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Jennifer F. Hamer’s book, Abandoned in the Heartland, reads like many of the best ethnographies on urban spaces by clearly demonstrating the resiliency of individuals and families making their way with little income and limited government assistance. And it is because of this clear connection to works like Streetwise by Elijah Anderson (1990), Off the Books by Sudhir Venkatesh (2006), or even Melissa Gilbert’s “‘Race,’ Space, and Power: The Survival Strategies of Working Poor Women” (1998) that this particular book is so attractive. Case studies with similar findings, despite geographic differences or researcher biases, present a clear and holistic examination of the everyday experiences of the working poor. But in this case study, Hamer is not looking at a Midwestern or northeastern urban core city. She instead examines a city which, post World War I, saw great industrial growth. By the 1970s, however, East St. Louis had been abandoned by industry in exchange for loose labor laws in southern U.S. states and the global south. This first-string St. Louis suburb was never designed for residents. It was always meant to be a “trash heap” for the city of St. Louis (39). Drawing in white ethnics and Black southerners for work opportunities, especially after the first World War, disinvestment by corporations and white flight (which started during the 1950s) quickly lifted the romantic veil of suburban life for those left behind. Because “…suburban life has never been one of splendor for blacks” (52), it is of no surprise that the city, set up to serve companies, was abandoned with a debt of $180 million (in 1979) and corruption at every level of municipal government (45, 50).

With this complex history, Hamer crafted a qualitative case study, conducting research between 1996 and 2003. She sought to understand the intersection of agency and the impact of policies like the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996—an act signed by President Clinton which sought to discourage dependency on state and federal welfare aid. Through interviews, focus groups at churches, ethnography, participant observation, and newspaper stories (25-28), Hamer got to know residents of East St. Louis. She found that “…despite all of the research conducted within these city’s boundaries, we actually knew very little about these people or the political economy that defined their physical space” (24). To provide missing knowledge to outsiders, she proceeds to document daily struggles, concluding that suburbs for Blacks are segregated spaces with poorer infrastructures and higher crime rates. This occurs because of lower incomes, fewer opportunities to escape low wage work, less wealth and an impersonal, disconnected state (10-11). Therefore, abandoned places require residents to rise above lost wages and limited career opportunities, a lack of infrastructure, in addition to fewer personnel for police and schools (21-22, 47).

As noted, other East St. Louis researchers, such as Jonathan Kozal (1991) and Andrew J. Theising (2003) corroborate Hamer’s observation that this is a city facing a range of social issues—unemployment, poverty, and lagging schools. Here, children are educated in a school district where plumbing is poor, books are old and kids do not feel that school is for them. Beyond school district shortcomings, the city itself struggles to keep jobs and businesses. So desperate is the situation that even panhandlers, amateur musicians and street artists do not go to East St. Louis’ downtown because there are few people and opportunities there. What is present are burned out buildings, weedy lots, empty shops, and a few new properties as well as casinos and a few fast food joints. What is also present are East St. Louisans—watching out for one another, engaging in care work, and protecting children from crime, safety hazards and discrimination in the best ways they know how.

East St. Louis residents creatively pair with family and fictive kin to get to work, run errands, and make ends meet. Even as jobs are described as “…lifeless, dead-end things, passed around in meaningless lateral moves that added up at best to shuffling the deck” (76), residents work through personal networks to land a “decent job” (according to Hamer’s informants, these include hospitality, chain-retail stores—anything seen as stable and above minimal wage). Such reliance on one another can and does quickly fray.
nerves – putting the use of private cars and favors in jeopardy, at least temporarily. Where personal transportation in the burbs has been burned into popular imagination as a necessity, here having a car is a luxury – a tool shared by kin in exchange for favors (for example, childcare). Hamer illustrates that access to reliable transportation shaped informants’ sense of self-worth, job choices, relationships, and interactions (58).

Cars would not hold the same importance if middle class suburbanites would cease protests against the creation of an efficient bus and rail system. These affluent neighbors argue that such a system will increase access to their communities by outside residents - who they consider criminal (63, 73). The construction of the Black East St. Louis criminal has real and damaging effects. Those who do not have a car still must work in neighboring cities (which have jobs). Residents (especially Black men) face harassment by passing cars and the police. Some eventually buy into the idea that they are undeserving of efficient and safe transportation. Hamer proficiently demonstrates that the relationship between East St. Louis and nearby cities is one which encourages hard working residents to believe that their poverty or lack of resources is due to their own failings and not connected to poor decisions by government or a national recession.

To climb the socioeconomic ladder, hustling is often paired with work. Drugs and illegal work, as well as off the book work as mechanics, gardeners, maids, and cooks are considered hustles. Whether dirty or clean, such off the book work is both necessary and attractive – as it pushes individuals to be creative, not get caught, or hustled themselves. Unorthodox strategies like hustling are especially important to older female heads of households. These women engage in formal labor, hustles and care work (125, 141). Often without a spouse (153), women in their golden years work overtime (paid and unpaid) to supply emotional and financial support to the adult children and grandchildren surrounding them (141). With heavy burdens, Hamer finds that senior women take poor care of themselves – even as they are often available to help others (128-129). They are more likely to not get medical care because of their care taking roles, cost of care, and lack of transportation to medical offices (130-131, 144).

Though there are a number of programs working in East St. Louis (sponsored by church initiatives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville), Hamer argues that “…deeply rooted socioeconomic problems that are products of government policies cannot be effectively addressed only through those programs” (184). More than programs, people need living wage jobs, health care, and college-level training (184). With the implementation of these much needed resources, residents who feel as Hamer does, “…that people here matter very little to the world outside” (178), will finally have reason to see themselves as full citizens – out of the shadow of a racialized and class based veil which limits their access to opportunities.

I currently assign this book to my upper level undergraduate students, but also see it as an informative piece for applied scholars. With clear writing and ability to address a range of social issues (poverty, transportation disparities, social support networks, dating and relationships), I see this as a text suitable for those studying the sociology of work, studies of inequality, African American communities, and for those applied scholars concerned with the lived experiences of individuals living in cities – urban and suburban.

REFERENCES


