

Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation

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The Boundaries and Geographical Markers of Race

In the foreword to David Leong's *Race and Place*, Soong-Chan Rah writes, "To change the social imagination of a community, a church, a denomination, and even a nation requires hard work. For those who are just beginning their journey toward biblical racial justice, this book offers an important primer. For those who have grown weary of trying to explain the reality of injustice in the world, this book offers markers and guideposts to persevere in that conversation. I am so grateful for David Leong's fresh and unique look at race in America. I will 'never look at another freeway, public school, or suburban home the same way again.'"

Throughout this critical book—amid conversation about walls, division, and barriers—Leong looks at questions such as:

- How do geographic structures hinder the work of reconciliation? Why were those structures created in the first place?
- Where does the term "ghetto" come from and why is it important to understand in twenty-first century America?
- Why is racial unrest so prevalent now, and primarily in urban areas?
- How can we change these systemic problems for the cause of reconciliation?
- Why is experiencing belonging in homogeneity problematic?
- Why does focusing on individual morality amid community building and healing not result in full reconciliation?
- Why is gentrification such a challenging term?

Why, when the church is so focused on reconciliation, do racial injustices persist? Because geographic structures and systems create barriers to reconciliation and prevent the flourishing of our communities, Leong writes.

"Race is neither a white/black issue nor is it merely one of political correctness," writes Amos Yong, professor of theology and mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. "Rather, it's about ghettos, ethnic enclaves, suburbia, and gentrification. David Leong helps us see how racialized our cities have been historically and how we continue to suffer under these decisions from decades ago. But *Race and Place* also provides us with concrete steps to live out the good news of justice and shalom in our neighborhoods and communities. There is plenty here for theorists to mull over and much for activists to work for as well."

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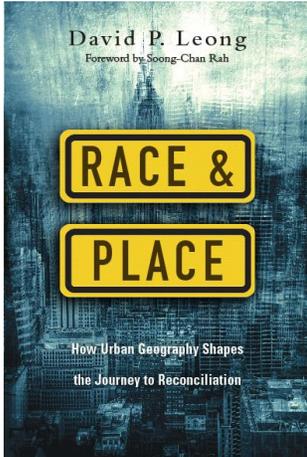


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The Racism of Walls

Walls, fences, borders, and boundaries are all around us, and they generally serve a common set of purposes: to divide, define, and demarcate. Geographically, walls and boundaries can be very important for the design of the built environment or the standards of public safety. For example, I'm usually grateful for the fenced areas in parks where my young children play; they can run freely without the danger of cars, and their exploring can be contained lest they wander too far. But walls can also divide to the detriment of a place; borders can create tension over contested ground or exacerbate violence that builds on either side of a physical or metaphorical boundary.

While the ordinary walls among us mostly go unnoticed—a landscaped retaining wall or a friendly neighbor's fence—sadly, there is no shortage of the contested and divisive type of wall. For example, Donald Trump's well-publicized desire to build a huge wall along the Mexican-American border is only the latest proposal in a long history of wall building. These "walls of hostility," as the apostle Paul refers to the cultural divide between Jews and Gentiles, remain active and entrenched barriers in our world today. Some of them are more obviously constructed, such as the security wall around the Israeli West Bank (known as the "Apartheid Wall" by many Palestinians). But these days most of them are harder to see at first, especially when so many suggest these walls have all come down and are relics of an uglier history now past.

Many of the walls are both historic walls that have had lasting and unforeseen effects on their communities and invisible walls that have formed along racial and socioeconomic lines. Keep in mind that physical boundaries are not necessarily more imposing or damaging to the common good, though at first it may seem that way. In fact, many of the symbolic walls we face—cultural boundaries, color lines, class barriers—are actually more dangerous to the flourishing of communities precisely because of their intangible characteristics. In a sense, it's their invisibility that protects and reinforces their power. When we fence a group in physically, the moral dilemma is clear. But when we create a boundary that's less apparent or obvious on the surface, its divisiveness may be contested.

Ultimately, as we identify and interpret these boundaries and the places they shape, I hope we bring the deeper meaning of these walls to bear on how the places we inhabit have in turn shaped us. If the church is ever going to summon the courage to transgress these walls of hostility, then we must understand the walls we're up against.

