rective, and judged by his modest historiographical aims, he largely succeeds. His book effectively recovers the memory of Washington as “a revered national icon,” honored in death for his “humanitarianism, humility, nationalism, perseverance, philanthropy, progressivism, spirituality, and wisdom.” Those wondering why this memory of Washington was forgotten, and what memory of Washington—within or outside of the academy—now prevails, will have to look elsewhere.

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Notwithstanding the reported spike in incidences of antisemitism in the United States in 2017, contemporary American Jews live in an era of unparalleled acceptance. The most onerous forms of social discrimination, which once were so troubling, have virtually disappeared from this country’s scene. Certainly, opposition among gentiles to Jews living next door to them no longer limits this minority group’s residential choices. But this high level of integration and the palpable growth of ever-increasing friendly and romantic relationships between American Jews and Christians have caused major worries within Jewish communal leadership about the fate of Jewish identification. Today, the fear of unbridled assimilation, far more than manifestations of Jew hatred, rankles those concerned with the future of America’s Jews. In her intriguing work Ambivalent Embrace, which focuses on the dilemmas of Jewish life in new suburban locales in the first decades after World War II, cultural historian Rachel Kranson teaches us that such well-founded apprehensions about that group’s continuity date back to the very outset of the increased acceptance of Jews in America. In 1944, amid the war against totalitarianism, public opinion surveys showed that Americans harbored a welt of antisemitic sentiments. Ironically, that same year saw Congress pass a bill of far-reaching importance that would soon change how Protestants, Catholics, and Jews saw Congress pass a bill of far-reaching importance that would soon change how Protestants, Catholics, and Jews saw

"...Amelden Embrace..." (49).

Kranson does criticize the critics whom she has chosen to study, but she misses an essential point about when and where “inauthenticity” began to characterize Jewish behavior. “Authenticity” and “inauthenticity” are Kranson’s favorite words, used time and again, and to my mind much too often. She notes the irony that some of the rabbis who upbraided their congregations for their edifice complexes went along with their laypeople’s desires as those who led services and organized ancillary activities garnered substantial salaries—compensation far greater than that accorded their religious predecessors (70). And she strongly suggests that the concerns of leftist critics about creeping suburban Jewish conservatism were unduly overwrought. For her, “no evidence indicates that newly prosperous Jews were any less ideologically liberal or politically active than those Jews who did not share their economic rise” (46). She pointedly indicates that poorer Jews who were left behind—or who felt stuck and under siege—in changing urban areas often abandoned liberalism as, for instance, they “fought to maintain segregated neighborhood schools” (46). Meanwhile, wealthier Jews removed from tensions did not question liberalism. And, I might add, many of them lived in racially restricted gilded enclaves. Incidentally, by the late 1960s, such suburban-dwelling Jews and their Christian neighbors both would be tarred as “limousine liberals” by those who remained in contested city environments.

Kranson should have gone further in challenging the alleged dichotomy between Jewish life in suburban areas as opposed to earlier Jewish locales. For Jews, the dilemma of continuity has a long, inglorious history. For example, while it may be true that “sumptuous, state-of-the-art post-war synagogue lacked the intangible ‘spirit’ that [dis-mayed rabbis] believed to be characteristic of a more authentic Judaism” (76), at least their congregations were present in their sanctuaries during the admittedly flaccid...
“religious revival” after 1945. During the 1930s, Judaism suffered from what was then referred to as a “spiritual depression,” as rabbis ministered in half-empty synagogues. Indeed, Kranson should have made her readers aware that the falling away from “authentic” traditions began long before suburban relocation, arguably beginning in Eastern Europe within and without the shtetl, continuing in downtown areas of American cities, on to postwar suburbia, and peaking in the present day.


“Urban decline lurks behind every postwar story,” the historian Robert A. Beauregard influentially pronounced a quarter century ago in his masterful study Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities (Beauregard, 4). With a crisp and insightful examination of the words, plans, and narratives generated by several generations of Cleveland boosters, J. Mark Souther’s Believing in Cleveland both ratifies and significantly complicates this sweeping claim.

