FOREWORD

The many narrow streets and wide avenues I walked down in Camden, New Jersey, during my childhood in the 1980s seemed to be haunted by the ghosts of a past more glorious than the present I confronted as a youth. There was the home that I had come to love and that which was depicted in the public imagination as a site of vice and loss.

The media depicted Camden as a “hood” and founded its judgment on the prescriptive words of politicians and pollsters who decried my city as one of the most violent and economically devastated urban spaces in the United States.

The gaze of the public was centered on a built environment that appeared broken as well as the state of the mostly Black and Latino/a working poor people as that which was best characterized as hopeless. One only needs to drive through the neighborhoods to find proof—abandoned properties, ragged asphalt streets, unkempt housing projects, the flow of crack cocaine, and much else. To the broader world these were sure signs of Camden’s decay—almost always rendered as the consequence of the glaring presence of the Black and Latinx residents who were evidence of the ostensible signs of nihilism, hopelessness, and cultural pathology, but I knew differently.

Beyond the sensational takes on Camden as one of New Jersey’s most infamous ghettos, those of us who called Camden home understood what onlookers missed. We made home and provision and hope and community and family and joy possible in spite of what we lacked because of the years upon years of calculated political disenfranchisement, scapegoating, loveless economic policies, White flight, dislocation, and greed.

As Susan Sontag wrote in her celebrated work *On Photography*, “To photograph people is to violate them . . . it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.”¹ In many instances, that is what photographs of Camden did. Throughout my life I have stared upon stills that caged the subjectivities of Camden’s people in the public imagination as if the interior lives of our people were nonexistent. The outsiders never peered behind the window frames of our homes. They did not capture what we made possible. They did not stare upon the many displays of radical love and care that sharpened our admiration for the place we were socialized to shame. They missed the tight-knit networks of neighbors who cared for one another as if they were family. They missed the ways we sometimes turned abandoned lots into grounds for play and exploration. They did not care to capture or write about the various instances of collective struggle that allowed so many families to emerge after clashes with law enforcement. They missed the presences of life that animated our streets, corner stores, parks, liquor stores, churches, mosques, bus stops, schools, and eateries with a type of hope that resisted hopelessness.

Outsiders’ interpretations of Camden, whether by way of photographs or media reportage, lacked the type of critical analysis that assessed the contexts that foreground many of Camden’s problems. *The Street: A Photographic Field Guide to American Inequality*, in contrast, reverts and corrects the myopic gaze of such onlookers. It is a critical work that testifies to the spirit that is situated behind and within the photos that capture so much of what so many have chosen to forget. Camden is alive like so many predominantly Black and Latinx working poor spaces in the United States. They have always been.

To critically assess Camden as a built environment is to read our home as a consequence of the collusion of anti-Blackness, neoliberal urban renewal policy making, and capitalistic-oriented politicking. *The Street* is a book I needed as I grappled with the complicated histories of the city I love as a budding adult. And the contributors write with nuance and critical

generosity, unlike the photographers, reporters, and social scientists who have framed Camden as everything except a site of possibility. The writers use Camden as a starting place in their effort to grapple with many consequences of systemic oppression in urban spaces within the United States.

What better time than now to insert Camden into a broader story on urban space, race, and class during a time of rapid gentrification and its concomitant features like urban education reform and development that permeates our now? This book surfaces amid the calloused and celebrated murder of Black and Latinx urban spaces and the ontological onslaught of the people within them.

That is why we need writers and thinkers who are prepared to grapple with the ways America strangulates the interior lives of the imagined dispossessed. We need nothing short of a reckoning with the powerful gaze of those who view our most loving spaces through an optic of what bell hooks calls White supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

DARNELL L. MOORE

NOTE

- 1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, [1977] 1982), 14.

T H E S T R E E T

Camden photo locations

Locations for all
photos, Camden,
New Jersey

Chicago CartoGraphics