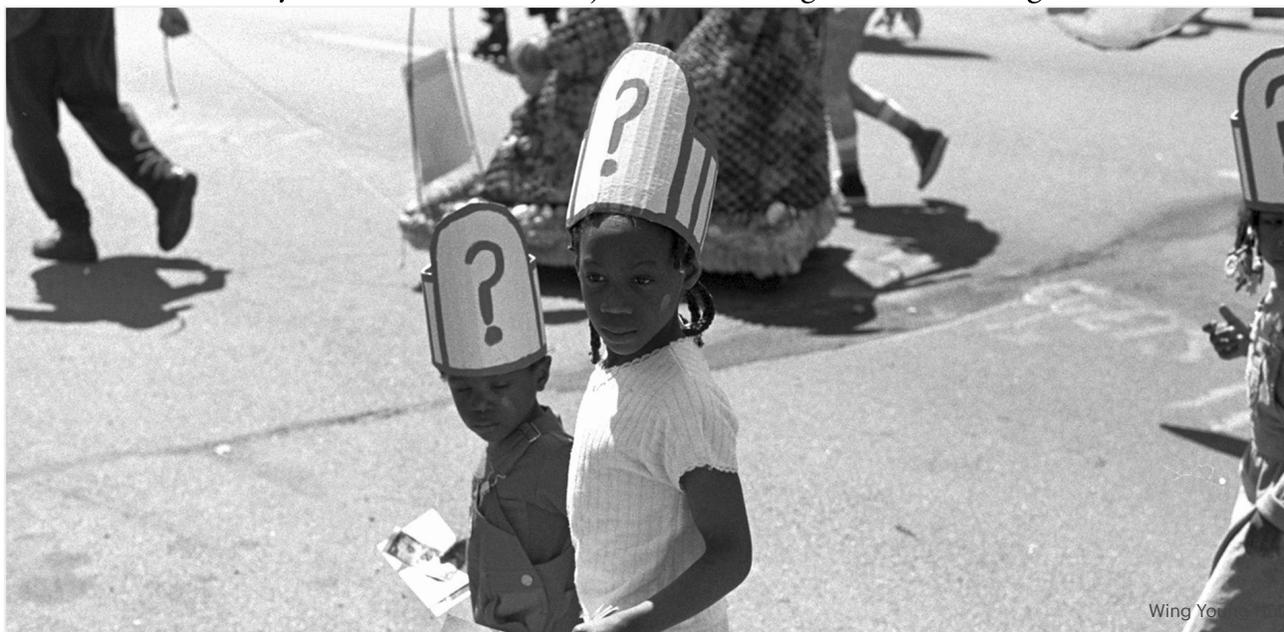


*The Atlantic*  
Minneapolis Had This Coming

My hometown faces not just a rebuilding but a reckoning.



*Story by Justin Ellis*

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*Photographs by Wing Young Huie*

Back in the late 1990s, the photographer and Minnesota native Wing Young Huie started an ambitious project to document life along Lake Street, a six-mile corridor that stretches across south Minneapolis, west from the Mississippi River to Lake Bde Maka Ska.

For four years, Huie captured Lake Street at its most beautiful and mundane—families at worship and at play; people sitting down for meals in their homes, or slogging through work. The faces, mostly people of color, are those of residents just trying to get by.

I get captivated by these photos because I know these places; I grew up in the heart of Lake Street in the 1980s. Lake Street holds a special place in the imaginations of some in Minneapolis; the thoroughfare has historic roots as a place settled by newcomers to the north, and Swedish and German immigrants gave way over time to Cambodians, Hmong people, Somalis, and families relocating from parts of Central America. Studying the photos, I immediately recognize the scenery, and am brought back to the old streetscape: fast-food joints such as White Castle; the massive Kmart dropped in the middle of the city's major north-south artery, Nicollet Avenue; the check-cashing spots and auto-parts stores; the restaurants and markets run by immigrants. But what I see most in these photos is that, until recently, the landscape of Lake Street hadn't changed much in decades.

