Book Reviews


In recent years, emerging social and political movements in Latin America have challenged the neoliberal model and questioned colonialist assumptions underwriting its knowledge regimes and exploitative practices. This has prompted a rethinking of such concepts as modernity, development, and economic globalization, as well as an intensified consideration of the role of scholarship and knowledge production in maintaining or dismantling power relations that perpetuate colonial epistemologies. Two recent texts, *Coloniality at Large* and *Twenty Theses on Politics*, contribute perceptive and critical analyses of contemporary issues in Latin America. *Coloniality at Large* is a sizeable collection of postcolonial critiques and *Twenty Theses on Politics* a directed political manifesto.

Despite the books’ strategic differences, both demonstrate to different ends the political, theoretical, and methodological positions of the foremost scholars from Latin America as related to the postcolonial condition. In contrast to much postcolonial theory that addresses the colonial encounter as actualized in direct, formal European rule that reached its peak somewhere in the early twentieth century, this Latin American scholarship also focuses on the fact that most of the Americas has been “independent” for almost 200 years and that power relations have assumed an array of contradictory postures. This history makes it conceptually and theoretically difficult to summarize or pin down how exactly race, knowledge and capital converge to produce formations of social inequality and uneven development across the Americas.

These books call for alternative ways of thinking about and acting upon “coloniality”: the structures of politics, power, control, and racialized hegemony that have emerged since the era of Latin American “independence” in the early nineteenth century (Moraña et al 2008:2). Since these initial moments of colonial difference—the differential space–time in which places/peoples are connected by a hierarchical world system—the concept of modernity has been continuously confined by Eurocentric epistemologies as an internal product of European genius, owing little to other parts of the world.

*Coloniality at Large* and *Twenty Theses on Politics* offer multiple critiques and alternatives to such reductionist understandings of colonial modernity and globalization. “Coloniality” is distinct from colonialism, and the authors of these texts consider coloniality and modernity as mutually dependent phenomena,
co-produced at a moment of Western history linked to the Atlantic commercial circuit and the transformation of capitalism into a global phenomenon with Europe as center (Moraña et al 2008:228). They establish that the constant centering of Europe or the “North-West” in accounts of global political economy and academic knowledge production is the result of continuous interweaving of racial, temporal, and spatial hierarchies, produced through moments of colonial difference and reified through historical, racial and spatialized divisions of global capitalism. These themes are elaborated on in both texts. Both provide compelling contemporary materials for critical political, economic, and cultural studies.

The edited volume Coloniality at Large includes 23 contributions that challenge the reader to re-imagine Latin America as a dynamic space of political, economic, linguistic, and cultural moments and processes that are unevenly integrated into global systems of power. Linking dependency theory, Marxist thought, and liberation theology to questions of identity, subjectivity and coloniality, contributing authors examine the particularities and consistencies of (post)colonialism and modernity in Latin America. Essays within the volume traverse such diverse themes as literature, art, politics, religion, social sciences, academic fieldwork, and the geopolitics of knowledge production. A key theme throughout the book is that theoretical production is never neutral or removed from real world conflict. Intellectual work, including so-called “critical theory”, contributes in myriad ways to concrete scenarios of real—not purely epistemic—violence. The volume problematizes any simplistic applications of “postcolonial theory” in the Americas and poses an important analytical question: how does one situate the global violence of capitalism without reducing the significance of complex “local” realities to how they relate to the West?

Essential to this volume are the ways in which politics of race and ethnicity and the meaning of crucial terms in the postcolonial lexicon, such as “essence”, “universal” and “subaltern” are used in the context of Latin America. The volume’s diverse and sometimes contradictory essays challenge the reader to rethink dominant (and often Eurocentric) political and economic theories that perpetuate racial/temporal categories. In doing so, the essays critically consider what Walter Mignolo labeled the “locus of enunciation”—the places and knowledge traditions from where theories about development, dependency, modernity, and globalization are put forth. The authors clearly draw the lines between academic works produced about Latin America and scholarship produced by and for Latin America. While most “postcolonial theory” arises out of colonial experiences across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, this book highlights the specificities of Latin American histories that are not adequately addressed by the contemporary canon.

