

in many cases are unaware data is being collected at all. Frith describes a case where the New York State government set up readers throughout the state to scan E-ZPass transponders without notifying drivers what they were doing so, let alone explaining why. There were no laws or policies requiring otherwise.

The author works hard to avoid hysteria and overstatement, but is no Pollyanna either. He suggests that some fears about RFID technology in particular might be overblown, but only for the none-too-reassuring reason that since the heyday of backlashes against RFID in the early 2000s, most people now routinely carry smart-

phones that track practically everything they do. He sees little prospect for laws and regulations governing data collection via RFID any time soon. With collective action ruled out, the best Frith has to offer is that we, as individuals, cultivate an “infrastructural imagination.” He admonishes us to try and be aware of the RFID tags and tag readers we encounter and to think critically about what kinds of data should and should not be collected.

In the Introduction, Frith describes a senior scholar at a conference asking why location-based smartphone apps like Foursquare with relatively small user bases get a great deal of scholarly attention

while a pervasive and important technology like RFID is ignored. Frith has dutifully taken up this challenge, and one gets the sense that *A Billion Little Things* is a workmanlike attempt to do justice to a worthy subject. The book may not fire the imagination about the promises and pitfalls of RFID technology, but it provides a clear and well-organized overview.

### Reviewer Information

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Charlette Caldwell

## The Black Skyscraper

*The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race*

By Adrienne Brown. Johns Hopkins University Press, 277 pages, 2017.

**A** definition of *perception* as used in the above subtitle might be, “an awareness of the environment through physical sensation.” One becomes aware of something through all five senses. Yet it is “seeing” that is the most compelling when analyzing the relationship

between architecture and race, especially, for example, when reexamined in literary works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Adrienne Brown, a professor who specializes in American and African American cultural production at the University of Chicago, takes her readers on a journey that recounts seeing racial characteristics in the early period of American skyscraper construction. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century,

and essentially ending with the erection of the Empire State Building, circa 1931, the plots of literary novels and short stories, architectural treatises, and magazine covers retell the aesthetic history of skyscrapers, endeavoring, as Brown argues, to “recover (the skyscraper’s) influence not only on the shape of the city but also on the racial sensorium of its residents and readers.”

Beginning with two “weird,” or fantastic, stories, the anxiety white

metropolitans felt during this period is evoked with fictional works that examine the relationship between the American frontier and skyscrapers. These authors struggled with the vanishing superiority of whiteness as cities like New York and Chicago grew taller, arguing that the chaos of cities muddled distinct categories of race. In response to this confusion, these authors — both

readily perceived visually, only his name and his penchant for “avarice” in business dealings — a pernicious stereotype Brown acknowledges that is easily detectable through facial characteristics — are used to classify him as nonwhite.

On the opposite side of the “weird,” realist authors, like William Dean Howells and Henry James, oppose the dizzying effects of skyscrapers by rediscovering intimate spaces. Both authors used domestic scenes to retreat from cities, reestablishing traditional methods of racial detection — easily identifiable visual characteristics — as the norm in editorials and fiction. Howells’s work reveals a growing concern for the diminishing ability to per-

ceive racial differences from a skyscraper’s vantage points, an act that would be more attainable at a smaller scale, like at a dining-room table. Although James is also concerned with blurred racial distinction, his work focuses on the possible extinction of racial categories brought on by less intimate buildings, like skyscrapers.

Brown discusses miscegenation in a few texts, exploring the way writers alluded to racial mixing to describe their perception of tall buildings. In Louis Sullivan’s Kindergarten Chats, the architect uses the word “miscegenation” to refer to past architectural styles. Sullivan hoped to “discourage” eclectic architecture to establish an “honest” and specifically American architecture in which skyscrapers were a key component. However, this structural honesty, as Brown reads, reflects the language of scientific racism as Sullivan argued for a “virile” architectural style capable of reflecting the “white” superiority

of the country. The novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen attempts to reposition cities as disrupters of racial classification as the characters in the story deal with passing — the ability of a member of one racial group to be accepted by another, usually undetected. However, the relationship between skyscrapers, racial mixing and perception is difficult to parse out in this section: *Passing* appears to be more of a commentary on race and modern cities than race and skyscrapers.

Besides one scene featuring prominently a fictionalized version of Chicago’s Drake Hotel, skyscrapers in this story function, Brown writes, as a “background catalyst” that affects the foreground of the novel, especially at the conclusion in which one of the characters who had been passing her entire life falls from the sixth floor of a tall apartment building. Before falling, her white husband confronts her about her true racial identity, suggesting that only in an intimate setting was racial distinction truly possible. *Passing* expressively narrates the shock many urban dwellers felt as modern technology changed cities rapidly, and unexpectedly, and skyscrapers represented this disorienting phenomenon.

