

“Our Nation Is Moving toward Two Societies”: Race, (Im)Mobility, and the Inequalities of Capitalism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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Genevieve Carpio (2019). *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race*. Oakland: University of California Press, 238 + xx pp., maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$29.95 (paper).

Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, eds. (2018). *Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years after the Kerner Report*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, xii + 469 pp., illustrations, tables, notes, index, \$24.95 (paper), \$99.95 (cloth).

Patrick Sharkey (2013). *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 250 + x pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$90.00 (cloth), \$30.00 (paper).

Reviewed by: Brandon T. Jett, *Florida SouthWestern State College, Fort Myers, FL, USA*

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Through 2020, communities across the globe became more attuned to issues of mobility. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread from country to country, state to state, and city to city, governments responded in various ways; many of these responses centered on the question of mobility. Lockdowns, quarantine, working from home, and social distancing have all raised awareness about the ways in which mobility is central to our conceptions of self and how one's experience with mobility is often shaped by race and class. As Genevieve Carpio argues, “Mobility is a geographic concept referring to the ways we experience, manage, and give meaning to movement” (p. 4). These issues surrounding mobility and its relationship to race and class are nothing unique to 2020. In fact, throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, issues of mobility, be it geographic or economic, shaped conceptions of race, racial differences, and racial disparities across the American landscape.

Genevieve Carpio explores the intersections of race-making and mobility in *Collisions at the Crossroads*. Through an exploration into bicycle laws, immigration debates and policy, arrests and incarceration, and heritage celebrations, she convincingly demonstrates how authorities established racial hierarchies in the heterogeneous and fluid landscape of southern California by allowing the free movement of some (mostly white) residents while restricting the mobility of others. This occurred in different ways, at different times, and to different racial groups throughout the period. Nonetheless, the ultimate outcome remained the same: a racialized landscape that utilized mobility as a means of concocting those definitions. For example, at the outset of Anglo settlement of the region, Carpio demonstrates how white

authorities created “Chinatown” settlements that were legally separated from the white settlements that occupied the central business districts. In a kind of late-nineteenth-century gentrification, white settlers displaced Chinese settlers in the central district and recreated Chinese living quarters on the outskirts of town. Carpio states, “Chinese workers were erased from the new downtown center and displaced to the town’s increasingly distant margins, where a new ‘Chinatown’ formed” (p. 50). Separating the white downtown and Chinatown was “Mongol Avenue,” which, she argued, “reinforced the link between race and space . . . in the city’s official geography” (p. 50).

What began with restrictions on Chinese residents’ living spaces continued, Carpio argues, well into the twentieth century. State and local authorities and politicians enacted laws restricting the mobility of racialized minority groups, including Japanese, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and African American residents. The legacies of these actions imprinted on the southern California landscape continue to resonate. One of the prime examples is the racial segregation of the region’s suburbs. According to Carpio, as part of the post–World War II suburban expansion, African Americans and Latino/a Americans were encouraged to participate, but were pushed farther outside of the city center, past the largely white suburbs, and into the periphery. She argues, “people of color have had to travel further and further from the city core, beyond the exurbs of the metropolitan borderlands and into its periphery in this pursuit” (p. 218). Yet, the pursuit of upward economic mobility has been curtailed by the “ghettoization” of the regions African Americans and Latino/as occupied. As families of color moved in, whites moved out. White flight from these areas devalued homes, limited tax bases, and curtailed job opportunities led to the continuation of “spatial inequality” and segregation that reinforced notions of space and race (p. 218). The rise of “Prison Valley” in these same areas represented another problematic development that linked race and mobility in southern California. Carpio describes the rise of the prison system in the region as a “significant exurban migration through coercive means” (p. 217). Either voluntary migration or forced migration to the exurbs further exacerbated racial segregation in southern California and contributed to the continued racialization of minority groups as their mobility and motility options were largely determined by outside, mostly Anglo forces: the state or real estate developers.

