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Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Urban America.

By Jennifer Lee. Harvard University Press, 2002. 270 pp. Cloth, \$35.00.

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In *Civility in the City*, Lee asks: What are merchant–customer relations like in black communities, and what do merchant–customer relations tell us about race and ethnic relations generally among blacks, Jews, and Koreans in urban America? Through ethnographic investigation, Lee found that black–Jewish and black–Korean relations are not as conflict-ridden, hostile, and prone to violent outbursts as suggested by media reports. Instead, the overwhelming majority of interactions are characterized by civility, even ordinariness. However, it is a peace that is achieved with great effort. In the face of irate black customers who demand refunds without receipts, attempt to return damaged items months after purchase, and aggressively argue for discounts that are not due them, merchants devise means to manage customers so that small disagreements do not erupt into major racial dramas. Crucial among these is the hiring of black employees who help merchants to bridge the cultural divide and to illustrate their own commitment to the health and well-being of the black communities in which they have established businesses.

The strength of *Civility in the City*, however, lies in Lee’s analysis of the impact that engagement within certain niches has on interracial relations. Lee argues that if black–Korean relations have been conflict-ridden it is because Koreans tend to occupy self-employment niches that are more susceptible to misunderstanding and customer conflict, niches “characterized by high volume, low profit margins, poorer customers, and fleeting customer interactions.” Jews who once predominated in this economic realm had very similar interactions with blacks. However, as they have moved up the evolutionary chain to self-employment that is less labor intensive, requires less volume, garners higher profit margins, and services middle-class customers with specialized attention, black–Jewish relations have become far more cordial. In chapters 3 and 4 alone, Lee essentially addresses the main questions posed, and she does so convincingly. Thus, these are especially critical for understanding the factors that lead to interracial conflict *and* civility among blacks, Jews, and Koreans in the urban context.

Civility in the City is not without shortcomings, however, as Lee’s analysis seems biased in favor of merchants’ contributions to this delicate peace. Lee contends that social order is achieved solely from the efforts of merchants — and the black employees they hire as mediators — who make investments to maintain day-to-day routine, recognizing that their failure to do so could have dramatic consequences. However, is it not possible that their black customers also have tools for avoiding conflict or diffusing it when it does occur, thereby

contributing to the routine, generally amicable relations that exist? Are they not motivated to find peace? In other words, the ways in which black customers attempt to maintain peace remains unexplored. In part, this asymmetry may be a function of how Lee approached the field. Gaining entry primarily through merchants, Lee collected data as a non-participant observer — merchants often had to interrupt face-to-face interviews to deal with customers, and Lee took this time to observe interactions — and as participant observer — she acted as a cashier and bagged merchandise in some stores as well. In the process, she recorded daily interactions between merchants (who knew who she was and why she was there) and customers (who had no such knowledge). This undoubtedly affected the type of data she collected as well as her interpretation of the data. Although Lee did interview customers, these seem to have been conducted after the fact and out of context. She and her (black) interviewers did not shadow customers as they shopped and thus were unable to gain critical insight into their perceptions and interpretations of customer–merchant relations. The perspective of the black customer, then, is given short shrift.

This is not the only instance in which reductionism occurs, however. In “Shopping While Black,” Lee subtly indicts black customers who, she says, appear more willing to riot against and picket local merchants than to confront merchants in white neighborhoods with whom they have more negative experiences. To explain this apparent paradox, she suggests that blacks avoid confronting extralocal white merchants and instead focus their resentments and frustrations on small, local Jewish and Korean merchants because these latter merchants are more proximate, physically, and have fewer resources with which to fight back. Here, the local merchants are painted as the undeserving recipients of black backlash; they are victims. However, Lee’s interpretation does not take into consideration the impact that differences in resources have on forms of resistance and retribution that people take. With greater resources, members of the black middle class — those followed in this chapter and most likely to come into contact with white merchants — do not have to riot in the streets. Instead, they can hire lawyers and initiate litigation, as was done when black middle-class patrons of Denny’s initiated a class-action suit against the restaurant chain. They may also access black media outlets from which they can articulate their concerns and mobilize support. Thus, small, local Korean and Jewish merchants are not the only targets of black mobilization and protest; nor are they likely disproportionately affected. However, because Lee underestimates the ways in which blacks of different social classes respond to discrimination, she exaggerates this. In the end, the reader is left with the impression that, within the urban context, interracial conflict largely erupts because black customers perceive they are being discriminated against, while everyday peace is largely negotiated and achieved because of merchants’ actions.

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Even with these serious shortcomings, however, *Civility in the City* is a noteworthy contribution. I would recommend it to scholars and laypersons alike, and I plan to add this book to my syllabus on race and ethnic relations.