Coloniality at Large is of particular interest to scholars in the social sciences and humanities, and anyone desiring an innovative perspective on modernity and coloniality in Latin America. Noticeably, and in some cases problematically, gender studies and feminist theory are entirely absent. In spite of this major critique, the book’s contributions engage closely with the violent theoretical framing of much research produced on or about Latin America, by constantly questioning the reductionism inherent in Eurocentric criticisms of colonial modernity and globalization that actually re-inscribe the West as superior. This anthology encourages students and researchers of Latin America to question their own epistemologies, motivations, and methods. It evokes the necessity
for a decolonization of academic knowledge regimes, by recognizing that epistemologies, like economies, are not ahistorical, and would not be possible without the connections and hierarchical distinctions created among places via coloniality. The volume transcends theoretical considerations by demonstrating the direct political and material implications for Latin American livelihoods through the ongoing realization of coloniality at large.

Twenty Theses on Politics, by Enrique Dussel, takes on a distinct yet allied project to Coloniality at Large. This book (originally published in Spanish in 2006) outlines the basic tenets of Dussel’s extensive work towards the development of a philosophy of liberation, but also intends to outline basic principals of contemporary Latin American politics and to inform political action. Written as an anti- or de-colonial political manifesto, Dussel offers a meticulous interpretation of selected current political trends in Latin America. Following Marx, his book “ascends from the abstract to the concrete” (xvi). His first theses begin by de-centering the concepts of politics and democracy in a postcolonial world, outlining normative principles of political action, and re-positioning the potential for positive political change with the victims of coloniality. From here, he goes on to develop the critical tenets for a politics of liberation.

Dussel’s utopian vision of an alternative political system reasserts what for him is the source of power, “the people”, which he defines elsewhere as synonymous to subaltern, or “the others”, “those excluded from modernity” (Dussel 2002). A central part of his framework describes how true power becomes negative—a fetishized conception of institutionalized and self-referential power—as it is hijacked and diluted by political elites. This conception and use of fetished power serves to marginalize, exclude, and enact a profound violence upon the people elected officials ostensibly represent.

For Dussel, a liberating political philosophy cannot simply be understood as a class struggle; it must include all subaltern groups (“the people”) and must involve a positive deployment of political power in the construction of a new hegemony. Dussel is clear that power cannot merely be taken, but must be created. In the second half of the book, he revisits the fundamental tenets of democracy, explores modes of institutional transformation, outlines praxes of political action and change, and introduces themes of ecological justice as imperative in new political theory. Dussel states that he intends this book for young people and political scholars. However, the important category of “the people” is left relatively unexamined in this work, and Dussel acknowledges that this project is primarily the illustration of the philosophical principles that should inform future political action, whatever form it may take. While the specific focus of the book offers more to students of political philosophy, the theses have application in other academic fields and regions beyond Latin America.

Together, Coloniality at Large and Twenty Theses on Politics represent a strong and important contribution to de-colonial and postcolonial philosophy, research, and action. They provoke scholars, researchers, and advocates of change to critically examine contemporary forms of colonial knowledge and actively work against global tendencies that corrupt and perpetuate violence and domination. These highly recommended texts offer new perspectives and insights on political action and coloniality in Latin America. They call for further efforts to reveal and produce de-colonial forms of politics, literature, art, research, and philosophy.

Randall Amster’s *Lost in Space* is a savvy look into local and global processes of neoliberalization, particularly as it transforms what it means to be a citizen. Amster documents a local instance in Tempe, Arizona of downtown redevelopment, privatization, and homeless removal, but this instance is a microcosm of a larger struggle over public space, rights, and citizenship. In this era of privatization in downtown spaces, rights of the “public” to use space are being supplanted by rights of the “owners” to exclude based on business interests. Often these exclusionary practices revolve around removing aesthetically displeasing bodies to promote a tourist-friendly consumer zone.

