

Book review

Faranak Miraftab, *Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives, and Local Placemaking*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN, 2016; 292 pp.: 978-0-253-01934-9, US\$30.00 (pbk)

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The vast middle of the United States is often framed as the conceptual and material core of the country: the so-called heartland. The heartland metaphor is suggestive of small-town life, of a time when agriculture symbolised the national economy and shaped our ideas about nationhood. At the centre of that vision is an implicit narrative about race and citizenship. To be a citizen of the American heartland in the past meant to represent a racially-constructed vision of American ‘purity’, to be hardworking, productive – and white.

Competing narratives about the heartland’s imagined cultural geography – that is: white-dominated small-town life – have been centre stage in the US national discourse in recent times as tropes of whiteness and geography dominated the 2016 US presidential contest. When Republican nominee Donald Trump put out the call to ‘make America great again’, he signalled a Kodachrome imaginary: heartland towns comprised of deserving white middle-class people, living well. Indeed, hidden in plain sight in the heartland metaphor – as within Trump’s slogan – is the longstanding American problem of racism and racialised dispossession.

The socio-spatial dynamics of race have become unavoidable in the contemporary public sphere through, for example, Trumpism on the one hand and Black Lives Matter on the other. Urbanists have long discussed how race and racism have become embedded in our cities and towns in a range of ways – from racially restrictive covenants and racist lending practices, to realtor steering and vigilante violence. This has been well-documented and analysed in the big city context (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 2012; Sugrue, 1996), but less so in the realm of small cities and towns.

In the heartland, as in other small-town American geographies in the north, there is an under-documented history of violently enforced after-dark segregation. These so-called ‘sundown towns’, a feature of the Jim Crow era, relied on both formal and informal violence and harassment to usher Blacks (and often others, including people who appeared to be Chinese, Mexican, Native American or Jewish) out of town by sunset each day (Loewen, 2005). The practices embodied in the ‘sundown’ racial regime continue today in many forms, whether it be through racial profiling in policing, housing discrimination or the suppression of voting rights, all of which force us to reckon with the dialectics of race, space and belonging.

Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives, and Local Placemaking, which draws on geography and social theory, steps into this urgent conversation on race and space through an urban planning

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lens. Faranak Miraftab offers us a very interesting text that contributes to national and global conversations about migration, race/ethnicity and urban change in several important ways. Primarily, it offers an analysis of the very dramatic evolutions underway in many small- to medium-sized American towns, where new waves of im/migration have come to dominate places that were once bastions of whiteness. These places are experiencing what we think of as 'urban' dynamics in several key ways, and Miraftab argues convincingly that it is important for urbanists to address this shift. This alone would be an important contribution, but the book goes in several other very interesting directions that are worth noting, touching on an astonishing number of important and interlocking themes.

Miraftab looks at the role of work in creating transnationalism, for example, and the intricacies of racial and gender dynamics that morph through that same transnationalism. Significantly, the book also looks at the increased danger of labour when it is subject to global market variations, which leaves workers open to continual exploitation as they struggle to integrate in work and social life. The book investigates the global cost of immigration, showing how the revival of the 'local', in this case Beardstown, Illinois, comes at a cost to places like Togo, the west African nation that borders Ghana, particularly through the strain on family networks that are forced to become transnational. This is the everyday violence of globalised 'cheap labour'.

In the same vein, Miraftab explores the nuances and political economies of global care chains, and shows key links between US-backed global policies like structural adjustment and small-town labour practices. She uncovers the complicated interpersonal politics of demographic change, where a one-time 'sundown town' becomes so diverse that not only are families forming across racial and

ethnic lines, but schools are also responding with bilingual programming and the local corporation is forced to display its community solidarity through support for Togolese, pan-African and Mexican celebrations. At the same time, the book exposes the tensions that flare up as the old racial/ethnic barriers are challenged, including through the differential treatment of immigrant versus US-born people of colour. These vectors of difference are used in reestablishing labour hierarchies, showing the ways that the class and power relations of the factory are then imbued in the society at large. The old-school politics of the 'company town', Miraftab shows, are thus hard to escape.

Beardstown is located on the Illinois River, 80 miles southwest of Peoria, the town long-used in American culture as a metaphor for the mainstream ('if it plays in Peoria ...'). The town is tucked in between abandoned boarded-up roadside towns, yet it thrives as a multicultural non-segregated place. It is not a perfect multiculturalism where all parties intermingle, and yet what Miraftab documents are the 'racial growing pains' towards a less-bounded society which contradictorily and unevenly moves towards greater acceptance. That process is both ushered in and challenged by the multinational Cargill corporation. Cargill has maintained pork production in Beardstown since 1987, and it began recruiting immigrant labourers and workers of colour domestically in the early 1990s, first reaching towards Mexico, later tapping into a stream of aspirational migrants in Togo, and then looking to Black people escaping the shrinkage of Detroit to fill out the labour force. Cargill recruits workers willing to do dangerous jobs for low pay, meanwhile putting the process of integration in motion through this recruitment.

As one informant expressed it to Miraftab, the onetime whites-only place was utterly transformed by the integration of the global labour force recruited by the meatpacking

company: 'The world came to us' (p. 4). By 2014, of Beardstown's 6000 residents, 2500 were from Mexico and Togo; a nearby population of African-American migrants from Detroit fill out the racial landscape. At the same time, the once-floundering economy also perked up, with the labour of these new immigrants fuelling a local economic boom. In that light, one way you could tell the story of Beardstown is as the place that solved 'urban shrinkage', a broadly felt issue in the heartland, with plucky immigrant labourers. MirafTAB insists that this upbeat narrative obscures difficult truths, but that it also contains a story that offers hope for broader social transformation.

