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Review of It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live

Tony Kiely

Technological University Dublin, tony2.kiely@gmail.com

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BOOK REVIEW

It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live: Class and Gender Studies in a Dublin Estate, by John Bissett, Bristol: Policy, 2023, 156pp., ISBN 978-1-4473-6821-2 (hardback); ISBN 978-1-4473-6822-9 (paperback).



Set within a block of flats in Dublin's inner-city, Chapter 1 ("Preface and Introduction") outlines the tensions between everyday existences and impending change among female and male residents, who await the demolition and re-furbishing of their homes with the attendant anxieties associated with social and geographic displacement. In doing so, it gives voice to the interplay between locational affinity and economic deprivation among tenants who may wish to escape the ennui of otherwise humdrum existences, where transcendence has historically been constrained by the embedded restrictiveness of demarcation. That said, it also considers the prospect of liberation for younger residents who conjure emancipatory thoughts of being valued, rather than obligated to operate within segregational strictures of employment. Breathing life into such perspectives, the author enunciates that "never, in all my time working on this research did I meet anyone from the estate who was paid to think or to write or to make art for a living" (3). Accordingly, structured around a stimulating introduction, eight ethnographic chapters chart the expectations and frustrations of the tenants, followed by four analytic chapters that evaluate the interaction between critical realism and exploitation.

Titled "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," Chapter 2 invites the reader to the heart of this research by exploring the unpredictability of tenant holdings in circumstances where re-imaginings of "where" one lives, may ultimately determine "how" one will live. Thus, the dialectical tension between past or present conditions and future possibilities exposes how public housing developments are all-to-often defined by the geographies of class and gender that disproportionately impact the unemployed and underprivileged. It also

wonders if levels of self-confidence are tangentially influenced by the reputation of one's address, pressures to secure paid employment, or exhibiting a disproportionate nostalgia for the past, resulting in some residents living with the apprehensions of temporarily abandoning their homes, while others await an opportunity to leave a world of anti-social behaviour for a better life.

Chapter 3 ("Work Ethic 1") weighs the incongruities between a desire to work for an appropriate living wage, against avoiding paid employment in order to receive additional welfare benefits, particularly among older male residents. It also establishes how this sub-group develop ingrained inflexibilities towards seeking employment by stressing that they are too old to work in certain occupations or under-qualified to work in others, resulting in work related conversations being laced with combinations of frustration and bitterness. Conversely, it also captures the attitudes of younger workers who, though expressing a preference for more interesting and challenging work, argue that the prospect of trying to access supplemental education diminishes over time, while ambition is frustrated by the absence of financial support systems (35).

Chapter 4 ("Work Ethic 2") differs substantively from "Work Ethic 1" in that it deals specifically with women from the estate, who seek to illustrate how a strong work ethic is central to their sense of self-worth (38), particularly in circumstances where there is a specified requirement for high levels of flexibility. The research also explores if they are hampered by the fact that many of them are single parents, or if parents or neighbours adopt babysitting roles while mothers are at work. Interestingly, unlike the men from the estate who witness diminishing work opportunities, much of the employment opportunities for women seem both interesting and opportune, while offering conduits to higher levels of self-respect and fulfilment.

Despite arguing that there is no such thing as poverty today, Chapter 5 ("The Food Chain") enquires as to how the distribution of food and clothing is viewed by an overwhelmingly female audience who have developed a dependence on religious orders for the provision of such services. Stressing a desire for fairer distribution, references to "making do" with what one receives or "swopping items" that one doesn't require (45), reflect how everyday life can become both regimented and judgemental. Accordingly, it queries if daily trips to religious houses accurately capture the rhythms of estate dwellers who are party to the social disparity between everyday work and a need to supplement food resources, without having to participate in quid pro quo expectations that they will participate in pre-prepared prayer rituals (50).

On a more pragmatic level, Chapter 6 (“Means Ends”) critiques opportunities to regulate the relationship between spikes in the cost of living and the restrictiveness of the weekly social welfare payment. Furthermore, it notes that as residents grow older, there is an increasing need to divert spending to what are deemed “necessities,” ranging from prescription medications to more everyday purchases such as cigarettes, alcohol and gambling, which “act as social lubricants” in the daily lives of the community (55). Additionally, it expresses fears for the financial wellbeing of loan recipients who borrow at inflated rates of interest, and wonders if such awarenesses might foster alternatives, ranging from the efficacy of supplying short-term, neighbour to neighbour, interest-free loans, to the simple pragmatics of loaning one’s free-travel bus pass to a neighbour.

Chapter 7 (“What Goes Around Comes Around”) engages with the reader as to the relationship between embedded values, and the harsh realities of everyday life, where an innate sense that bad behaviour correlates with reciprocal justice is represented in the expression that “one gets what one deserves in life” (64). On the other hand, a belief that “it’s not where you live that matters, it’s how you live,” communicates an altogether different rationale, evinced in a belief that transcendence will override the limitations of where one lives. In doing so, it addresses how protecting one’s children until they come of age, allows mothers to control antisocial influences. However, it also encompasses the possibility of delaying a house-move in favour of embracing what is best known.