If Carpio’s work demonstrates the relationship between conceptions and constructions of race and mobility in a very literal sense, Fred Harris and Alan Curtis’s edited collection *Healing Our Divided Society* explores mobility through a much wider analytical lens of “progress,” broadly defined. In this collection, progress is explored in a variety of realms, including economic and employment shifts, educational improvements, housing and neighborhood investment, criminal justice, and equality and equity. The main theme of the thirty-one essays is that in terms of “progress,” the United States remains relatively unchanged since the 1960s. African Americans remain far behind their white counterparts in terms of educational equity and economic upward mobility; racial segregation, although no longer dictated by law, remains ever present across the country; and government support of economically depressed communities (many of which are African American) remains drastically underfunded. For all of these reasons, the editors argued, “The warning of the Kerner Commission is as relevant today as it was then: ‘Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal’” (p. 138). In exploring these various issues, the authors contend that government policy, especially supply-side economics and neo-liberalism’s emphasis on market forces to address systemic inequality has limited the “progress” or mobility of African Americans after several decades of government support for white economic upward mobility. Another way of understanding these two societies is through the lens of mobility. The United States has become defined by the lack of mobility or progress for many African Americans, while white Americans enjoy a greater ability to progress, or move up, the economic ladder. As restrictions on mobility were used to define racial distinctions in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the last fifty years, these distinctions have

borne real fruit in perpetuating racially segregated communities in America that are unfortunately defined by immobility.

Patrick Sharkey's *Stuck in Place* explores the relationship between race and immobility in an economic sense. In many ways, his main conclusions on the economic upward mobility of African Americans echoes what Harris and Curtis's collection conclude. Sharkey acknowledges a rather drastic expansion of the black middle class from 1968 to the present, but states, "a close look at the data shows that the overall level of economic advancement among African Americans has been remarkably limited" (p. 2) over the last five decades. This lack of economic progress, in his estimation, is related to the limited mobility for many African Americans. Despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in breaking down many of the barriers to black equality, African Americans, he demonstrates, continue to reside in places where discrimination, economic divestment, limited job opportunities, segregation, and punitive criminal justice approaches remain prevalent and concentrated. The persistence of these characteristics of largely black communities means, according to Sharkey, that African Americans of different generations occupy similar, or in some cases worse, economic standings than the previous generation *and* that is linked to the fact that their urban communities are undergoing downward economic trajectories. To Sharkey, this implies that the "ghetto" in America is inherited. He states,

the finding that the stark racial inequality in America's neighborhoods that existed in the 1970s has been passed on, with little change, to the current generation. Relative to their parents, the current generation of African American adults has made virtually no advancement in residential America—the children who were raised in the most disadvantaged areas during the civil rights period are overwhelmingly likely to now raise their own children in remarkably similar environments. (p. 9)

As such, immobility has come to define African American communities, while mobility is more likely to occur in white communities.

Taken together, these three works demonstrate the myriad ways in which mobility has not only defined race or helped construct racial distinction in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also how race has largely shaped one's mobility in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Although these authors emphasize the lack of mobility and its relation to race, in the context of 2020, the opposite has often been the case. As millions of Americans are working or have worked from home over the course of the pandemic, recent studies find that the ability to work from home is also shaped by race. Based on numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Economic Policy Institute found that "less than 30% of workers can work from home, and the ability to work from home differs enormously by race and ethnicity."¹ Nearly 30 percent of white workers are able to work from home, while only 19 percent of African Americans and 16 percent of Hispanic or Latinx workers enjoy that opportunity. Although not writing about 2020, Carpio's statement that "one of the ways whiteness operates has been through exercising control over one's own mobility" (p. 10) is equally applicable to the twenty-first century. White Americans simply have more ability to determine and shape their own mobility, and through politics, have a greater ability to shape and determine the mobility of traditionally marginalized communities. The opposite is true for minorities who, as these three books demonstrate, often have their motility, or ability to be mobile, decided by forces beyond their immediate control.

