

Linkon, Sherry (2018) *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Mi.

Review by Christine J. Walley

Sherry Lee Linkon's outstanding recent book, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization*, is destined to quickly become a foundational text within working-class studies and a go-to reference for those from a variety of fields.¹ Building upon existing academic discussions of deindustrialization while also breaking new ground, the book explores what Linkon suggests is a working-class genre of writing and artistic practice – 'deindustrialization literature.' Although sometimes generated by former industrial workers, this genre is more often the province of their children or grandchildren, with additional works coming from those who have grown up in – or otherwise found connection to – the brownfields and ruins of former industry. Through this literature, Linkon explores the 'half-life' of deindustrialization: a recognition that deindustrialization is best conceptualized as a long-term process rather than an event and that its toxic residue persists in and shapes working-class lives and landscapes decades after the loss of industrial work.

In the first part of the book, Linkon offers literary analyses of texts – novels, plays, films, essays, poems – that struggle with the relationship between work and identity in past and present. The literature includes stories about the embodied work memories of a displaced Latina Cadillac worker, a comic horror novel about contemporary service workers in a box store overrun by zombie ghosts, and a Pulitzer-prize winning play in which African-American, white, and Latinx workers in a Rust Belt town wrestle with their relationships to each other and their diminishing life options. Such literature, Linkon argues, offers a window onto the complex subjectivities of those affected. While those of higher classes might puzzle over the seeming inability of displaced industrial workers to 'just get over it,' the increasingly precarious nature of contemporary work, and its relative inability to support the stable social worlds that earlier industrial jobs once had, ensures that memories of the past continue to haunt the present. This is not an uncritical nostalgia, Linkon argues, but rather a 'reflective' one that pivots around the duality of simultaneously remembering the dangers and difficulties of lost industrial labor and the even greater loss of meaning, identity, and socioeconomic stability in its wake.

Yet, Linkon cautions that we should not read deindustrialization literature as a genre of social or political resistance. She argues that the forces of global capitalism and neoliberalism remain distant in these accounts. This is, she suggests, both because individuals inevitably experience larger forces through the particularities of everyday life in specific locales, and because the increasingly fractured workplace experiences brought about by economic restructuring and neoliberal policies disrupt possibilities for worker solidarity and working-class identity in ways that make it difficult to understand, much less act against, such forces. Given this relative absence in the deindustrialization literature, readers might wonder how to make sense of the recent activism of Bernie Sanders supporters, Fight for 15 organizers, and wildcat teachers'

strikes. Is this gap because this newer activism and the authors of deindustrialization literature emerge out of different social spaces and experiences? Or is it that we need to make explicit the connections between the causes and ongoing fallout of deindustrialization *and* the growing inequality and work conditions that are engendering this new activism? Should creating such conceptual linkages be a central task for working-class studies moving forward?

Linkon's book is also valuable in its recognition of the diversity of working-class experiences within deindustrialization literature. Although she finished the first draft of her book before Donald Trump was elected President in 2016, election-year discussions of the 'working class' permeated the time when she was completing it. While this focus might have offered opportunities to address working-class realities after decades of neglect, Linkon notes that this attention was simultaneously undermined by the media's resurrection of a vision of the 'working class' as white, male industrial workers, despite long-standing recognition of working-class diversity among academics, unions, and others. Although the industrial or postindustrial experiences of white male workers are indeed well-represented in deindustrialization literature, Linkon also highlights literature that explores deindustrialization's impact on African-American and Latinx individuals and communities and underscores the ways in which race, class, and gender are co-constituted and negotiated in such accounts.

In the latter half of the book, Linkon moves away from literary analysis and explores 'cultural' understandings of deindustrialization in a broader, more anthropological, sense. In these chapters, she considers what deindustrialization literature can tell us about the material realities of living in the midst of deindustrialized ruins and landscapes, as well as how white middle-class commentators engage with such regions through what she refers to as 'rust belt chic' commentary. For Linkon, 'rust belt chic' can range from the highly problematic (i.e. marketing boosterism leading to gentrification and the 'ruin porn' visual aesthetic of industrial ruins shorn of human activity) to more thoughtful engagement with deindustrialized landscapes and communities (as found in the online magazine *Belt*, for example). Here, Linkon seems torn in her analysis. On the one hand, she wants to recognize the problematic aspects of some middle-class commentary, including what Kate Dudley characterized, in *End of the Line* (1994), as a tendency to view former industrial workers as a new kind of exotic 'primitive,' the dying remnants of a fading more 'authentic' world. On the other hand, she wants to leave space for positive middle-class engagement, suggesting that many middle-class rust belt chic commentators are themselves the grandchildren of former industrial workers or are members of the downwardly mobile 'creative class' who may empathize with economic displacement. Ultimately, it may be that the evocative cynicism of the term 'rust belt chic' is too narrow to suggest the diverse forms of middle-class engagement that Linkon wants to include. It may also be that further exploration of this topic will require ethnographic research along with literary analysis, suggesting possible future research topics for others.

In sum, *Half-Life* is a landmark book that creates much-needed bridges between two sets of literature and thinking: on the one hand, longstanding literatures on labor history, industrial work, and deindustrialization, and, on the other, academic literatures on globalization, service economies, and newer forms of precarious labor. While the former are often associated with whites, and particularly white men, the latter are often linked to women and workers of color. Yet, an overreliance on the industrial/service work duality can blind us to the diversity of those who were displaced by deindustrialization and to the ways that prior forms of work and identity continue to 'haunt' the present. After all, it is economic restructuring and neoliberal policies that are rendering work – whether industrial, service, or even professional – increasingly

contingent and precarious. (Remaining industrial labor itself is now often ‘temp’ work). The work/identity crises and ruined landscapes of deindustrialization have long been harbingers of these socioeconomic transformations, and we all need to hone our conceptual tools for understanding and interpreting such changes and what they imply for political action. As Linkon suggests, ‘working class or not, we are all living in the half-life of deindustrialization,’ and she proves to be an excellent guide to the literary works that suggest what living in such landscapes might mean.

Reviewer Bio

Christine Walley is Professor of Anthropology at MIT. Her project *Exit Zero* uses family stories to examine the long-term impact of deindustrialization in the United States. It includes an award-winning book with University of Chicago Press (2013), as well as a documentary film made with director Chris Boebel.

¹ This review is indebted to discussion at *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization* panel at the Working Class Studies Association meetings (Stony Brook, New York, June 8, 2018).