

## **Materiality of place and politics of placemaking: in conversation with metrocentric urban theories**

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This presentation draws on my latest book, *Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives and Local Placemaking* (Indiana University press, 2016). The book gives an account of diverse, dispossessed, and displaced people brought together in a former sundown town in rural Illinois, called Beardstown, when its meat processing plant recruits workers among African Americans, Mexicans and West Africans. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Illinois, Mexico and Togo, my research for the book unfolds how this workforce is produced for the global labor market; how their transnational lives help them to stay in these jobs; and how these displaced workers renegotiate their relationships with each other across the lines of ethnicity, race, language, and nationality as they make a new home in Illinois. By focusing on the type of locality that is at the heart of capitalism and yet has been largely overlooked in urban scholarship on globalization, the study offers a fresh perspective on materiality and politics of place and placemaking.

In the opening chapter of the book, I ask, if we look outside the spotlight of the global cities, away from the gaze of large metropolitan areas and the large-scale political activism that formal immigrant coalitions shape, what would we see in terms of the urban dynamics of migration? What would we see if we focus on the dark shaded areas, the blind spots created by the intense conceptual light that dominant urban scholarship of globalization shines on its usual subjects? Would we see similar spatial dynamics in splintered and polarized places? We know that today, no space escapes capitalism. Places like Beardstown cannot be conceptualized as rural towns in some traditional sense that assumes that the “rural” exists outside capitalist relationships. Rural places have always been places of flows, of in- and out-migration, of displacement (of Native Americans, for example), and of in-placement. But if all spaces

are urban in the sense that they are an integral part of capitalism as Beardstown is, then in this age of global capitalism and in the “global village” where we live, does place make a difference in dynamics of the globally mobile labor at the local level?

In this presentation, as I do in the book, I make a case for importance of materiality of a place and its politics. Materiality is to mean “the physical world that surrounds us: nature, human-made objects, our bodies, and even more broadly, the way space is organized around us, and the concrete practices and technologies we employ in our everyday life” (Gille 2013, 157). Size is only one aspect of the material characteristics of a local place. Size alone does not determine the unfolding social dynamics.

Emergent urban scholarship, which rightly critiqued the physical determinism that dominated urban scholarship in the early twentieth century, seems to have swung the analytic pendulum to the opposite end in the early twenty-first century. In stressing the social construction of space and the formation of cities in relation to the broader structures of capitalism, that emergent urban scholarship has paid little attention to the materiality of its subject matter and hence what I call assuming a “post-material” position in urban scholarship. It is precisely by seeing through such a post-material analytic optic that the emergent urban scholarship ends up with its metrocentric theorization—a metrocentrism that silences a range of places and place-based politics, as in the case I discuss in *Global Heartland*.

A brief detour will help to explain my position in critique of post-material and metrocentric theorization. This century, which by some is declared as century of the city and the Urban Age, has already seen energized debates among scholars who seek to theorize the urban anew and offer new ways of understanding and analyzing the urban—analytically, methodologically, and ontologically. One strong camp, at the center of which are Euro-American scholars, has engaged with the hypothesis Henry Lefebvre put forward forty years ago and coined the term “planetary urbanization.” Advocating for an integrated theorization of urbanization and capitalism, they stress that just as no corner of the planet escapes relations of capitalism, so no space escapes being urban. They call for an analytic shift from city, which is often understood as bounded territory or physical object, to a planetary urban society.

This theorization of capitalism and production of space, in challenging the binaries of city/non-city, urban/ rural, town/country, and society/nature, makes a significant ontological contribution to the study of places like Beardstown— places that in a binary construction are described as rural, as in outside the intense relations of industrial and global capitalism. While the notion of planetary urbanization helps to overcome this shortcoming, it fails to account for specifics of place and the difference the particular materiality of place makes in the kinds of politics and global-local relationships it fosters. In absence of such, the analytical framework for understanding processes of globalization, migration, and local development defaults to a perspective of urban scholarship predominantly shaped through experience of metropolitan areas and global cities—a metrocentric perspective.

As I advocate in this book, we need a relational theorization of place and placemaking to advance urban scholarship beyond generalizations of a planetary scale, which overlook the microworlds of people and the provisional politics they engage in a range of places. In this book, while I stress and embrace the relational openness of the place, I also make a case for paying attention to the materiality of place, and the difference the solidity of place makes. In other words, we must pay attention not only to how difference is produced but also to how difference is produced differently in different places—places differentiated by not only their social but also their material characteristics.