While mobility, however defined, is certainly at the center of these authors' arguments about racial constructions and the trajectories of racial minorities, another central theme is the connection between capitalism and race in the United States. Carpio argues convincingly that as capitalism spread along with Anglo settlers in the American West, Asian and Mexican workers' mobility was "carefully managed" (p. 104) in an effort to provide cheap agricultural laborers for the citrus industry, while erasing the contributions made by those workers to the economic development and trajectory of that region. By restricting the mobility of Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican

laborers, white authorities cemented notions of racial differences while also cutting off major benefits of capitalist expansion and economic upward mobility for those racialized groups. By cordoning off racial minorities to certain sections of cities and towns in southern California, capitalist expansion ensured white American businessmen had a steady supply of cheap and marginalized labor and that economic benefits were off limits to racialized laborers. Thus, according to Carpio, the racialization that occurred as a result of restrictions placed on mobility were connected to the spread of American business and capitalism in the American West.

Racial constructions certainly were related to the establishment of capitalism in southern California, but Harris and Curtis's collection also explores how some of those historical restrictions on mobility (being geographic, economic, educational, and social) have a larger legacy in the neo-liberal economic era of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As capitalism matured through the twentieth century, a brief expansion of the welfare state in the United States emerged from the 1930s to the 1970s. While Keynesian economic philosophy dominated for much of the mid-twentieth century, that line of thinking fell out of favor among American politicians after 1980. The march of neo-liberalism and the emphasis on free markets, deregulation, global trade, and a reduction in government spending promised economic growth for all. Yet, the benefits of that political and economic philosophy, at least according to Harris and Curtis, were largely distributed along racial lines. White Americans overwhelmingly were the beneficiaries, while African Americans and other traditionally marginalized groups were on the losing end of deindustrialization, globalization, and the contraction of the welfare state.

As pointed out by numerous writers in *Healing Our Divided Society*, African Americans in particular, are more likely to live in economically depressed areas. Just as the major victories of the Civil Rights Movement occurred in the mid- and late 1960s, many industrial and manufacturing jobs moved overseas or away from urban communities where most African Americans resided. As these jobs left, African Americans suffered economic hardships and job loss, and, as a result, became less likely to move up the economic ladder. While these economic developments unfolded, the welfare state contracted. African Americans living in economically depressed areas had fewer resources available to improve or even sustain their communities in many cases. As such, the neo-liberal form of capitalism that unfolded over the last half-century has left African Americans confined to geographic areas that were disproportionately impoverished. Neo-liberalism hit African American communities especially hard. As the authors stated, "Since the 1968 Kerner Commission, poverty, unemployment, and inequality have for the most part risen when federal macroeconomic policy has been supply side and trickle down" (p. 23), that is, neo-liberal.

Sharkey echoes Harris and Curtis's critique of neo-liberalism and the negative effects that that version of capitalism has had on black communities, in particular. His emphasis on the "inherited ghetto" is based on the decades-long "attach[ment]" of African American families to places

where political decisions and social policies have led to severe disinvestment and persistent, rigid segregation; where the employment base that supported a middle-class urban population has migrated away, contracted, or collapsed; and where the impact of punitive criminal justice policies has been concentrated. (pp. 5-6)

In other words, the policies of neo-liberalism curtailed many of the promises that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement made, including the removal of legal restrictions on voting, employment, and discrimination based on race. Neo-liberalism has reinforced notions of race, place, and immobility in economic and geographic terms over the last fifty years.

Capitalism has morphed throughout its existence, especially in the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, the federal government embraced Keynesian economic philosophy, regulated capitalism, and expanded the welfare state to avoid some of the worst aspects of the

capitalism. By the late-twentieth century, the mood shifted to a neo-liberal approach that emphasized deregulations, weakening of labor unions, free trade, and a reduced welfare state. Yet, by 2016, populist reactions against neo-liberalism manifested in the United States, and elsewhere. What, if anything, will replace neo-liberalism remains to be seen, but these authors point out that despite the shifting nature of capitalism in the twentieth century, the political economy of the United States consistently unfolded in racialized ways.