For urban scholars, this may sound like a re-run of a familiar plot, but let me explain why you should pick up this book. Amster is neither the first scholar to point to the deeper roots and implications of privatization, nor the first to look at homelessness as a “bellwether of urban justice” (Mitchell 2003). But he tackles the issue, particularly the “how” and “why” questions, with intense fervor and thoroughness, allowing his activism to intertwine with the research. The book begins with three densely packed chapters that serve as an extensive review of literature about “why” exclusion happens. As for “how”, Amster thoroughly documents Tempe’s exclusionary agenda through a case study of the implementation of an anti-sidewalk sitting ordinance (see chapter 5). In this case study, Amster utilizes standard data sources like ordinances and media discourse, but what he adds to the discussion are the personalities driving the ordinances and other practices. He benefits from being a first-hand witness to the exclusionary ordinance put in place in Tempe. He is also able to document personal communication between business leaders and himself as they rhetorically “duke it out” over who should have access to space. Getting to read the raw, uncensored words of these city “leaders” is a thrill because it reveals a piece of the story that is powerful but often very difficult to capture.

Another reason to pick up this book is Amster’s use of an ecological framework to connect a local phenomenon to larger global trends and processes. In his final chapter, Amster emphasizes the role of scale in analyzing the processes of globalization, localization, resistance, and stifling of resistance. For instance, privatization is being pushed in localities, but it is also a trend on the global scale. On the flip side, effective resistance movements often are grounded in local issues that they also fight on the global scale. To highlight the global nature of Tempe’s homeless/public space battles, Amster briefly gestures to similar instances in seven
major countries or regions in the world, demonstrating some contextual differences but also the startling similarities in approaches to homelessness, development, and public space. Tempe, Arizona is much like many other cities in the USA which are increasingly focused on being centers of consumption, as Harvey (1993) notes.

Over the course of the book, Amster explores “the patterns of interconnection among five particular spheres: 1) the lived experiences of homeless people, 2) the impetus of development and gentrification, 3) the material and ideological erosion of public space, 4) the enactment of anti-homeless ordinances and regulations, and 5) emerging forces of resistance to these trends” (209). Amster utilizes an ecological framework to spin this narrative of spatial control and homeless resistance. The ecological framework is meant to draw together the common threads across individual experiences, and cities across the world, and to bring out the reflexive relationships between criminalization of homelessness, globalization, and homeless resistance across multiple scales.

Chapter 1 lays out a framework of homeless people as active agents in their lives, rather than problem, pathology or victim—all labels used by conservatives and liberals alike. Amster states early on that homelessness is both a social and spatial problem. The purpose is to “describe and document how processes of geographic regulation and homeless criminalization are interlocking and mutually-reinforcing facets of a larger frame of social and spatial control often loosely grouped under the emerging rubric of globalization” (2). Homelessness is often painted in terms of choice—did this person choose to live this way? If the answer is no, they deserve help. If yes, they don’t. This issue of choice is a fickle one if we get into an argument over “truth”. If someone has had limited options and no good chances to get off the street, but they maintain that they “choose” this lifestyle, who are we to say that they don’t? But many scholars and advocates for the homeless argue that they deserve help because they didn’t “choose” to be there, thus they are victims deserving of help. Amster draws a hard line on this, arguing that even if they’ve chosen (within a limited scope of options) to live on the street, they should have the right to live that way. His assertion flies in the face of most social science research, which begins with the assumption that homeless people want to and should be integrated into mainstream society.

Amster faithfully and systematically lays out the common arguments against homeless people and exposes their roots, such as disease, decay, the “broken windows” theory, criminality, bad for business, need protection from themselves, etc. He also cites their implications, for example, the broken windows theory has provided a foundation for community policing programs to take aggressive approaches to sweeping the streets “clean” of any “broken windows”, including people perceived to be flawed.

