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## The Half Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring

William DeGenaro

*The University of Michigan Dearborn*, [billdeg@umich.edu](mailto:billdeg@umich.edu)

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## The Half Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring

**Sherry Lee Linkon**

University of Michigan Press, 2018. 218 pp.

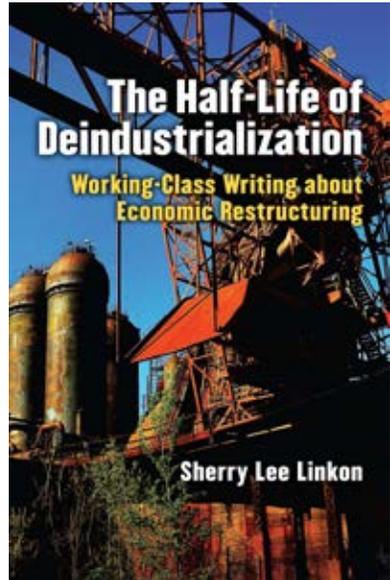
**Reviewed by William DeGenaro**

The University of Michigan Dearborn

Sherry Lee Linkon was my professor twenty years ago when I took her Cultural Studies seminar at Youngstown State University. The course treated film, fiction, and all matter of non-fiction as textual representations equally worthy of critical analysis. Distinctions between signifiers from domains traditionally labeled “rhetoric” and those from domains labeled “poetics” held no water. Like Linkon’s syllabus from two decades ago, *The Half Life of Deindustrialization* assumes that all texts have the potential to reveal important insights about cultural myths and values. Her engaging study looks at texts from a wide range of genres that offer representations of deindustrialization in the United States. Linkon sees memory, nostalgia, socio-economic insecurity, community, pride, and politics through a critical lens, offering a nuanced and compelling portrait of how deindustrialization still reverberates, even decades after initial waves of plant and factory closings.

Linkon’s exigence for writing this book is the same exigence that should prompt readers of *Community Literacy Journal* to read this book. During the Trump era, there is an imperative for deeper engagement with working-class communities—for critical, intersectional, ethical scholarship that centers, for instance, places and persons directly impacted by deindustrialization or recession, for more and better ethnographic research, more and better community-based and service learning teaching projects in these communities, for more textual and rhetorical analyses of representations of working-class life. For readers of *CLJ* who do community-based work in these communities and/or who wish to engage questions about how resentment and anger—but also civic pride and strong community bonds—foment therein, Linkon’s book is a must read.

The book’s preface situates Linkon’s analysis within the current political moment in the U.S., reviewing the prevalence of stories invoking the “white working class” and their support for candidate Donald Trump. (The metro area surrounding my hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, long a Democrat stronghold, voted overwhelmingly for President Trump.) Linkon alludes to the intriguing paradox that both mass culture



and members of the managerial-professional classes often imagine and treat members of the working class “as genuine, down to Earth, tough, and intuitively wise” persons who “had not followed the right path or did not have the qualities necessary for success” (xiv). This paradox is at the heart of a still-pervasive bootstraps mythology, of course, and yet, as Linkon argues, the nation collectively seemed surprised that the 2016 election underlined class conflict.

A minor quibble, but I would have appreciated additional commentary in the preface and introduction about race-class intersections and Trump’s victory. Arguably, the election underlined racial divisions more than class divisions, as then-candidate Trump found favor in white people across the class spectrum. Sure, the white working class supported Trump, but so did elite whites. Yet the “white working class” trope dominated election post-mortems. Still, Linkon’s point about the need to understand class animus remains valid.

Linkon posits “deindustrialization literature” (narratives, fiction, poetry, and film) as a key inroad for understanding working-class life that’s more likely than mass media reports or academic analyses to have insights from first-hand “perspective[s].” Their “attitudes deserve consideration, even if we disagree with their politics” (xvii). What I value is the fundamentally rhetorical approach of treating narratives and literary representations as texts that have a political (electoral or otherwise) point-of-view. Linkon maintains, “Commentators too easily assign racism and xenophobia to the white working class, but deindustrialization literature offers a more complex and nuanced view” (xviii), a claim sure to prompt debate. Yes, the nuance is essential, but it’s also important—in an era when hostility toward persons of color and immigrants is so visible and so troubling—to call out “racism and xenophobia” loudly and publicly.

The book introduces the useful concept of deindustrialization’s *half-life*, suggestive of how the closing of factories and mills leaves a “persistent and dangerous residue” that lessens in toxicity across subsequent years but also “remains potent” and continues to have a sustained impact on the environment (2). We don’t know enough about that toxicity, Linkon maintains, including the complicated ways community members in deindustrialized areas vote, behave, evolve, and survive. Or in some cases, how community members *don’t survive*; as Linkon points out, death and disease often thrive in deindustrialized places, rendering the toxicity/half-life metaphor especially apt. Linkon suggests that deindustrialization literature reveals the diverse and cyclic ways that memory and narrative operate in places like Flint, Michigan, and Youngstown, Ohio. In foregrounding recession and job loss as events that have ongoing impact, not as atomized historic moments, Linkon urges readers to take a longer view on deindustrialization—not just looking at immediate implications but also the psychic, material, and lingering damage done. She points out, for instance, that there are important distinctions between being “displaced” by a huge plant closing in your town (like members of my parents’ generation) and “defined” by that closing (as for instance are kids like me who grow up *after* the closing). As new sectors and “new material conditions of labor” (especially conditions resulting from globalization) coalesce, working-class culture is also “revised” (7). Much deindustrialization literature, Linkon writes in her introduction, concerns itself with these periods of flux. Further,

the memoirs and narratives, fiction and film that represents these long-term effects fill in the large gaps in social science research and rhetorically speak to (sometimes broad) audiences about the affective and material realities of community members (think of the acclaimed television series *The Wire*, one of Linkon's primary texts).