That's different now, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. Night after night of violence has left swaths of Lake Street in ruins, the product of sorrow and rage from black people whose voices have been denied too long, and whose suffering has become more pronounced in a global pandemic and an economic crisis acutely targeting black bodies.

*[ Ibram X. Kendi: The American nightmare ]*

This was all inevitable. The conditions that led to this moment didn't spring up overnight; it's been in the making for generations. No group of protesters could devastate south Minneapolis more than years of disinvestment and abandonment already have. Lake Street was hollowed out long before the flames came.

In recent years, Minneapolis has thrived on the reputation of being a progressive North Star where politicians champion inclusivity and mobility, a playground for the arts and award-winning cuisine, where your dollar takes you so much further than in the big coastal cities. Minneapolis and St. Paul seem to consistently chart high in “best places to live” rankings, and abysmally low in racial equity.



Scenes from Lake Street (Wing Young Huie)

That’s borne out in the numbers. Census data from 2015, for example, showed homeownership rates for black families in the Twin Cities was about 23 percent; for whites, that number was 75 percent, putting it among the highest in the nation. In 2018, the unemployment rate for blacks in Minnesota dropped to a historic low of 6.9 percent. It was still three times the rate of white unemployment.

A 2019 study by economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis showed that, although students in Minnesota beat the national average on math and reading scores, these scores for white students were about 20 percent higher than for black students. The incarceration rate for black residents? That’s higher too.

And now George Floyd’s death is just the latest instance of police-related killings in the Twin Cities in the past 10 years; the protests and violence that followed are costs that come from bearing the weight of a system that won’t let you live any kind of life.

*[ Read: The double standard of the American riot ]*

My hometown faces a reckoning, not just a rebuilding. Social scientists have tried to parse this in the past. Samuel Myers Jr., the director of the Roy Wilkins

Center for Human Relations and Social Justice at the University of Minnesota, uses the term “the Minnesota paradox” in analyzing racial disparities and the state’s inability to address its legacy of discrimination.\* In his book co-authored with Inhyuck Ha, *Race Neutrality: Rationalizing Remedies to Racial Inequality*, Myers wrote: “The overwhelming sentiment among residents of Minnesota is one of alarm and concern about these racial disparities but reluctance to attribute these disparities to systemic discrimination or racism.”

Growing up, I just took it as a fact that black folks lived only in specific slices of north and south Minneapolis; I simply had to look at where different family members lived. When you’re born into redlining, it has a way of making you believe that neighborhoods are the natural outcome of residents having a job and paying bills on time, not racism built through governments and banks and developers acting hand in hand.

Lake Street was targeted for redevelopment in the 1970s, a ploy to rejuvenate neighborhoods abandoned by the city at a time when white flight was already accelerating. City officials planned big, or as big as you could get for the upper Midwest at the time: a suburban-style mini mall. (Minnesotans *really* love malls.) Instead, only Kmart showed up. And Kmart had a list of demands, the biggest being closing off Nicollet Avenue. They severed south Minneapolis from downtown just to maintain big-box-store standards.

This was the neighborhood I grew up in, and in my mind, that Kmart has looked worn down since the day it opened. Our neighborhood was essentially walled off by this 10-acre policy mistake. And even though the decisions that brought it into the world inflicted more trauma on overlooked black and brown families, the Kmart and the SuperValu market next door were a boon. They were what we had to work with.

I left Minneapolis for college in the late '90s and have bounced around the country for work ever since, returning home a handful of times every year to see my family. Leaving home makes you aware of how life there changes while you’re away. It’s one thing to note when your favorite breakfast spot or barbershop disappears; it’s another when whole city blocks give way to cranes and construction. High-end chefs and brewpubs soon followed. But this infusion of

