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Book Review: *From Slave Cabins to the White House:
Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*

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Koritha Mitchell: *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*

***From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African-American Culture.* Koritha Mitchell: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 296pp. \$24.95 Paperback.**

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In *From Slave Cabins to the White House*, Koritha Mitchell offers a close analysis of the historical relationship between African Americans and the construct of citizenship, from the time of slavery to the contemporary era. Mitchell charts the logic behind the concept she coins *homemade citizenship*, which is a radical act of self-construction and self-affirmation undertaken by Black Americans in the face of systematic oppression and unsuccessful denial of Black success. Black success— even only “mediocre” success— is met with aggression, violence, outrage, and pushback at every turn, and yet Black Americans continue to succeed. The primary focus of this book is to chart the ways Black cultural production since slavery has evinced and embodied a greater narrative of success— not as escapist, but not squarely in protest or response to white oppression.

Mitchell usefully analyzes an array of texts written by Black American women since slavery, including Harriet Jacobs, Frances E.W. Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, and Toni Morrison, along with the cultural narratives produced regarding the public persona of Michelle Obama. Mitchell analyzes Obama as a successful careerwoman, mother, and wife, who is a vital agent in the idealized heteronormative nuclear family the Obamas have constructed— and that is not recognized as such by the racist American public. The Obamas’ success at embodying this ideal is the very reason for white Americans’ racist attacks against them. Mitchell focuses on Obama in order to answer questions posed regarding the ability of Black Americans but especially Black women to construct citizenship for themselves and for their

families. This book is especially beneficial for scholars who seek a broad overview of the tactics Black women use in writing about achievement, success, and celebrations of survival over a span of 150 years, though each chapter hones in on a decade in order to survey the ways these narratives change over time.

Throughout the book, Mitchell explains that homemade citizenship provides a “deep sense of success and belonging that does not depend on civic inclusion or mainstream recognition,” i.e., that the white standard is not vital for Black Americans to create spaces and communities that are fulfilling. There is a balance, however, between self-affirmation and the understanding that succeeding will bring on hostility from white Americans and white institutions of power.

Mitchell acutely notes that it is vital to analyze Black cultural production— among other kinds of production— through a lens of achievement and self-affirmation, as protest and resistance are not the only stories that Black Americans produce. Mitchell makes the claim that black domestic success, created in the form of strong families, and especially by strong mothers and wives, in the form of the heteronormative nuclear family, is what attracts the most hostility because strong Black families break free of the narrative projected onto them that there is no domestic peace in marginalized communities.

In fact, the dominant cultural narrative in the United States is one that posits so-called “weak” families as “noncitizens.” Mitchell uses fictional representations of Black homemakers to analyze homemaking. Women as subjects (homemakers) reveal more about dominant and marginal discourses than their male counterparts. Black homemakers additionally have documented their awareness of their “domestic vulnerability,” i.e., how desperately white Americans seek to undermine and attack Black domesticity.

The heteronormative family unit is the most hegemonic construction of success in the United States; African American families have been repeatedly portrayed in popular discourse and media as dysfunctional and “broken.” Thus, one fundamental path to American success is conveyed as impossible for Black Americans based on identity— race— alone. Despite any success in adhering to cultural ideals of domestic prosperity, Black Americans are consistently denied respect and civic inclusion, and Mitchell documents this throughout the entire timespan of her analysis. Mitchell also recognizes that it may seem that Black Americans embrace a conservative ideal when pursuing heteronormative-hegemonic success. She acutely notes that in reality, all societal practices are attached to a larger system of oppression. Black survival under such systems, though on the surface it embraces a project of capitalism, settler colonialism, etc., is, in fact, a radical act.

Survival, for Black Americans, is success, as the violent white institutions that founded the American culture and nation were built to deny the survival of Black Americans. Current Black cultural production is a celebration of the very fact that that attempt was and currently is unsuccessful. Mitchell follows this logic through by emphasizing that the repeated attempts by white Americans and institutions to destroy the humanity of Black Americans were always unsuccessful, and will always continue to be. Thus, violence is a response to the success of Black Americans in asserting humanity and agency, and Black Americans continue to march toward success, joy, accomplishment, and love, despite the violent attacks by others. Rather than framing Black cultural production as defensive— i.e., responsive to white attacks, Mitchell emphasizes that in fact the violence against Black success is defensive—defensive of a culture that seeks— and fails— to violently marginalize Black Americans.

In *From Slave Cabins to the White House*, Mitchell successfully makes the case for reinvestigation of what scholars have previously dismissed as Black American conformity to white, patriarchal standards. As Mitchell distinguishes, we cannot apply the same analytical frameworks to every subject of American societal control. As Black Americans have worked to craft their own citizenship in the face of a nation that systematically denied such, scholars must work to craft new analyzes of the narratives of Black Americans. Mitchell's innovative analyses of homemaking Black characters should be used by scholars as a methodology for future research in the areas of American studies, African American studies, and gender studies.