Having dispensed with the notion that homeless people are the problem, Amster begins the second chapter by laying out the “real” problem—intolerance, control, exclusion, surveillance of public (increasingly privatized) spaces and expulsion of those who do not fit the globalized, gentrified corporate image of these public–private spaces. Public space is not an open space for all—it is a site of contestation where conflicting beliefs over citizenship and rights play out. Amster exposes these contestations through his use of public statements and media coverage to paint a picture of the divided “public” fighting over “their” spaces. His use of these sources is an effective way to break down the monolith of public space. This chapter pulls in the urban ecology framework to build and layer the complex intersections between
spatial practices, ideological leanings away from democracy, and the health of the environment and the people living in the community. Amster tackles at length the issue of anti-homeless laws and criminalization of the everyday activities of those living on the street. He exposes the undemocratic nature of these laws in a similar vein to Don Mitchell’s work, with both scholars arguing that constitutionality is not the appropriate measure of these laws, but rather their furthering or decaying of democracy (Mitchell 2003).

Despite Amster’s focus on institutional practices, he never loses sight of the impact on individuals trying to live within these exclusionary spaces. This book walks a tightrope between focusing on individuals’ lives and on the policies that shape their allowable practices. Many scholars try to achieve this balance but fall prey to one or the other. It is a testament to the power of Amster’s ecological framework that he effectively maintains this balance.

Chapter 5 is a case study that relies heavily on local artifacts to articulate one local instance of the broader concepts he introduces in chapters 1–4. He pulls from media coverage, city council minutes, and various other government documents to craft a case study of a specific city ordinance, its roots in the community and the USA, debates about the ordinance, and concrete impacts on the space of the community. He also articulates the role of new technologies of surveillance in policing space and citizens, a topic recently addressed by Mitchell and Heynen (2009) as well.

As the spaces of consumption increase, the spaces of non-consumption decrease. Consumers are privileged over “public”. These spaces of consumption are also treated—legally and otherwise—as private property with rights of exclusion (see Blomley 2004, 2009; Mitchell and Staeheli 2006). Along with the emphasis on consumption comes emphasis on aesthetics—to get the “right” kind of people shopping here, we have to get rid of the “wrong” kind of people. Amster cites examples of customers and even employees being removed from the space by security guards because their appearance was too grungy and indicative of homelessness. In chapter 2, he states, “the parameters of a society are defined through practices and relationships, and as the vignettes described here indicate, there is an inherently exclusionary power dynamic at work in many ostensibly public places that in reality have become private property” (65). Private security and surveillance aid in the privatization by facilitating more effective levels of exclusion.

This book resonates with me particularly because I am also an activist scholar working on issues of space and homelessness. Amster reports a similar experience to mine here in Champaign-Urbana: “when the homeless embrace the values of agency and community and organize themselves accordingly, such moments are inherently resistant and subversive—a fact apparently not lost on authorities and officials” (36). Chapter 6 is dedicated entirely to examining homeless resistance and attempts to create new forms of social and material relationships. The homeless community I have been working with for the past year has been doing that same thing, and similar threats have been issued from the city government. Amster and I agree 100% that homeless mobilization is necessary to change the socio-spatial relationships in which we exist. Amster’s spatialization of the “homeless problem” is, in my opinion, at the forefront of work on homelessness. It completely reframes the debate from “what services to provide and what illnesses do they have” to “how is homelessness imbricated in issues of land use, zoning, power, control, and property”. He turns a critical lens on traditional “helping” efforts by cities and
organizations, looking at them through the lens of people trying to exist in spaces that are not controlled by the city and the “helping” organizations and not subject to excessive restrictions. This approach to homelessness that the people experiencing it deserve (and should demand) the right to use space in ways that help them live is one that I have used in my work in Champaign-Urbana with a self-organized homeless, “self-housing” community.

