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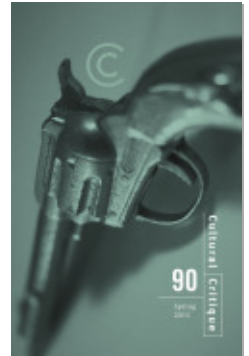
Michael Brown, Ferguson, and the Ghosts of Pruitt-Igoe

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Cultural Critique, Number 90, Spring 2015, pp. 140-142 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2015.a586904>



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MICHAEL BROWN, FERGUSON, AND THE GHOSTS OF PRUITT-IGOE

Roderick A. Ferguson

The St. Louis-based journalist Sylvester Brown Jr. wrote recently, “Be it by design, accident, or benign neglect, the fuse that led to the explosion in Ferguson was lit in St. Louis more than 60 years ago.” Brown is referring to the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, an experiment in public housing that came about as a result of the United States Public Housing Act of 1949. The Housing Act provided cities with federal dollars to clear slums, redevelop urban space, and build affordable housing. As a housing experiment, the Pruitt-Igoe complex—made up of thirty-three towers that rose eleven stories high—would stand for many as an exemplar of the ideals and failures of modernist social visions, particularly the belief that intelligent design could solve social problems, in this case the problems associated with black poor and migrant classes. As Brown suggests, the killing of Michael Brown and the anguish that followed are the result of a volatile history having to do with the deferred dream of Pruitt-Igoe, deferred because that particular “experiment” represented for its residents the possibility that an American city would finally do right by black life. Instead, what the history of Pruitt-Igoe reveals and the events in Ferguson confirm is that the systematic denigration of black life is both historic and ongoing.

It becomes clear in the history of Pruitt-Igoe that racist discourses made the failures of the housing complex interchangeable with the supposed pathologies of the people themselves. This is partly what Chad Freidrichs’s brilliant 2011 film, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, makes clear. Countering myths that the housing project failed because of the behavior of the people, the film shows how Pruitt-Igoe and its residents were victimized by cheap construction as well as political and economic interests bent on exploiting the black poor (i.e., making their rent and food more expensive than the mortgages and groceries paid by suburban

whites). The film goes on to demonstrate how the white middle class was developed through that exploitation. As such, the documentary chronicles how Pruitt-Igoe became a symbol for black pathology and a catalyst for the consolidation of white power, a consolidation achieved through zoning laws, among other things, that would prevent the construction of other Pruitt-Igoes and protect the racial integrity of white suburbs.

The perception that Pruitt-Igoe represented a culture of black pathology, as the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal put it in 1944, would become part of the national discourse as well. Indeed, the demolition of the first three buildings in 1972 encouraged particularly “sociological” reflections on what went wrong with Pruitt-Igoe. The *Washington Post* argued that there was “incompatibility between the high-rise structure and the large poor families who came to inhabit it, only a generation removed from the farm” (Bristol, 167). George Kassenbaum, one of the Pruitt-Igoe architects, asserted, “You had middle-class whites like myself designing for an entirely different group” (167). The failures of Pruitt-Igoe were increasingly understood as a mismatch between modern design and black cultural inferiority. In Katharine G. Bristol’s classic article “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” Bristol rightly argues that the failure of Pruitt-Igoe was not because of its high modernist architecture but was a result of “institutionalized economic and racial oppression” (168). This truth would be buried, however, under the weight of a powerful narrative about the cultural dysfunctions of black communities, dysfunctions that rendered them—in this nation’s racial imaginary—the antithesis of social life and being.

Once the fall of Pruitt-Igoe was clearly imminent, its black residents would move to northern suburbs like Ferguson, Normandy, Jennings, Wellston, and Bellefontaine Neighbors. As Sylvester Brown states, blacks were pushed to suburban locales, largely as a result of “billions of dollars” going to county rather than city schools. In response, whites flew further north but retained their control of law enforcement and municipal government within those areas. This convergence of white authority and myths of black inferiority produced the conditions whereby administering black life (in municipal governments and on police forces) meant supervising its worthlessness.

Pruitt-Igoe is the symbol of an affective history in which blackness is always and already understood as a candidate for social and actual

death, a history in which whiteness is socialized to maintain its independence at whatever cost. The exploitations, racism, and pain of Pruitt-Igoe are carved into the events in Ferguson, events that show that the tragedy of white privilege and anti-blackness marches on. For this reason, a teenager could be shot six times for disobeying an officer's order, his bullet-ridden body left to lie in the street for four hours afterward.

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