Chapter 8 (“Fragile Beings”) reflects on how our psychological and social-selves are the product of events and practices that have taken place over time, where age, hard-work and long-term illnesses lead to pragmatic dependencies on medicines and clinic visits, resulting in “getting onto disability payment” being equated with being removed from the unemployment register (75). Opposing this rationale however, an alternate analysis wonders if claiming disability benefit should go beyond the need for physical or psychological manifestations of poor health. (78). Thus, the sense of “growing into fragility” is catalogued in how men from the estate delight in discussing their youthful masculinity while simultaneously enduring declining physical health, corresponds with the lot of those who incrementally accommodate modern fragilities, ranging from methadone addiction to psychological vulnerabilities.

The importance of linguistic expression is a key feature of Chapter 9 (“The Word”), which details the forces at play in the estate’s unique environment, resulting in local lore with its related phraseology being of substantial import. That said, the awareness of societal distances induces a self-consciousness which may animate the community to retreat to the shelter of their homeplaces, where, according to the author, “language has potency in both its

presence and its absence" (86). Indeed, the telling and retelling of well-worn stories acts to preserve the heritage of how things are done and where community bingo sessions offer inclusivity by way of opportunities to experience "how one lives in the comfort of "where one lives," aided and abetted by communal banter and joviality.

Citing Collier (1994), who proposes that "analysing the narratives and practices of residents provides a window into their world" (97), Chapter 10 ("From Manifest Phenomena to Generative Structures") discusses the need to challenge widely-held perspectives that "ethnographic commentators are "guardians of the one and only truth," where "what happened once, will likely happen again and again." On the other hand, advocates of a realist perspective contend that public housing estates function best where their world is not predetermined. by successionist theorists, who focus on historic inter-relationships, as opposed to an alternate view that social reality should be emergent and non-predictable. Thus, the author suggests that how residents live is both an outcome and a presupposition of sets of relations, where differing definitions of class exist, not just in the psyches of the well to do, but increasingly, in the communities of the marginalised (100).

On the other hand, Chapter 11 ("Class as the Production of Scarcity: Wage, Price, Debt, Food") proclaims scarcity as a "profound characteristic of everyday working-class life" which, though resonating with the need for sensible behaviour, is echoed in the off-handedness of shrug-away responses such as "that's just the way it is," or "whatever hand you are dealt, you just have to get on with it" (102). Interestingly, while "class" manifests itself in struggles to source work that pays a decent wage, it benefits those who control the wherewithal to live a better life. Thus, according to the author, scarcity produces obsessions with price, which correlate with the amount of money one has at one's disposal. Moreover, it generates "primitive struggles to procure extra food resources" in situations where associated shame is displaced by humour or concealment (106).

Chapter 12 ("Women and the Affective Domain of the Bridgetown Estate") re-addresses the interactions between class and gender, ranging from the coldly economic to the emotive world of everyday necessities, where the provision of care is central to those living on the Bridgetown Estate. Citing a number of feminist theorists, Bissett makes the point that despite their material struggles, women speak with a different voice when operating within an ethic of care. Indeed, in what might be viewed as a pragmatic approach, they carry their hopes and responsibilities for their children and grandchildren without the assistance of men (108). Interestingly, Bissett differentiates between "caring for someone" and "caring about someone," arguing that the surplus affection required for the latter generally goes unacknowledged (110),

resulting in worn bodies bearing testament to their investments in love, care and justice (113).

The final chapter titled (“Class Geography: Part of No Part”) endeavours to calibrate not only the significance of place, for those who reside in the Bridgetown Estate, but also, its relationship with the outside world, where contexts of deprivation, disadvantage and social exclusion are challenged by arguments that society should, where possible, remove avoidable sources of social debilitation from the dweller, by way of transcendental critical realism. Thus, Bissett’s comprehensive analysis notes that while there is a plenitude of constraints and ills that endeavour to limit the unfilled needs and desires of residents living in this declining estate, striving for change can become forms of alienation, which prohibit mental flourishing and self-realisation, where the phrase “it’s not where you live, it’s how you live” suggests that one must first belong, while simultaneously purging an inherited doubt that such aspirations might well be achievable.

All in all, this publication is a timely and enriching analysis of the quotidian struggles of those living in public sector accommodation, which underline whether or not residents value themselves enough to explore new adventures or, or if they would lean more towards clinging on to what they know and trust. In adopting a methodology that facilitates the development of trusting relationships within longitudinal co-constructions of language, the phenomenological approach chosen is wholly appropriate, while in a similar context, the index, being both accurate and comprehensive, greatly increases the utility of this publication. However, there is still a long way to go on such issues, but contributions, such as this will undoubtedly assist academics and scholars alike in advancing the significance of this topic, while providing an emotional context for those who will design or build the living spaces of the future.

Tony Kiely

Technological University Dublin