Throughout the text, Linkon offers a careful, transparent definition of deindustrialization literature as well as a clearly articulated scope for her study. Her "temporal and thematic framework" (12) consists of contextual analysis of diverse genres that since around the turn of the millennium have taken up "the long-term effects of economic restructuring" by focusing on community members of very specific regions or even neighborhoods (12-13). Because the corpus consists of stories of men and women, white people and persons of color, and the urban and rural working classes and working poor, these textual representations have potential to construct new realities in communities and "disrupt and expand" the values and understandings of readers (13-15).

Chapters are organized around generative themes. Chapter one focuses on the complexities of *memory*, a pervasive and complicated element in how stories of job loss are told. Linkon argues that "nostalgia" and "haunting" frequently compete with one another in these stories, creating a sense of paradox with respect to how the past is recalled. Memory constitutes not only recollections of a different past but also serves to create identity and community in places where deindustrialization has upended what once constituted work and life. Linkon uses David Simon's *The Wire* to reflect on the degree to which memories of the past can help community members in deindustrialized places understand the present and even take collective action. Chapter two takes a similarly critical look at *identity*, and considers stories where multiple identity markers intersect with one's ability to perform being working class and contending with recession and job loss. Through a particularly detailed reading of Philip Meyer's excellent novel *American Rust*, Linkon considers how deindustrialization exacerbates tensions over gender, sexuality, and performances of masculinity. Linkon argues that the "trauma" of deindustrialization further "complicates" how race/class/gender intersections impact the lived experiences of working-class persons, "but contemporary working-class identity narratives also reveal tensions between individual and collective identity" (85). Linkon cites social science research to show the accuracy and realism of the fictional stories about young persons in depressed communities becoming "isolated" (e.g., due to not forming the kinds of adult social bonds often forged at work) and by extension more individualistic. The discussion of identity in chapter two is a model of intersectional thinking and has especially notable implications for making sense of working-class life and community in our fraught era.

In chapter three, Linkon turns her attention to *place*, looking for example at the growth of "ruin porn" including websites, blogs, and documentaries that fetishize life among abandoned buildings and sparsely populated landscapes. Linkon sees this phenomenon as an outgrowth of deindustrialization being "visible and tangible" in urban locales like Detroit, where ruin porn was extremely popular for several years. More broadly, Linkon considers in this chapter how fundamental a role that place can

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play in stories about deindustrialization, and concludes that “these narratives raise questions about how the present is shaped and, in some cases, limited by the past, which, because it is embedded in the landscape, cannot be left behind” (113). Chapter three will be of special interest to *CLJ* readers interested in place-based pedagogies. Linkon’s argument about the centrality of *place* as a mnemonic device of sorts has implications for such teaching and the ways we ask students to move from memory to insight in their own narratives about community membership. Chapter four attends to *culture* and poses the question, *What is ‘rust belt chic’?* Linkon defines “rust belt chic” as “commentary and narrative, produced by journalists and creative writers but also urban planners and local activists,” historically aware but primarily concerned with “personal and civic reinvention” (132). Linkon acknowledges multiple ways that this sub-genre is productive and useful to community members; particularly interesting is her analysis of how writers and community members sometimes reclaim and repurpose negative attributes of a place (like Youngstown’s reputation as a mob mecca or Flint’s crime rate), transforming the negative into something positive. But she also critiques its idealism and nostalgia, and points out that some of the purveyors of “rust belt chic” are white, middle-class outsiders to the cities they write about—think: hipsters or creative class types who aren’t always critical or reflective about their engagement. Further, she argues, representations of “rust belt chic” are sometimes commodified and used as a “branding tool.”

In her conclusion, Linkon suggests ways to use deindustrialization narratives—particularly literary texts—to counter mass culture stories that foreground working-class communities and persons as failures. She makes a compelling case that narratives of the halflife can productively expose material conditions including ongoing toxicity while also helping readers and community members reflect generatively on the past, present, and future. Writing studies scholars working on community-based scholarship and teaching initiatives in the rust belt or other places impacted by deindustrialization will find Linkon’s analysis on memory, place, identity, and culture useful. Like Nedra Reynolds’s work on the intersections between geography and writing, *The Halflife of Deindustrialization* fleshes out important questions about contexts of textual production. And anyone teaching at institutions serving large numbers of working-class, working-poor, and/or downsized students ought to consider deeply Linkon’s analysis of how traumatic events like plant closings are not one-off events but rather explosions that are felt years, decades, generations later.

I took Professor Linkon’s class twenty years ago in a city that factors heavily in the present study, having grown up in Youngstown during the decades following the collapse of the city’s steel industry. Mass unemployment shaped my experience less than it did the experience of many of my peers because my father had made the odd, unpopular decision during the height of the baby boom, and the height of Youngstown’s steel boom, to become a school teacher instead of a steel worker. His dad drove a truck for one of the mills and many of his uncles, male cousins, and neighbors worked there too. School took him out of the mills. Years later, school took me out of Youngstown completely; I left for graduate school in Arizona a few months after taking Professor Linkon’s class. But that community still shapes who I am and I

still carry my own memories, my own complex feelings about having left, my own political convictions that were forged there. Many of us support students as they deepen and problematize their relationships with their communities. In Linkon's *The Halflife of Deindustrialization* we can find a model for critical reflection about ways that places and spaces shape our recollections and our dreamings.