Yet, these works also demonstrate that this does not have to be the case. As pointed on numerous times in Harris and Curtis's collection, there are multiple policy options available to reshape capitalism in ways that uplift traditionally marginalized groups, particularly African Americans. Broadly speaking, the policies and programs advocated in the book are all based on "Keynesian economic policy focused on job creation, job training, tax credits, an increased minimum wage, the strengthening of labor unions, single-payer health care, and reformed trade policy to benefit workers" (p. 14). Financing for such a robust program, according to the editors, would come from eliminating programs that do not work, including work-first programing, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, education vouchers, and mass incarceration. This remade version of capitalism would do much to offset the seeming immobility of African American communities in particular that was established in the early twentieth century and continued into the twenty-first.

Sharkey argues similarly. He believes that the best way to overcome the generational economic and physical immobility of African Americans is through "durable urban policy" that will "generate enduring changes in the lives of targeted families" and the capacity to "generate change that persists over time" (p. 168). Part of his solution revolves around policy that promotes black Americans' mobility. Specifically, sustained investment and support for families looking to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods into lower poverty neighborhoods should, in his view, be expanded and programs that allow black residents to relocate well outside of their current city of residence. However, the most appropriate and sustainable approach involves "durable investment" in high-poverty communities by increasing "levels of political influence, amenities that are taken for granted in middle-class communities, quality public services and schools, a vibrant economic base, and effective policing" (p. 179) that would lead to improved economic upward mobility and "progress" for African Americans. This kind of investment from local, state, and federal governments would undo much of the damage caused by neo-liberal policies that did much to restrict African American progress after 1980.

For all the promise of proposed solutions outlined by Harris, Curtis, and Sharkey, the likelihood of the complete overturning of neo-liberal capitalism in the near future seems unlikely. This is where Carpio's explanation of the ways in which individuals resisted the implementation of mobility restrictions and racialization based on those restrictions is significant. She amply demonstrates that

efforts to keep marginalized populations in place have not been without resistance. Groups targeted for their mobility met the constraints levied by government officials, their neighbors, and the media with movements of their own, from the Japanese racers of Riverside's early bicycling circuits to the deviant Latina drivers who took to the streets in Depression-era Los Angeles. (p. 233)

Unfortunately, larger structural and political changes notwithstanding, it will be these individual acts of resistance to racialization and marginalization under neo-liberal capitalism that will be at the forefront of challenging the racial inequality, inequity, and immobility that has become one of its most pernicious legacies.

When taken together, these works demonstrate the ways in which the construction of racial identities in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been transformed into racial inequalities and inequities in the twenty-first century. Despite the significant contributions made

by Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and African Americans to the success of capitalist expansion in southern California, their forced immobility and restrictions on movement unfolded as part of a larger process of racialization that cut their communities off from the full benefits that American society had to offer. These initial efforts in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bore problematic fruit in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as the effects of segregation, racialization, and marginalization of minority communities, especially African American communities, affected not only the physical mobility but also economic upward mobility of those same communities. As neo-liberal policies after 1980 further hindered African Americans in their progress, broadly speaking, there have been renewed calls for different approaches to economic and political policy that could change that trajectory.

The events of 2020 have brought many issues to the fore in American life, perhaps none more than the ways in which mobility shapes our lives and how our mobility is often shaped by race. The ability to determine one's own mobility is largely reserved for white Americans, while the mobility of traditionally marginalized groups, including African Americans and Latinx Americans, is often decided or shaped by others. Whether it be related to COVID-19 quarantines, working from home, residential segregation, forcible restraint by police officers, or incarceration, it is undeniable that one's ability to be mobile in multiple ways in the United States is largely determined by race and these authors illuminate how the American public understands racial identity is often related to our understanding of mobility.

Note

1. Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, "Not Everybody Can Work from Home," Working Economics Blog, Economic Policy Institute, March 19, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home/>.

Author Biography

Brandon T. Jett is a professor of history at Florida SouthWestern State College. He is the author of *Race, Crime, and Policing in the Jim Crow South: African Americans and Law Enforcement in Birmingham, Memphis, and New Orleans, 1920-1945* (2021) and several articles related to the history of race, criminal justice, and urbanization in the American South. He is currently working on an edited volume on trends in violence in Texas from 1965 to 2018 and a study on the decline of lynching in Florida.