Methodologically, Amster embraces many forms of knowing, including “experiential immersion”, or the idea that to know something, we must not only examine, analyze, and think about it, but we must also endeavor to experience it. He uses parts of symbolic interactionism but ultimately describes his work as engaging an anarchist methodology that seeks theories and knowledge employed for liberatory purposes. I appreciate the natural flow between research and activism in this study. Amster does not try to separate his activist practices from his research practices, but instead allows them to cross over, influence, and enhance each other. He also rejects dualisms, embracing instead the idea of symbiosis and ecological interweaving—the basis for the ecological perspective in which the research is framed. Anarchist methodology is necessary to overcome the ought—is problem—the idea that because something is, it necessarily should be that way. Anarchist thought “provides a framework for manifesting new visions” (140). Finally, the ecological perspective is a good way to bridge different scales and geographies to understand the interconnected nature of homelessness, space, environment, and power from the scale of the individual to global processes.

This book is valuable but not without its flaws. I applaud Amster’s continuing project on this case (see Amster 2004), but I also can’t wait to read something new from him. I don’t want to downplay the importance of sticking with an activist project because it’s very important and something that academics don’t always do very well, but I want to hear new thoughts from him. I do acknowledge, though, that he evolves the ecological framework in this latest volume, which adds significantly to the concepts advanced in this book.

This volume also borders on romanticism of street life as Amster highlights many of the positive and self-affirming statements made by people living on the street and does not discuss the negative parts of this life. However, this book has to be viewed as a response to a larger body of literature that portrays only the negative parts, which leads to the characterizations of homeless as pathological or victim. His approach also acknowledges that individuals have a right to represent themselves in the way they wish, not the way the researcher wishes. However, without access to interview protocols, there is no way of knowing if these positive representations are truly self-representations or if questions focused only on positive aspects. In my experiences of working with people on the street, people will move between feelings of “it’s all good; I chose this and it’s awesome” to “this is absolute shit; no one in their right mind would live like this, I’m just here because I have to be; I can’t wait to get up and out”. I understand Amster’s portrayal as a response but also believe that it could show more of the nuance and contradiction inherent in anyone’s feelings about their life.

Finally, the strength of this book is also its weakness. It contains so much information and is so thorough that it can be used like a map or guide, but because it is so comprehensive, it would be very difficult for a layperson or undergraduate or otherwise unfamiliar person to pick up and digest what’s in it. But I don’t care; it’s an encyclopedia and a much-needed one! This book is so densely written and
covers such a breadth of knowledge that it can be mined again and again for new insights and aspects. I see it as a resource guide for anyone doing work—activist or research—on the spatial issues of control and power, as exemplified through issues of homelessness. Amster himself admits that three of the chapters in this book consist of an exhaustive literature review on homelessness and public space. I would love to see this text evolve into a public education project. The text itself is overwhelming but contains so many valuable insights that could be made accessible to communities through different forms of dissemination.

References

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With How It Works: Recovering Citizens in Post-Welfare Philadelphia (HIW), Robert Fairbanks provides an example of scholarship that does not shy away from the dilemmas and ambiguities of the “wild west” of “informal” poverty management produced by 30 years of “war on dependency”. HIW, which takes its name from the fifth chapter of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, tells the story of how addiction, welfare reform and a post-industrial landscape punctuated by thousands of abandoned buildings has spawned a “movement” of for-profit, unregulated recovery houses—informal housing for drug addicts and alcoholics in blighted urban areas. Vilified as an exploitative form of welfare economy, and lionized as spaces of hope for impoverished addicts, Fairbanks shows in great ethnographic detail how recovery houses create a programmatic space in which self-help comes to been seen as the only solution to poverty and addiction. For Fairbanks, the
recovery house, by nurturing the self-steering capacity of impoverished subjects, becomes an integral component of a public/private regime of regulation that seeks market solutions to fiscal austerity. HIW reveals a form of neoliberal government in which the poor own the mantle of their own predicament and shoulder it with great efficiency—with less cost and culpability for the state and stronger incentives for the “deserving” entrepreneurial poor.