In 2002, rising hip-hop star and talented rapper Eminem cemented his celebrity status with the film *8 Mile*, a huge box-office success that retold the story of Eminem's origins. Besides highlighting his humble beginnings as a poor white kid living on the wrong side of the

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David P. Leong (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is associate professor of missiology at Seattle Pacific University and Seminary, where he also serves as the director of the Global and Urban Ministry minor. He previously served in churches in urban Seattle through ministries focused on community groups and neighborhood involvement.

As a scholar and practitioner, Leong examines the theological meaning of the city in an increasingly globalized and urbanized world. Working at the intersection of intercultural and missiological discourse, he sees the city as a rich context for theological reflection about topics ranging from hip hop and the built environment to multiculturalism and

tracks, the story put the hip-hop scene in Detroit on the map, with particular emphasis on 8 Mile Road, the historic dividing line between whites and blacks.

8 Mile Road, also known as M-102, is a Michigan highway that runs east-west along the northern border of the city of Detroit. Physically, it is simply one road in a system of many highways that run through the state. However, as we've explored from the beginning, the real meaning of a street sign like 8 Mile often transcends its physicality or material boundaries. But how exactly did 8 Mile Road achieve such cultural significance and notoriety? Unsurprisingly, it began with a wall.

Like a lot of other American cities, the population of Detroit grew significantly through the 1930s, and by 1940, new housing development had basically reached the northern edge of the city. Around the same time, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created by the US government in 1934, had begun to lay the foundation for homeownership as a central component of the national economy under Roosevelt's New Deal reforms. FHA-backed home loans essentially restructured and regulated the entire mortgage industry in order to make homeownership accessible and affordable for "all," especially for new home buyers in areas that would become suburbs.

As builders essentially ran out of space in Detroit, developers began to look more at the land outside the city, just north of 8 Mile Road. Mass-produced single-family homes were the newest (and most expensive) consumer item on the market, as the wave of the future toward prosperity and wealth had both government-backed financing and affordable, entry-level pricing with payment plans spaced over thirty years. It was an ingenious move on the part of the government to stimulate jobs, spending, and growth in the already prospering American economy. The land north of 8 Mile was ripe for development, and building new homes there would keep communities growing.

But there was one big catch, and it was a significant one since it was determined by the color of your skin. Private developers needed FHA approval in order to finance their building projects, since it was FHA loans that would allow buyers to purchase their American dreams of white picket fences, cul-de-sacs, and suburban life. Without FHA financing, nothing built could be purchased, and so the FHA worked with the federally run Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) to establish a rating system for determining how and where housing loans should be prioritized. Explicit within this rating system was the racial makeup of the neighborhood, with subsequent consideration for where new homes could and should be built.

The underlying principle was quite simple: racially homogeneous *white* neighborhoods were stable and therefore good investments. Racially mixed neighborhoods were unstable and therefore a financial risk, depending on the particular ethnic ratios and the level of "black infiltration." Predominantly black or minority communities were deemed hazardous and

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BOOK EXCERPT

missional ecclesiology.

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therefore denied any potential investment. On HOLC maps, white neighborhoods were coded and outlined with the color green, the highest rating. Conversely, black and minority neighborhoods were outlined in red and given the lowest rating; they were "red-lined." Redlining was a common practice in FHA developments all across the country, and every city where people bought or built homes – from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles, and many places in between – was shaped by this blatantly racist policy. Following federal guidelines, the private banking industry also largely adopted the same methods of rating risk assessment.

Meanwhile, back in Detroit, when developers proposed some new construction on the north side of 8 Mile Road, and current residents also wanted new FHA mortgages, the racially coded rating system kicked in, and the maps showed that the proposed homes would be built too close to black communities on the south side of 8 Mile Road. Proximity to ethnic enclaves and racial diversity was too much of a financial risk, and applications for FHA loans would be denied. However, determined to build and profit, developers and residents had an idea: Why not build a wall to establish a clear boundary between the black families living on the south side of 8 Mile and the new, white communities being built nearby?

Accordingly, the 8 Mile Wall was built in 1940. About a half-mile long, six feet tall, and one foot thick, this concrete wall still stands today. On its completion, FHA-backed loans were approved on the other side of the wall, and new homes were built in suburban neighborhoods that quickly became exclusive white enclaves outside of the city. This pattern was not unique to Detroit, and all across the nation, suburban development took shape and amassed wealth on the essential foundation of racial exclusion. And as if the FHA's complicity in racist banking policy wasn't enough, private developers also played their part through a consistent use of racially restrictive housing covenants that explicitly excluded people of color from living in, renting, or purchasing homes in these new suburbs.

– Adapted from chapter four, "Walls of Hostility"