics of the early 20th century. In an evocative passage, Rodriguez reflects on new housing and policing policies focused on eliminating ‘nuisances’. “‘Nuisances’ are the activities of deviants, the survival strategies of marginalized communities that thrive in informality and cooperation, the queer household formations that adopt children – and adults – into spaces that reject conventional heteronormative and patriarchal norms” (p. 200).

What neoliberals call nuisances, in other words, are the Black deviants whose political history the book unveils and affirms – people who are forever positioned outside regimes of power but whose actions, when they manage to reappropriate and ‘diverge’ a space, can make a difference for themselves and a more liveable world for everyone.

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Kian Goh, Form and Flow: The Spatial Politics of Urban Resilience and Climate Justice, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021; 298 pp.: ISBN: 97802625 43057, $35 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Jennifer L Rice, University of Georgia, USA

The importance of cities, local governments and urban actors in climate change governance has been well-established for quite some time now. It takes an incredible effort, therefore, to push this academic conversation forward and establish new understandings of urban climate justice, resilience and activism. Kian Goh’s Form and Flow accomplishes this through a combination of careful theoretical exploration, rich empirical description and personal commitment and engagement. Weaving important and intricate connections between New York City, Jakarta and Rotterdam, Goh offers a unique and comprehensive understanding of the complex global-urban networks of climate change action and planning, but without losing the importance, nuance, beauty of people’s everyday lives – lives that are in communities who are resisting, visioning and building in the midst of global climate disaster.

The book’s Introduction (‘Climate Justice and Urban Futures’) offers a thoughtful and compelling overview of decades of research on climate change and cities. This includes, for example, the scales and spaces of climate action that pose challenges and opportunities at all levels of governance, the deepening connections between neoliberal capitalism and many mainstream responses to climate change, and importantly, the fraught task of planning for resilience and climate justice in a highly uneven world. Goh utilises this firm theoretical foundation to situate and centre one of the book’s main contributions – how ‘new spaces of contestation’ (p. 14) regarding urban climate futures and climate justice are