Despite the chaos American skyscrapers seemed to wreak in some texts, a group of black writers in the twentieth century appeared to embrace the stupefying effects of this architecture by gauging its effects on black American culture. Despite being well-known for his ground-breaking work in sociology, W.E.B. DuBois also wrote a series of science fiction short stories that incorporate the dizzying visual influence of skyscrapers. In his “The Princess Steel” a white couple visits a black sociology professor in

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using the Metropolitan Life Building as their setting — imagined how methods of racial detection could adapt in fictionalized versions of the frontier. In George Allan England’s *The Last New Yorkers*, the skyscraper evolves into a “fantastical refuge” for racial perception that was not possible in the real world where huddled masses at the base of a tall building blurred racial characteristics.

However, in Murray Leinster’s *The Runaway Skyscraper*, bureaucratic and legal procedures, like the infamous one-drop rule, become new forms of racial classification that survive when visual detection fails after the Met Life Building travels backward in time, forcing the time-travelling workers to work collectively. The new forms of racial detection become potent when it is discovered that an office worker, one who was instrumental in procuring the land that the skyscraper would be built upon, is Jewish. The ethnicity of this character is not

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his office housed in a skyscraper. The disorienting vista of the cityscape from the professor's office window distracts them enough to not notice immediately that the sociologist they have come to visit is, in fact, black, yet the couple is shocked to see how gentlemanly this black professor appears to be.

The story ends with the couple using a device invented by the professor to view the vista. The husband's view is transported to a fantastical scene in which the

sense of "reality" comes rushing back along with any dream of an interracial new beginning. Brown suggests that the end of the novel — in which the black man is reunited with his wife but learns of the death of his child — champions black survival in the modern city.

Although other black writers considered DuBois old-fashioned, they nevertheless used the same disorientating nature of skyscrapers to discuss black American culture. Black-run magazines depicted covers with black bodies situated next to skyscrapers, also rendered in black, appearing to embrace the staggering effects of skyscrapers for their advantages of specifically upsetting stringent racial categories.


Countering this acceptance, Brown discusses distressing intimate experiences in the everyday lives of white metropolitans in the last chapter of the book. Perhaps the most famous of the texts dis-

cussed, *The Great Gatsby*, relays this experience most clearly. The novel's characters' perception of race extends along class and gender, as Brown examines the way in which characters engage within — and outside — the city. The modern city rising with its tall buildings appears enticing at first, however, upon closer observation, the city is disturbing as racial expression confuses traditional social boundaries. Jay Gatsby may dress and act like his well-off white companions, however, the secrecy surrounding his origins and the people he chooses to do business with in the city — another explicit anti-Semitic reference to a character deemed as "nonwhite" — taints his friends' perception of him, labeling Gatsby himself as "nonwhite." Race and class

are also explored in the work of Faith Baldwin, as one of her characters — a female office worker — is considered cultural backward by sacrificing a working life in a tall office building for motherhood. However, another character is praised for the same seemingly difficult decision. The difference between the two characters is that the first woman is the daughter of Italian immigrants and the other is an Anglo-American woman — expected to combat the influx of immigrants with procreation.

The book is worthwhile, if mostly for the wealth of literary references — too many to list properly here — and rereading of classic texts. Interdisciplinary is the best way to describe Brown's approach: She uses architectural treatises, well-known literary novels, and short stories to mark how urbanites visually contended with their changing environment. Although at times her thesis loses its coherency within the style of writing, Brown's book is a welcome addition to a time in which scholars are examining how everyday objects have been historically written. In addition, Brown's close readings of these texts are grounded in sociology, history, and legal precedents, providing the reader with context for why a certain author may have perceived skyscrapers in a certain way. This reading highlights the pervasiveness of our visual senses when coping with modern technology and a rapidly changing environment.

### Reviewer Information

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prominent figures have black skin. However, his wife only sees the same vista they had encountered before, a moment Brown uses to demonstrate the relentlessness of racial prejudices.

DuBois's "The Comet" is perhaps the most poignant in the relationship between architecture and black American culture. A comet destroys Manhattan and the only two survivors are a black man and a white woman. After surveying the damage wrought by the comet on the city, the white woman learns to accept her companion, eventually realizing, while at the top of the Met Life Building, that she would need to relinquish her racial prejudices in order to repopulate the earth. However, it is discovered that only Manhattan was destroyed, and her