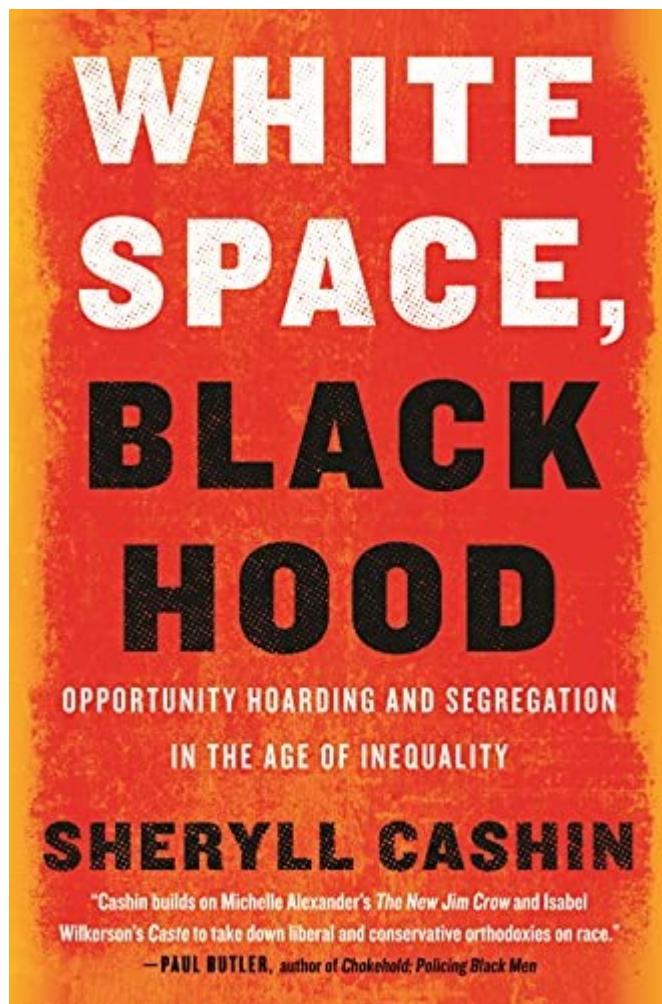


We need to stop talking about “good” and “bad” neighborhoods

Both Sheryll Cashin and Yelena Bailey investigate the scandalous inequalities between city neighborhoods.

by [Heath W. Carter](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

In Review



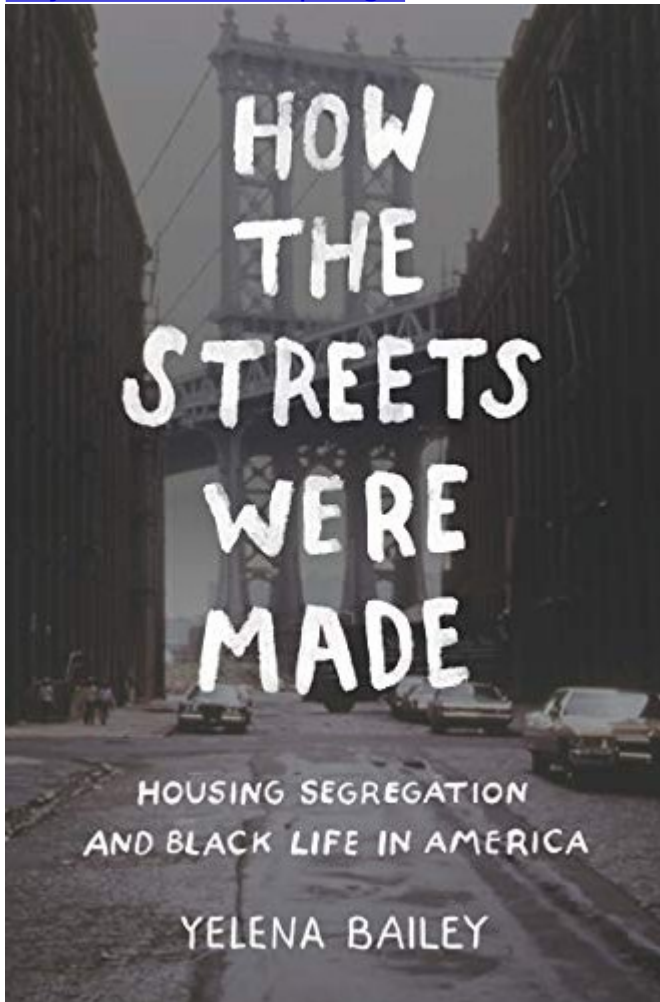
White Space, Black Hood

Opportunity Hoarding and Segregation in the Age of Inequality

By Sheryll Cashin

Beacon

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How the Streets Were Made

Housing Segregation and Black Life in America

By Yelena Bailey

University of North Carolina Press

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I still remember how annoyed I was the first time someone told me I should eliminate the phrase “bad neighborhood” from my vocabulary. I was a 24-year-old

Chicagoan, with one graduate degree already in hand and six years of city living under my belt. By that point I had mostly forsaken the colorblind conservatism of my youth, which so clearly failed to make sense of the sharp inequalities inscribed into the urban landscape. But I had never thought twice about calling some parts of the city “good” and others “bad,” a practice that was almost second nature in my predominantly White, middle-class circles. When my friend—a sociologist—suggested that those categories were problematic, it was all I could do not to roll my eyes. Wasn’t it just *obvious* that some parts of the city were objectively worse than others?

