

## Book Review

# Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives, and Local Placemaking

By Faranak Miraftab  
University of Indiana Press, 292 pages, \$30.00

**Reviewer:** Winifred R. Poster, *Washington University, St. Louis*

**G**lobal *Heartland* could not come at a better time. In the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, many observers have been desperate to understand why the rural Midwest had such a pivotal role in the results. For a macro view, a series of graphics published in the *Washington Post* gives a glimpse into the far-right turn by the US electorate (Keating and Karklis 2016). These maps of the United States show data at the county level on the extent of ethnic diversity and its likelihood of recent change. As one would expect, much of the south (and up the coasts on both sides) is already diverse and not changing much. A smattering of counties across the country are diverse and getting more so, or else not diverse and staying that way. But most striking is the broad, U-shaped band descending from the Northwest, across the Midwest, and back up the Northeast. Here, we find contradictory social forces of low diversity and rapid change.

Beardstown, Illinois, is exactly one of these cities. As the focal point of *Global Heartland*, this rural town of 6,000 has been an anchor of the meatpacking industry (“Porkopolis”). It transformed relatively recently from “an all-white enclave” (p. 23) to a destination for workers from Detroit, Mexico, and Togo. So, while the United States as a nation is headed immanently for a historic population flip to non-white majority, cities like Beardstown have had little preparation for it. Miraftab quotes one of her informants, “We didn’t want to go to the world, but the world came to us” (p. 4).

*Global Heartland* offers a beautifully crafted ethnography illuminating how this is happening and how local residents experience it. The core of the story is how small towns are caught in the crux of globalization—and not in an easy, “benefits for all” kind of way. Globalization in Beardstown has meant: a change in ownership of its major employer, a drastic undercutting of unions, a decline in wages, and, significantly, a deliberate turn in corporate policy toward insourcing of workers from around the world (chapters 2 and 3). (Noteworthy here is that Miraftab heroically took on one of the giants of the global food processing industry to do this project—Cargill, number four in the country for beef, pork,

turkey, and other products. The introduction gives an account of their backlash on her research.)

As we are increasingly aware, globalization often leads to economic devastation for small towns in the United States. When multinational firms pick up and move their operations overseas, they can leave ghost towns and social desolation in their wake. This is vividly depicted in films like *Rich Hill*, about teen boys in a rural Missouri town who experience crushing poverty, sexual abuse, diminished hopes, and much more (Palermo and Tragos 2015).

But *Global Heartland* sheds light on another side of this story—the companies that stay rather than leave, and simultaneously reshape contour of race, ethnicity, and citizenship. The analysis charts stunning social developments in the town (chapter 2), from overt racism (legacies of being a “sundown town,” linguistic tensions among workers on the shop floor, etc.), to multiracial progress (new school programs for English as a second language, uniquely high rates of Latino homeownership, etc.). Miraftab inserts us within the places she studied by means of photos, maps, and historical details. We see Beardstown through time, from events like a torch-burning, white-hooded KKK rally, to celebrations of Africa Day and Mexican Independence Day (chapter 8).

Furthermore, Miraftab’s exceptional research design adds another layer to the story. While she took Beardstown as a starting point, she also *traveled herself along the same trajectories as the immigrants*—back to their originating locations in Mexico (chapter 3) and Togo (chapter 4), along with local interviews of workers from Detroit (chapter 5). While abroad, she interviewed family members and saw the spaces where her informants return regularly. This is not only a comparative analysis then, but one that literally moves through the circuits of transnational movement (and across three continents, no less). *Global Heartland* is about how this transnational workforce was produced and how workers cope, negotiate and resist.

One of the poignant takeaways from the book is the concept of “global restructuring of social reproduction” (chapter 6). Lacking sufficient support locally, employees do extra kinds of work on their own to maintain their families. They turn to an array of transnational careworking activities: sending their kids to their native countries for childcare; bringing foreign family members over to look after elders in the United States; and returning home for medical and family care when the jobs break down their own bodies. Thus, while the literature on immigration tends to emphasize economic factors (wages, employment markets, etc.) or political factors (state immigration policy, etc.), Miraftab emphasizes the important emotional and familial contributions. These activities serve as critical forms of “invisible labor” (Poster, Crain, and Cherry 2016) that supplement and therefore aid employers, but which workers undertake (and fund) on their own in order to sustain their jobs in Beardstown.

Beardstown, in the end, appears to exhibit trends of both enduring inequality and ethnic agency. Residents labor daily in “the most dangerous industry” (by official classifications), but also claim public spaces and reshape the community’s imagination. Miraftab provides an engaging theoretical critique of how to understand the global and local, urban and rural. She also urges us to reconsider

the concept of the “global city,” and its exclusive association with large-scale urban metropolises. Few will be unconvinced at the end that Beardstown is also a true melding of transnational peoples, labors, and families.

*Global Heartland*, therefore, is a must-read for many audiences in understanding the rapid and profound changes of even the smallest towns and cities in the United States, as they experience globalization, neoliberal corporatism, racism, and multiculturalism. It will be helpful to students and scholars of urban and rural studies, but also those of politics, immigration, global and international affairs, labor, emotions and care work, manufacturing and industry, race, ethnicity, and citizenship.

## References

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- Palermo, Andrew Droz, and Tracy Droz Tragos. 2015. *Rich Hill*. PBS, Independent Lens.
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