While providing an intimate account of struggling addicts and recovery entrepreneurs, Fairbanks avoids many of the pitfalls that often mar ethnographies of urban poverty. He resists the romantic temptation to subvert prejudicial ethnographies about his subjects by substituting negative stereotypes with “hidden” redemptive caricatures. Instead, he allows normative ambiguities (moral and political) to proliferate, defying easy categorizations and exploding preconceptions, both positive and negative, of recovery houses, their operators and their inhabitants. Such ambiguities, while making easy verdicts elusive, help Fairbanks avoid ready-made narratives, and the uncritical adoption of the “grounded” folk theories proffered by subjects and interviewees. What emerges from the normative fog is an account of the still messy and evolving relationship between the macro-level (de)regulatory goals of the neoliberal state and a suite of “unregulated” informal micro-level subsistence strategies—from day-labor to fringe finance—that have become “troubled site[s] of regulation on several fronts” (222).

Perhaps HIW’s most important contribution is to document the complex overlap of public and private forms of regulation—indeed, to problematize the distinction itself in ways implied by, but rarely developed, in the invocation of roll-out neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002). Fairbanks clearly identifies the presence of roll-back and roll-out dynamics—in which state functions are replaced by private, market proxies—in the recovery house industry. In doing so, however, he demonstrates that the recovery house industry rarely fits neatly into binaries of public and private, or state and non-state. In his account, the recovery house industry is both encroached upon by state agencies (eg the criminal justice system in the form of Treatment Courts) and dependent upon state programs (including welfare, the Coordinating Office of Drug and Alcohol Programs and formal treatment programs) in ways that belie “facile notions of . . . an unequivocally revanchist state” as well as “the perception of the recovery house as an underground phenomenon functioning in the dark corners of “ghetto” neighborhoods” (232). The recovery house appears as an uncertain space: on the one hand, the product of welfare state retrenchment and a model of self-help; on the other, a collectivist form of resistance to neoliberalism through the pooling of welfare cheques. Fairbanks finesses this ambiguity and uncertainty by showing how nonintervention can operate as a sort of statecraft, government at a distance, and “vector of governmentality” (204). The state, through the devolution and redistribution of risk and responsibility to recovery houses, according to Fairbanks, retains control over operators through fear. Recovery house informality and legal insecurity make an inopportune visit from a welfare official, or a complaint from a neighbor an existential threat that instills a panoptical sense of surveillance and an ethic of self-government in recovery house operators. Such precariousness encourages operators to transmute risk and vulnerability onto their clients, the recovering subjects.

This linking of the state to the microphysics of power in “unregulated” recovery houses makes HIW an excellent example of how scholars might seek to bridge the schism between governmentality and more macro-oriented political
economy approaches to neoliberalism (see Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010). Governmentality scholars have been criticized for allowing “their low-flying, rigidly antisystematic orientation” to obscure “macrospatial rules, parameters and mechanisms” (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010) that allow family resemblances to be found in the idiosyncratic variety neoliberalization creates. Fairbanks is able to provide a grounded account of neoliberalization that, while not deterministic, acknowledges the “context of context” linking the path-dependent, local experimentation of the recovery house to macrospatial frameworks.