The kernel of truth in my exasperation was that the urban United States is home to jaw-dropping disparities. Consider just one devastating example: in major metropolitan areas across the country, life expectancy varies by decades depending on the census tract in which one happens to be born. One recent study found that both New Orleans and Buffalo have 25.8-year swings between the tract with the highest life expectancy and that with the lowest. New York City and Washington, DC, are even worse, with 27.4- and 27.5-year life expectancy gaps, respectively. Chicago tops this most dubious of charts, with a 30.1-year chasm between the most and least long-lived. It is no coincidence, of course, that the cities with the largest life expectancy gaps are also those with the highest levels of residential segregation by race and ethnicity.

Two new books investigate the origins and persistence of such scandalous inequalities, illuminating along the way how the idea—often masquerading as common sense—that some neighborhoods are just “bad” has long been weaponized against Black communities.

Sheryll Cashin’s *White Space, Black Hood* drives home that the Black “hood” did not emerge by accident. While there continues to be a lively debate in American popular discourse as to whether Black urban poverty stems first and foremost from individual failings or systemic racism, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the latter conclusion. Cashin thus builds on a vast scholarly consensus when she argues that “geography is now central to American caste, a mechanism for overinvesting in affluent white space and disinvesting and plundering elsewhere.”

This structurally racist state of affairs has been well over a century in the making. Cashin often refers to contemporary African Americans as “descendants” in order to drive home what she describes as an unbroken history of racial oppression, from

chattel slavery of old to the geographically organized caste system of today. “A basic move, of creating and maintaining Black-subordinating institutions to confer value on affluent whites, has not changed,” she writes, “though the mechanics and propaganda have metastasized.”

Cashin explores these evolving mechanics and propaganda in great depth, offering a valuable primer on some of the main engines of racial inequality in the modern United States. She highlights a variety of historical and contemporary tactics—including everything from restrictive covenants to redlining, and from high-rise public housing to “urban renewal” redevelopment campaigns—deployed to protect “good” White neighborhoods and contain “bad” Black ones. The result has been a hyper-segregated residential order, one further disfigured by vast disparities in public spending. Even as federal funds flowed to the construction of highways and suburban subdivisions—hubs for what Cashin calls “opportunity hoarding”—White and corporate flight out of the city decimated the tax base for locally funded schools and infrastructure projects.

About the only thing the general public was willing to invest in in predominantly Black neighborhoods was aggressive policing and mass incarceration. In late-2000s Chicago alone, Cashin reports, there were more than 851 “million-dollar blocks”: blocks on which the state, in one four-year period, spent more than \$1,000,000 in order to incarcerate residents. Racist stereotypes of Black city dwellers as thugs and welfare queens helped keep the money flowing to police and prisons, even as these same stereotypes fueled campaigns to roll back spending on the social safety net.

The nefarious role that such “ghetto mythology” has played in legitimizing racial inequality is the central focus of Yelena Bailey’s *How the Streets Were Made*. Bailey explores how “the streets” function “not just as a physical, racialized geographic space produced by segregationist policies but also as a sociocultural entity that has influenced our understanding of Blackness in America for decades.” Everywhere she looks, whether to advertising, books, or television, this angle on “the contested racial imaginary of American life” reveals that White cultural creators have often failed to apprehend Black humanity in all its rich fullness.

In one fascinating example, Bailey analyzes how such a critically acclaimed production as HBO’s series *The Wire*, while complicating any simplistic view of law enforcement as the heroes of the story, nevertheless “reinforces the hypersexualization and objectification of black men” and moreover “paints the

streets as a Black space that cannot be tamed, changed, or redeemed.” She goes on to contrast the world conjured in *The Wire* by David Simon with the world evoked by Black creator Lena Waithe in *The Chi* (Showtime). The latter show serves in Bailey’s telling as key evidence for the humanizing power of the Black gaze. Whereas *The Wire* “immediately immerses the viewer in violence, death, and policing,” *The Chi* “opens with what can only be described as an image of Black boy joy.” The contrast could not be more telling.

Especially when read together, Cashin’s and Bailey’s books underscore not just the wisdom but the ethical urgency of my friend’s challenge. The notion that some neighborhoods are “good” and others “bad” can seem commonsensical, but these labels have in fact played an instrumental role in justifying and extending lethal forms of racial inequality.

It is not just that our collective vocabulary needs to be updated but that our categories need to be altogether transformed. If we take Cashin seriously, especially in light of biblical warnings about God’s judgment on those who oppress the poor, we might wonder whether conventional moral reasoning should be turned upside down: Are the most reprehensible neighborhoods actually the affluent ones, which voraciously hoard the resources that others so conspicuously lack? And if White Christian readers have ears to hear Bailey’s core findings, we should worry that in our preoccupation with the dangers of “the streets”—a preoccupation, notably, that transcends partisan lines, informing all kinds of individual and collective decisions—we have failed not only to love our Black neighbors but even to see them as neighbors in the first place.

Both Cashin and Bailey close with calls for reparations. “Other-regarding *agape* love is the only sustainable basis for political communities,” Cashin avers. “A country premised on supremacy and a hierarchy in which descendants are at the bottom—what we have had in America for centuries—is exhausting and not sustainable because it is premised on and engenders violence.”

But where might the initiative for this new kind of society come from? There is little reason to believe that the spark will emanate from the halls and sanctuaries of the powerful. As Bailey observes, “those in power have not yet dared to imagine what freedom from these inequities might look like.” The best hope for redemptive change may reside in the much-maligned streets themselves. “A novel idea is to ask [descendants] what they most need to prosper and listen carefully to the answers,” Cashin declares. “Policymakers who live elsewhere might be surprised at the

common-sense brilliance of their insights.”