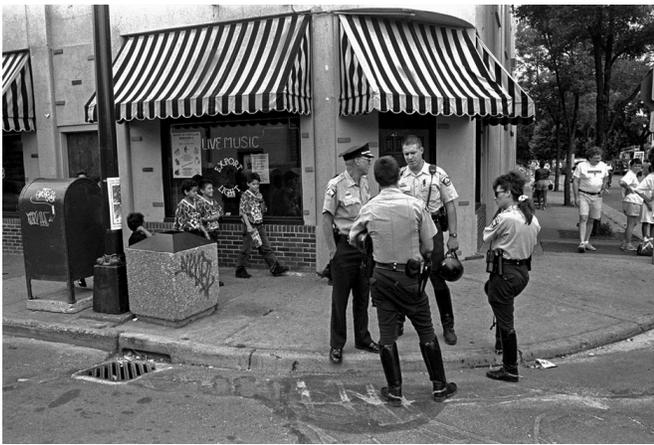
money was uneven, especially along Lake Street. As the Uptown neighborhood on the far west end of Lake Street sprouted condos and boutiques, my old neighborhood stayed the same. As East Lake Street, bumping up against the Mississippi River on the other side of town, gathered cider houses and coffee shops, for my part of Lake Street, it was still more of the same.

Nevertheless, quickly the narrative of the bikeable City of Lakes and opportunity crystallized, a story told in the pages of *The Atlantic*. And why not celebrate it? Minneapolis promised good jobs, affordable housing, and clean living. If you love liberal politics, maybe you've heard about how Hubert Humphrey was a champion of civil rights or how Walter Mondale was a co-sponsor of the Fair Housing Act. Also, did you know that both Keith Ellison and his successor, Ilhan Omar, broke barriers in being elected to Congress while also being a person of color from Minnesota? Perhaps you've seen the dashing young mayor, Jacob Frey, who is no stranger to talking back to Donald Trump or getting serenaded with boos from residents.

*[ Read: The criminalization of gentrifying neighborhoods ]*

Far too often the historical political achievements and liberal lineage of the Twin Cities feed the perception filter that surrounds the region. Because no place with a record like that, or that gave us Prince, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, and the Sounds of Blackness, could have racism problems, right?

But it turns out that Minneapolis is, in other ways—the ones that matter the most—not remarkable. One way my hometown is not remarkable is its relationship to police violence. Philando Castile's killing in the suburbs of St. Paul in 2016 drew the attention of the world to police violence in Minnesota. Since 2010, 11 people have died at the hands of police in Minneapolis, including David Smith, Jamar Clark, Justine Damond, and now George Floyd.



Left: Lake & Bloomington; Right: Chicago & Lake (Wing Young Huie)

And every time, reform is the answer. After each death, Minneapolis leaders promise new policy, new training. In 2007, a group of black officers sued the city, alleging discriminatory conduct against black people, both citizens and *officers inside the department*. The suit was settled and dismissed, but now one of those officers, Medaria Arradondo, is the police chief. Prior to this year, only one officer involved in police violence in the city faced jail, Mohamed Noor, who was sentenced to 12 and a half years in Damond's shooting. Noor was black; Damond was white. Derek Chauvin, the officer charged in Floyd's death, is the first white police officer in Minnesota to face prosecution in the death of a black person. And now the Minneapolis City Council seems to feel the urgency to change policing. And although voting to ban chokeholds and signing a pledge to dismantle the police department are powerful statements, until they are backed by definitive action and funding, these moves will join a long line of fruitless symbolic gestures.

These are the realities that bind if you look like me in one of the most livable cities in the United States. Living a black life in Minneapolis means sitting in disparity between your good-natured neighbors and a system of structural racism and disenfranchisement enforced through policy, white silence, and police violence. As far back as the early 1900s, racial covenants denied black people and other minorities the ability to buy homes in the city. White families took hold of the desirable areas abutting the parks and the lakes, neighborhoods where trees grew to great green awnings and lawns could yawn and stretch. And it stayed that way. The Mapping Prejudice project, which began examining structural racism in

Twin Cities housing in 2016, says neighborhoods with a history of racial covenants are 79 percent white today.