On a more critical note, Fairbanks is surprisingly unreflexive about his position as a researcher, and the challenges of conducting his research as an outsider. In making this critique, I am not merely calling for some genuflection about positionality. It is important, however, to address how HIW fits within a long tradition in the study of the poor that seeks to make the “strange” familiar (Roy 2010). It is a tradition in which the researcher typically inhabits a “zone of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2004)—a position that Fairbanks occupies, but only obliquely acknowledges with the occasional anecdote. An example of this awkward engagement occurs when Malik, Fairbanks’s primary source, escorts him to the train station under the guise that “Tuesday is rob the white boy night” (207). This incident is the only acknowledgement of Fairbanks’s “outsider” status and it is used to provide little more than narrative texture, which might be easily forgiven if it were not for the fact that much of what is remarkable about HIW is indebted to the privileged access that Fairbanks was granted to a secretive and even paranoid industry. The researcher’s role in the narrative of HIW slips seamlessly from fly-on-the-wall to trusted confidant and friend to policy consultant and provider of computer services. While perhaps it goes without saying that the researcher must wear many hats, the seamlessness of Fairbanks’s transitions is enough to make a young researcher curious about methods and the story behind the story.

Regardless of the mystery behind his methods, the story that Fairbanks tells is an important one that is worth reading for a broad spectrum of critical scholars. It is a rarely-so-well-told story about the negotiation of what Krippner (2007) has called the “neoliberal dilemma”: how can the state escape responsibility for social and economic outcomes while recognizing the Polanyian insight that markets need regulation to function in a capitalist economy? While the forms of (re)regulation on display in the recovery house movement are most certainly “troubled”, and make the visible hands of the state hard to see outside of fine-grained ethnographic research, Fairbanks convincingly shows that they do exist. HIW provides a grounded account of neoliberalization while not being seduced by an overly dichotomous view of state and market. If HIW is any indication, critical ethnography holds great promise for those interested in better understanding “how coordination occurs between state and market actors to accomplish the tasks of policy” (Krippner 2007:480) after the state has “retreated”.

References


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In many ways, journalist Marjorie Rosen’s book, *Boom Town: How Wal-Mart Transformed an All-American Town into an International Community*, is a prescient and timely read. It centers on Bentonville, Arkansas, a “happy-go-lucky” (148), one-time “Mayberry” (147) of a place that has been made into a cosmopolitan corporate enclave by the explosive growth of Wal-Mart, the international retailer founded in 1962 by hometown son, Sam Walton. As Wal-Mart grew, so did Bentonville, expanding from just over 11,000 residents in 1990 to 33,700 by 2007 as “a variety of well-educated, urban types of all ethnicities and religions, often with MBAs or advanced engineering degrees, began migrating to the area” (4). This, Rosen points out, is in stark contrast to the nearby towns of Springdale and Rogers, where a far different form of corporate patronage—Tyson Foods’ chicken processing plants and the trucking empire of J.B. Hunt—has translated into a “a huge appetite for unskilled labor” and a massive influx of Hispanics—“both legal and undocumented” (168). What ensues, Rosen informs us, “is the story of cultures clashing and cultures embracing, enriching each other” (2).

Indeed, in October 2007—two and a half years before Arizona enacted controversial legislation requiring state and local police to investigate the status of anyone they suspect of being in the United States illegally—law enforcement agencies in Springdale, Rogers and Benton County adopted their own controversial weapon in a localized war against illegal immigration. As with Arizona’s SB1070, the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement initiative 287(g) empowered trained local police to perform duties previously reserved for federal immigration agents, including detaining anyone without proper documentation.

As a result, *Boom Town* proves trenchant, tapping into the roiling debates over immigration and cultural change that passage of Arizona’s SB1070 would bring to international attention. Told through a series of chapter-length vignettes, *Boom Town* captures daily life for a range of individuals bound up in the transformation of a region that Rosen situates as a “microcosm for social and cultural change in the United States” (ix). She writes evocatively of how Wal-Mart’s growth into the world’s largest retailer fosters a seemingly color-blind environment of opportunity for a remarkable mix of peoples—from a Marshalese security guard and “Wal-Mart Jews” (67), to highly educated Hindus who are successful yet separate as they struggle to “retain . . . old values” even as they “make a Modern American life” (95). At points these anecdotal snapshots provide unvarnished stories of searching for a
foothold in a shifting cultural and economic landscape; at others powerful, heartrending tales of lives lived at the margins. Along the way, Rosen’s astute powers of observation and storytelling skills capture unsettling processes of urbanization as they sweep across the region, re-shaping it from a sleepy slice of the rural Ozark Mountains—a place where the Ku Klux Klan once rallied and apple orchards provided solid working class lifestyles—into a sprawling multi-cultural company town for the world’s largest retailer and the vendors, service providers and peripheral suppliers that support it.

