

Book Reviews

Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America. By Marcia Chatelain. New York: Liveright, 2020. 336 pp. Hardcover, \$28.95. ISBN: 978-1-63149-394-2.

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Reviewed by LaShawn Harris

Franchise is a major contribution to several overlapping historiographies: food studies and African American, business, and civil rights histories. Original in scope, the multi-prize-winning book explores a lesser-known chapter in American and African American histories. The 2021 Pulitzer Prize-winning monograph persuasively illuminates the relationship between the long political struggle for equality and the expansion of the fast-food industry. And the restaurant chain McDonald's, created in the 1940s, is at the center of the story. Exploring the impact of fast food on post-World War II African American communities through one of America's most popular restaurant chains, Chatelain suggests that fast food became a source of despair, power, and opportunity—a battlefield on which the struggle for racial justice and civil rights had been waged since the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, *Franchise* tells the story of race capitalism and Black entrepreneurship, as well as the influence of Black communities on the McDonald's franchise. Black consumerism and entrepreneurship were pivotal to the economic growth and expansion of McDonald's, proving that African American communities could deliver solid economic profits. In many ways, Chatelain argues, fast food “became black,” moving from predominantly white suburban communities to racially and ethnically urban neighborhoods, thus transforming and increasing food corporations' consumer base. “By unmasking the process of how fast food ‘became black,’ we are able to appreciate the difficult decisions black America has had to make under the stress of racial trauma, political exclusion, and social alienation” (p. 21). At the same time, the story of “unmasking the process of how fast food ‘became black’” reveals how unfamiliar historical African American figures and groups such as consumers, business leaders, celebrities, and politicians used capitalism and economic opportunities such as restaurant franchising to address and improve Black people' economic lives.

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McDonald's represented promise and peril for African Americans. After the passage of 1960s civil rights legislation and the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., African American political activists, exploring strategies for economic advancement, turned to Black business ownership as a way toward collective financial progress. According to Chatelain, "businesses would become the vehicles for the economic prosperity that Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty could never deliver," leading Black activists, entrepreneurs, and federal officials including U.S. President Richard Nixon to believe that capitalism could address issues of racial inequality and better Black people's quality of life, while also quelling national uprisings and capturing political support from African Americans (p. 14). Federal loans, economic investment in urban neighborhoods, and personal desire for financial improvement made it possible for African Americans like Chicagoan Herman Perry to franchise a McDonald's restaurant. Perry became the first Black McDonald's franchise owner and operator, opening his store in 1968. In 1972, the Chicago businessman alongside other franchise owners created the National Black McDonald's Operators Association, an organization that became the Black voice within the McDonald's corporation. Observing the economic success of Perry and other Black McDonald's operators, McDonald's and other fast-food corporations cultivated a new consumer base and recruited more Black people for franchise ownership. But, as Chatelain points out, there were limits to Black capitalism and franchise ownership, especially as it pertained to economic austerity and racial equity.

McDonald's could not address massive poverty rates and unemployment, exploitative labor practices, and nationwide campaigns concerned with health and nutrition. Black community leaders accused the fast-food chain of assigning Black franchisees to underserved communities, ones that yielded high revenue and required high operating costs. Not willing to dismiss Black consumers' concerns about McDonald's role in Black communities, the fast-food chain (and its competitors) enlisted Black franchise owners and Black marketing and advertising companies such as Burrell Communications to assist with the development of media campaigns that targeted Black interests. Such corporate business strategies provided a space for Black culture and education, bringing history and art to Black and white audiences and partnerships with Black philanthropic organizations like the United Negro College Fund. "Direct appeals to black audiences uncovered the way that fast food satiated a hunger for representation and cultural validation" (p. 19).

Black consumerism and capitalism and the expansion of fast-food corporations have a complicated history—and that story also has a multifaceted recent history. Today, McDonald's and other fast-food chains

have come to be seen as promoters of scholastic achievement, poor health, and obesity; appropriators of Black history; and employers of low-wage laborers. And Chatelain does not shy away from exploring these layered contemporary issues. She rightfully addresses these topics, showing “how capitalism can unify cohorts to serves its interests, even as it disassembles communities” (p. 21). *Franchise* is an engaging and innovative work. It presents nuanced perspectives and narratives on late twentieth-century African American life, an era historians are beginning to research and document. Moreover, Chatelain’s fantastic work is a welcome addition to the growing list of studies about racial capitalism, Black entrepreneurship, and civil rights.

LaShawn Harris is associate professor of history at Michigan State University and author of Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy (2016).

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Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership. By Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. xiv + 349 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN: 978-1-469-65366-2.

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Reviewed by A. Mechele Dickerson

Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership chronicles an often overlooked period in the affordable housing literature to show how the shift from racially exclusive housing policies in the 1940s and 1950s (where it was nearly impossible for Blacks to buy high-appreciating homes using low-cost and low-risk federally insured mortgages) to a regime of more inclusive policies in the late 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for Blacks to lose massive housing wealth decades later during the 2007–2009 Great Recession. While the book was published pre-COVID, historian (and 2021 MacArthur Fellow) Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s damning criticisms of federal housing policies that are centered on selling homes help explain why low-income renters faced significant eviction risks during the pandemic.

Taylor cites congressional testimony, agency reports and advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles, and photographs to describe federal housing policies in the 1960s and 1970s that were designed to rescue poor Black renters from rat-infested and crime-ridden public housing projects in deteriorating center cities. Though these ostensibly