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In *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*, Bryant Simon effectively connects the rise and fall of the “Queen of Resorts” to a larger narrative of urban life in America in the twentieth century. He argues that Atlantic City’s success rested in its ability to present itself as the ultimate public space for white, middle-class consumers. During the city’s heyday before the 1960s, crowds swarmed the Boardwalk to act out their racial and class fantasies. Jewish, German and Italian immigrants escaped their workaday routines in the Bronx, Baltimore, or Philadelphia to indulge themselves in the shops, restaurants, and theaters along the shore. Seeing and being seen by others was an essential and pleasurable part of the Atlantic City experience: Simon describes how tourists loved to dress up in “mink coats and sharply pleated linen pants” (10) to promenade or ride in one of the city’s famous rolling chairs.

Yet while visitors celebrated the democratic nature of the Boardwalk, Simon is careful to point out how Atlantic City’s fantasy world was premised on the exclusion of certain groups. Not welcome on the beach or in most amusements, African Americans carried luggage in hotels, cleaned floors in theatres, or pushed rolling chairs carrying white tourists. Simon argues that the exclusion of black patrons only added to the allure of these attractions for whites. For the children of European immigrants, being waited on by blacks could signal their ultimate transformation into Americans. This “public production of race making” (41) was a central part of the city’s appeal as a tourist destination in Simon’s view. The city carefully managed interaction between the races. Blacks who transgressed the city’s colour line were swiftly disciplined, yet whites often went slumming in Northside establishments like Club Harlem. This, too, was part of the appeal of the city for white tourists who sought to “edge closer to what they imagined to be authentic blackness.” (51) Simon argues that club owners presented a simultaneously exoticized and sanitized version of black life, where white patrons could ogle black dancers, listen to jazz and eat soul food without facing any real danger or making any meaningful connection with those of another race.

This combination of illicit thrills and security was replicated in other ways in Atlantic City. Hucksters in the early part of the century promised tourists contact with other cultures and carefully constructed “authentic” displays of imported goods from Japan or Egypt. Simon argues that even the city’s famed Miss America Pageant can be interpreted in this vein. Despite organizers’ emphasis on the wholesomeness of the contest, it “put women on display, welcoming viewers to undress the participants with their eyes and their fantasies.” (50) Rules of sexual conduct also proved malleable on New York Avenue, where gay men visited nightclubs and prostitutes stood on street corners. Atlantic City offered visitors a respite from the boundaries which hemmed in their everyday lives, allowing them to indulge

temporarily while never completely upsetting prevailing notions about race, class, and gender.

By the late 1960s, tourists who had been regular visitors to Atlantic City began to choose other destinations for their holidays. The grand hotels grew shabby and many were eventually razed, local papers were filled with stories of crime, and whole blocks of the city lay desolate and abandoned. Simon argues that the city’s experience should be viewed as part of a much broader transformation of urban America, one which affected not only tourist spots but all American cities. The increasingly visible racial strife in the city caused white tourists to flee to “safer” spaces like Disneyland, where racial and class conflicts were effectively erased from perception. Later attempts to rebuild the city through either drastic urban renewal programs or by building casinos had unintended and often tragic consequences. Simon argues that local bankers and business leaders became so focused on bringing back white middle-class visitors that they overlooked other possibilities. Instead of rebuilding black neighbourhoods or recognizing the potential of gay tourism, they struck a devil’s bargain with casino companies and created a city which now seems to have gambling and little else. White tourists did indeed come to the casinos, but the city itself reaped few benefits—housing stock was depleted, small businesses were destroyed and poor areas became poorer. Casinos attempted to take the “city” out of Atlantic City and in doing so nearly destroyed it.

Boardwalk of Dreams is passionately argued, and Simon writes of his own personal connection to Atlantic City with sincerity but not sentimentality. In addition to examining newspaper accounts, photographs, and promotional material, Simon conducted extensive interviews with a number of current and former Atlantic City residents. He is adept at using his sources to evoke the looks, sounds, smells, and even the tastes of the different areas of the city, from the luxury movie houses of Atlantic Avenue in the first half of the century to the wasteland of Pauline’s Prairie (a failed urban renewal site named for City Housing Authority head Pauline Hill) in the 1970s. This is a very entertaining read, a fact which may distract readers from Simon’s serious call to rethink the city’s past. One can hardly fault Simon for the fact that the dramatic and often amusing anecdotes of high rollers and pleasure seekers at times threaten to overwhelm the narrative of racial exclusion which he hopes to make central to our understanding of the city. On the whole, however, Simon’s arguments about the changing nature of public space and its consequences for Atlantic City are compelling. He does not propose any easy solutions for the problems of poverty and development which plague his subject, but in highlighting an important factor in the creation of these problems he tries to suggest some potential openings, however small, for people to learn from this history.

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