James T. Wardlaw, a former head of the Minneapolis Urban League, predicted the future back in 1944 in a letter to the *Minneapolis Star*. Writing of systematic prejudice in Twin Cities real estate, he said: “These are the practices which during the past decade have come to be regarded as expedient and profitable. These are also the practices which if endured for another decade will reap for Minneapolis a sorry harvest.”

He was right: Housing is destiny in America; it determines every single facet of our lives. So why is it surprising that Minneapolis is rich with inequality when all of the necessary ingredients for structural racism have been present for so long? What would make anyone expect change?

Right now Minneapolis is trying to transform itself yet again. Soon even my old neighborhood Kmart will disappear. This past March, the city council approved a plan to buy out the store’s lease for \$9 million in order to tear it down, reopen Nicollet Avenue, and redevelop the land. Just before that, the city also passed the Minneapolis 2040 plan, a broad vision for goals such as reducing carbon emissions, creating a more transit-friendly city, and addressing racial inequality.

Given the city’s history, the planners decided one of the best tools to confront systemic racism was allowing for a wider range of housing in Minneapolis. They decided to eliminate zoning for single-family housing in the city, opting instead for multi-family buildings to try to create more affordable living options across the board. That last part predictably caused outrage in the more moneyed parts of town, people vowing to “protect” their neighborhoods, who proudly displayed DON’T BULLDOZE OUR NEIGHBORHOODS yard signs. Good old-fashioned Twin Cities passive aggression fueled fresh NIMBYism, giving shape to white fears of authoritarianism. The former city council member Lisa McDonald went so far as to say in an interview with the news nonprofit *MinnPost*: “It’s basically an opportunity to make sure that anything that happens in Minneapolis is top-down,” she said. “It’s almost Trumpian.”

Imagine the tyranny. What would it be like to live under a system that disregards you and the needs of your family in order to protect the interests of entrenched

power? When you have never really suffered or lived in a society that denies your full existence, policy documents—or even public-health orders that (temporarily) stop you from getting a haircut—somehow look like fascism.

White rule is protecting homeowner interests. It's the use of police to protect property and quality of life, not the sanctity of life. It's the face under the mask of empathy worn by so many midwestern progressives who claim love for their black and brown friends. It's the hollow sympathy of BLACK LIVES MATTER yard signs next to DON'T BULLDOZE OUR NEIGHBORHOODS signs. There are not enough MLK breakfasts or Juneteeth picnics or marches or Lizzo concerts to absolve you of your sins.

*[ Adam Serwer: The cruelty is the point ]*

So, no, it's not a "Minnesota paradox"; it never was. This is a uniquely American system, one perpetuated by white power of all political flavors, doing exactly what it was designed to do. Racial inequity is the story of this country from its founding; it's just that Minnesota started to believe its own lies about opportunity and brotherly love. That's ironic, given that the state exists as a product of plundering—or was it rezoning?—the land of indigenous Americans.

This was the choice that created this state, and it hangs over every soul in Minneapolis. It's echoed in the decisions of those who willfully ignore black suffering because of the comforts they have been afforded for generations. Myers, who has studied the "Minnesota paradox," acknowledges this: "You have a legacy of asset accumulation in Minnesota [by] white people [that] can't be explained by education, by training, by family structure, by native ability or intelligence," he told the *Star Tribune* in 2019.\*

Why wouldn't black people living in the Twin Cities want to burn everything down and start anew? Why wouldn't they give voice to the rage that resides in our bones? It's the only language that gets noticed as you lay dying, no longer content to suffer the good intentions of well-meaning white people.

Wing Young Huie's photos tell it all: The divide was always there if you were willing to look. Living side by side is not the same as living in solidarity, not when you've been given the scraps of prosperity and told it's enough to feed you

and yours. The story of Lake Street, of black life in Minneapolis, is one of stark abandonment, even when it's captured on film for all to see. And neglect has always made for perfect kindling.

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*\* This article previously misstated that Samuel Myers Jr. coined the term "the Minnesota paradox."*

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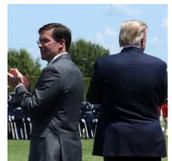
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