The context for the book is the well-known yet staggering loss of population, wealth, industry, and commerce that afflicted Cleveland, like its midwestern peer cities, from World War II to the Reagan years. But the familiar story of postwar urban shrinkage and decay isn’t in itself what Souther sets out to highlight. Instead, the book chronicles the constant drumbeat of mottos, ad campaigns, renewal projects, and cosmic upgrades via which growth-coalition elites sought to market the city and region not just to tourists and out-of-town executives but also to doubting Clevelanders themselves.

Their ubiquity, Souther contends, demonstrates that “comeback” hopes, images, and narratives were the constant counterpart to public impressions of decline; the two had a symbiotic relationship, rather than the sequential redemption that is often assumed in popular forms of urban discourse. Such confidence-building schemes were ultimately no match for the national and global forces that eroded Cleveland’s economic and tax bases. Nonetheless, this study maintains, initiatives like these deserve more than a dismissive eye roll from urban scholars, because perceptions—and the succession of efforts to shape those perceptions—have concrete effects as “triggers for actions that shape the courses of cities” (3).

Looming large in the book’s narrative is the collection of slogans—among them “The Best Location in the Nation,” “Cleveland: NOW!,” and “The Best Things in Life Are Here”—used to promote the city and region. Believing in Cleveland consistently interrogates these catchphrases with reference to the concrete urban conditions that they responded to and sought to alter. Most distressing to local leaders were the indications of decline, whether directly measurable or subjectively perceived, in three specific areas: the commercial vibrancy of the downtown, the manufacturing health of the city and the region, and the quality of life in the neighborhoods. With a neat structural symmetry, Souther devotes three chapters to image campaigns related to these areas in the immediate postwar decades, and another three to such campaigns during the 1970s and 1980s. Due to the author’s skill in unearthing the contentious private conversations and debates behind these measures rather than just the polished public products, readers are able to recognize how seemingly unified image-making initiatives actually functioned as one more arena for larger political battles over racial injustice, diverging city and suburban priorities, the competing desires emanating from different economic sectors, and which residents’ histories and experiences were deemed to matter most.

An absorbing chapter on the mayoralty of Carl Stokes (1968–1971), wedged between the two three-chapter segments mentioned above, provides the hinge for one of Souther’s key arguments about the transforming nature of Cleveland’s promotional endeavors. Image campaigns preceding the Stokes administration remained at least partially tethered to the real-world strengths and maladies they purported to describe or counteract, readers learn. But the elevated hopes of recovery and social progress produced by Stokes’s election victory, which had given Cleveland the nation’s first black big-city mayor, couldn’t possibly be met using the dwindling resources at the new mayor’s disposal. As Souther suggests, the Stokes team, more than its predecessors, consequently relied on an image-driven governance approach in order to “create the semblance of progress” (120); this, in turn, set the pattern for the subsequent two decades, when “image concerns took on a life of their own” (5) while substantially eclipsing other potential strategies for civic improvement or growth.

This kind of project offers important contributions to several subfields of U.S. urban historical scholarship. At one level, Souther’s book provides a rich survey of local economic and policy history, including a source-intensive demonstration of the fractured rather than monolithic nature of postwar metropolitan growth coalitions.

At another and perhaps more innovative level, it adds marvelously to the growing scholarly turn toward issues of urban representation and narrative. Indeed, Believing in Cleveland is, in large measure, a sustained close reading of a particular cluster of representational texts (growth-coalition revitalization narratives) and the conflicted ways in which various interpretive communities—among others, business tycoons, white suburbanites, downtown theatergoers, and African American neighborhood activists—responded to them. From vaunted lakefront urban renewal complexes to evanescent block-level re-sodding initiatives to glossy tourist-oriented magazine spreads, Cleveland’s corporate and political leaders embraced self-assigned roles as civic storytellers—performing the work of “making things mean,” in cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s phrase. At the same time, the chief (if rarely acknowledged) function of this narrative labor, as Souther convincingly asserts, was “the management of decline”; that is, diverting “attention from the city’s uneasy experience of its own metropolitan transformation” (19).