Beardstown, then, offers an important vision of the new immigration, the flow that turned migration patterns away from the traditionally strong destinations of New York and California to the hinter- and heart-lands of the country. This shift happened for a multiplicity of reasons, having to do with urban deindustrialisation in larger northern cities, among other things. One key factor was safety; MirafTAB makes the point that the inner nodes of the country were less equipped for migrant surveillance. Immigrants thus converged there, seeking places that might be less subject to the growing deportation raids of the 1990s and 2000s (which affect undocumented people as well as legal immigrants, who are often racially profiled as 'illegal'.)

Methodologically, the book blends political economy with ethnography, particularly following scholars in geography and planning who have been incorporating the tools of anthropology into their structural analyses. The methods are rigorous and rich, what MirafTAB calls a relational ethnography, incorporating deep local studies with global travels to interview members of the extended families of Beardstown residents in Michoacan, Mexico and Lome, Togo. This serves multiple

purposes, including that of protection of her local informants since people abroad could discuss labour conditions in Beardstown without endangering Beardstown residents who need to keep their Cargill employment. This method also expands our sense of place and the webs of urban geography, demonstrating the networks involved in producing what Doreen Massey described as a 'global sense of place' (Massey, 1994). Like Massey, MirafTAB demonstrates the ways that the local and the global are mutually constitutive but also non-binary. Ultimately, she shows that globalisation is happening, not just in global cities, but in places like Beardstown.

In that vein, the book undertakes a careful ethnography of Beardstown as well as of the origin places of the town's new residents, situating the 'American' story as a global one. The ethnographic elements of the book, however, are not always successful. The moments of storytelling are occasionally jarring in places where, for example, some informants are described physically and others are not, leaving the reader to wonder what 'norm' the undescribed must adhere to (is it whiteness or something else?). Even so, the text offers a model and a call for more work like this, which brings the narrative qualities of ethnography into conversation with political economic analysis of both structural forces and of the ethnographic encounter itself. One additional very interesting impact of MirafTAB's transnational ethnographic approach is to push the analysis of American racial dynamics beyond the old black-white frame to focus on intersecting interracial and transnational relations between groups.

In sum, MirafTAB's is an important case study in the dialectics of race, space and belonging. In this story, you can see both the hope and the fear of the American future. Beardstown offers us a glimpse into the racist legacies that persist in the US, even as they are reformulated by global capital

restructuring. At the same time, we glimpse a possible urban racial future of intercultural cooperation.

References

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Response

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In the Trump era, when hatred is unleashed from the top, it is urgent to reveal how the invisible forces of capitalism, racism and sexism combine to make the toxic brew that nativists use to criminalise and oppress the very people on whose nightmarish lives the American Dream rests. *Global Heartland* sheds light on the violence of dispossession and displacement that take place translocally and transnationally: processes that first deprive people of their livelihoods and dignified lives, then send them to places around the globe where their cheap labour is used for dangerous, dirty and difficult jobs where they are nevertheless criminalised for stealing jobs that locals did not want. *Global Heartland* seeks to change the dominant narrative by asking who is developing whom – a question that white supremacist colonising forces and societies have sought to obscure since the initial sin of colonisation. *Global Heartland* makes visible the processes of care invested into the lives of displaced workers

not only by workers' transnational families but also by public institutions in their home communities. The book reveals that it is not only labour but also towns and their infrastructure that the company grabs without having ever invested in them. In an earlier era, corporations invested in the development of company towns, but today they move into rustbelt towns and use the infrastructure previous generations paid for through taxes and citizenship. I hope that the stories retold in *Global Heartland* can make a meaningful and effective intervention in checking the growing toxic brew of misogynist, white supremacist capitalism.

Rachel Brahinsky's review of *Global Heartland* included in this volume of *Urban Studies* makes a thorough and accurate representation of the book's core messages and its analytical structure. Aside from the note of urgency following the presidential election since her review was written, a brief response to an important and specific methodological question she raises in her review is necessary. Brahinsky's careful examination of the book captures the unevenness in the ethnographic details by which the research participants are described; she wonders 'what "norm" the undescribed must adhere to (is it whiteness or something else?)'. This question helps me highlight the challenges of doing ethnographic work among diverse and contentious groups when the researcher (in this case me, an immigrant myself) is at the centre of contentions. Methodologically, I found a way around this problem by using a proxy for myself: a tall, blond, blue-eyed American young man with family roots in Beardstown, who was more easily accepted by the white, established residents, many of whom did not have good things to say about immigrants and the changes they have brought to the town. While relying on an RA allowed me to include the voices and perspectives of a population I would not have had easy access to, it did not allow me to offer the kind of detail

and thick ethnographic description I offer for interviewees among other groups – their moods, their feelings, their body language and other details that make the connection between the reader and the interviewee. In a larger perspective and in relative terms, this was a small cost to pay for inclusion of voices less accessible to me.

In closing, I wish to re-emphasise that much has changed on the national political scene since the time the book was researched and written. If it was an astonishing news to my colleagues and students that in 1996 the KKK rallied in Beardstown, Illinois, today this no longer seems out of the ordinary. Bigotry and hate advocated at the national political level has unfortunately normalised such experiences. For Beardstown, the 1996 breakout of violence served as a catalyst not

only for hate but also for love, and urged the fence sitters to no longer serve as bystanders and silent observers. Let's hope the hate and bigotry now being spewed results in galvanising progressive forces and evoking solidarities among and across the communities threatened. In the contemporary political climate, the experiences of Beardstown have much to offer the rest of the US, if not the world.

Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives, and Local Placemaking was awarded the 2016 Davidoff Book Award, Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP), as well as the Global & Transnational Sociology section Book Award, American Sociological Association (ASA).