Boom Town, Rosen informs us early on, is a “journalistic study” (x), a methodological point of departure that aspires to objectivity and even-handedness. In one sense, this approach allows the book to engage with the theme of cultural change in a narrative, almost unfiltered manner. The resulting stories, faithfully recounted through Rosen’s journalistic talents, give testimony. But in another sense, it encourages Boom Town to maintain an awkward critical distance. By emphasizing culture and focusing exclusively on what the author sees and hears in a small corner of northwest Arkansas, Boom Town never quite explores the degree to which local ethnic diversity and relative economic wellbeing are the products of problematic global processes. Boom Town’s Wal-Mart world is demarcated by the narrow bounds of greater Bentonville, an enclave awash in office and ancillary services jobs and the “benefits of growth” (ie infrastructure improvements, cultural centers and museums) spun off by the retailer’s $408 billion dollar enterprise. One wonders, what about conditions for the nearly 2million employees in Wal-Mart’s more than 6600 stores around the world, for instance, or the impact of trend-setting innovations such as just-in-time efficiencies, off-shoring of manufacturing and rapacious expansion-oriented growth on individuals, communities and local economies elsewhere across the planet?

This narrative approach also conveys an image of the retailer as an exemplar of a set of quintessentially American values—thrifty, hard working, clean living and loyal—forged in the crucible of the Depression and twentieth century wars against fascism and communism. In this world, far more important than a person’s skin color or religion is their willingness to adhere to the ethics and embrace the values that corporate Wal-Mart embodies and its neighboring communities defend.

Yet after reading Boom Town one could argue that in northwest Arkansas the line that divides immigrants who succeed from those who struggle is class. Ethnic “others” in what Rosen describes as a harmonious and accepting Bentonville, while often brown and of different religions, are middle-class managers and vendors whose values hew closely to those of their corporate patron. Meanwhile, Hispanics in Rogers and Springdale eviscerate chickens and paint houses. They are remotely tolerated because they are willing to take unskilled jobs at unlivable wages but forever demonized for not fully conforming to the American ideal. Never mind, of course, that a propensity to pack into small apartments and park cars on lawns says more about their economic circumstances than any meaningful cultural characteristics. As Gary Compton, Bentonville’s superintendent of schools, tells Rosen, “When all your white people are rich and all your Hispanics are poor, you are going to have some issues” (208).

Rosen, to her credit, acknowledges these contradictions. Still, Boom Town never fully engages with the dilemmas posed by a growth-first, competitive approach to local economic development that, like Wal-Mart’s retail formula, creates and
subsequently preys upon class disparities and is anchored by the privileging of select social constructs at the expense of others.

In the end, Rosen reports, the Wal-Mart way suggests a “celebration of individual cultures in harmonious concert with the values of American life that strengthens and enriches not just our communities but the entire fabric of our nation” (284). Of course there is another way of viewing the landscape that *Boom Town* describes, one in which strange bedfellows—Islamic architects building Jewish temples, for instance—are not happy side effects of the retailer’s ubiquitous presence. This view would see them as the essential byproducts of a system that destroys differentiation even as it pays lip service to ethnic diversity, flattening space and experience by reducing the human endeavor to the banal imperatives of capitalist logic and pitting individuals and communities against each other in the process. By this read the multicultural change washing over Bentonville, in contrast to Springdale and Rogers, is not some fortuitous moment of cosmopolitanism. It is rather the inevitable fallout of a system whose survival is built on class divisions and an endless though at some point unsustainable search for growth. As such it is a system that offers few pathways to a more harmonious world.

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