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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Life Among the Ruins: Deindustrialization in Historiographical Perspective

Andrew Parnaby

Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)

I LIVE IN A DEPLETED CITY (Sydney), in a deindustrialized region (Cape Breton Regional Municipality), on a marginal island (Cape Breton), in a have-not province (Nova Scotia). As recently as the mid-1960s, the city, region, and island were supported economically by coal mining, steel making, and fish processing; thousands were employed directly in these areas, while thousands upon thousands more provided supportive goods and services. Things have changed dramatically since then. No one on the island goes underground for coal anymore, nor does anyone here smelt iron ore. Fish plant workers remain, but they are few in number and endangered. Within the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, which used to be called “industrial Cape Breton” because the island’s steel industry and nearly all of its coal mines fell within its boundaries, the impact of this protracted economic decline has been dramatic and seemingly irreversible. Between 1961 and 2011, the municipality’s population has contracted from 131,507 to 97,398, a drop of nearly 26 per cent; immigration to the region is non-existent. The average family income is 40 per cent less than in the rest of Canada; 24 per cent of children under the age of six live in low-income houses, a rate above the provincial and national average; most of those households are led by single women. Levels of arthritis, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, substance abuse, and cancer are either among the highest or (in the case of cancer) are *the* highest in the country. Derelict houses and buildings line many streets, and arson is all too common. The municipal government is practically bankrupt, while property taxes are the highest in the province.¹ The (official) unemployment rate for the island as a whole hovers

1. Cape Breton Regional Municipality, “Integrated Sustainability Plan,” (discussion paper,

around 15 per cent. It isn't pretty. Yet people, like me and 97,397 others still live here, on the leeward side of a clearly defined and still influential economic moment. And we are not alone in this endeavour. As Alice Mah reveals in her recent study, people live with industrial ruination all over the world.

To understand these lives, she begins, it is critical to distinguish between two concepts: "industrial ruins" and "industrial ruination." The former term refers to the physical remains of industrial production: abandoned infrastructure, boarded-up buildings, derelict machinery, fenced-off fields. Emptied of economic purpose, yet often still an imposing physical presence, their degradation evokes a lost civilization, she writes, albeit one created and abandoned within a relatively compressed period of time. Amidst the ruins, a longing for the time when these things functioned properly is commonplace; so too is a sense of awe, induced by the size and scale of the physical remains themselves, a feeling some have called the "deindustrial sublime." In contrast, the latter phrase, industrial ruination, is meant to redirect our view away from seeing abandoned structures as static things, mere targets of aesthetic experiences, and toward a perspective that emphasizes their connections to the communities and memories within which they rest.² "At any given moment, an industrial ruin appears as a snapshot of time and space within a longer process of ruination," Mah writes. "Later, the ruin will inevitably undergo processes of demolition, reuse, or rebirth. Snapshots of industrial ruination can reveal a great deal about the socioeconomic processes, but cannot be separated from either ... the spaces in which they are located or the people who make these surroundings." (11) Mah has three snapshots of industrial ruination in mind: Niagara Falls (Canada/US), Newcastle upon Tyne (England), and Ivanovo (Russia). Sociological in outlook, her analysis of each locale engages with a series of critical questions that have come to define the interdisciplinary study of deindustrialization over the past three decades. Why does deindustrialization occur? What are its consequences? What are the strengths and limitations of a comparative analysis?

Causes

THE TERM "DEINDUSTRIALIZATION" is often used to describe the sudden collapse of employment in resource extraction, heavy manufacturing, and value-added production – economic sectors that are sometimes referred to as "basic" industries – within a short time frame and in a defined location or region.³ For North American historians, the term also has a slightly narrower

municipal council, Cape Breton, NS, September 15, 2009), <http://www.cbrm.ns.ca/images/stories/ICSP/Staff%20Report%20-%20Discussion%20Paper%20Sept%202009.pdf>.

2. The basics of the debate are sketched in Mike Rubin's article, "Capturing the Motor City," *New York Times*, 18 August 2011.

3. Writing in their now-classic work, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings*,

definition: it is used to refer to the emergence of the “rust belt” in the United States in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, a deindustrialized landscape that in time stretched from the upper Midwest to the Great Lakes and on to the northeastern corner of the continent – including, on the Canadian side, Sydney, Cape Breton.⁴ Why does deindustrialization happen?

For some writers, the answer to this specific question can be found in a more general examination of capitalism itself. This economic system, they argue, is fuelled by the search for profits by individuals, corporations, and classes. Through competition, profit-seekers feel all sorts of pressures, both actual and potential, not the least of which is the need to rigorously control the costs of production, which can be achieved by investing in new technologies that improve efficiency, speeding up the pace of work, paying employees lower wages, tapping into newer and cheaper sources of labour, undoing state regulations, busting unions, seeking subsidies or tariff protection, or a combination of these elements. Yet when the costs of production can no longer be contained, when profits are squeezed, when a competitive advantage disappears, the outcome, they argue, is always the same: farewell to the factory. For these scholars, deindustrialization is thus best understood not as a singular event, limited to a given region in a specific time, but rather as a defining feature of an inherently unstable or dynamic (depending on one’s view) system which must constantly revolutionize how and where things are made to ensure costs are low and profits high. “This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism,” the economist Joseph Schumpeter wrote in 1942. “It is what capitalism consists of and what every capitalist concern has got to live in.”⁵ Geography, like the link between competition, costs, and profits, is important

Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry (New York, 1982), Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison defined deindustrialization as “a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation’s productive capacity” (6).

4. Youngstown, Ohio, is perhaps one of the best-known cities in this “rust belt” region and, in many ways, has come to symbolize deindustrialization as a whole. See Staughton Lynd, *The Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown’s Steel Mill Closings* (San Pedro, 1982); Stephen High, “Deindustrializing Youngstown: Memories of Resistance and Loss in the Decades following ‘Black Monday,’” *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 100–21; John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, “Collateral Damage: Deindustrialization and the Uses of Youngstown” in Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins*, 201–18. Cowie and Heathcott provide a good introduction to the field in their “The Meanings of Deindustrialization,” in their edited collection *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, 2003), 1–18, also available at *Faculty Publications – Collective Bargaining, Labor Law, and Labor History* (2003), <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cbpubs/33>. See also Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, 1999), Steven P. Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization* (Albany, 1996), and Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto, 2003).

5. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1950), 83. The term “creative destruction” has also been adopted by writers and economists who possess a neoconservative or neoliberal perspective.

to this line of inquiry too. This is David Harvey's beat. Deindustrialization in one locale can often mean industrialization in another – across town, perhaps, or in another province, state, country, or hemisphere. And indeed, those who own the means to produce things, the profit-seekers, nearly always possess superior mobility over those who do not, the workers. This makes it far easier for the former to seek out low-cost environments – and leave old ones behind – and much harder for the latter to resist such moves, especially when government policies aid the movement of capital over labour.⁶ Holding this broad conceptual approach together, according to Schumpeter and Harvey, is Marx, whose insights into the liquidity of capital, crises of production, and velocity of change stud his entire oeuvre, including *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Grundrisse*, and *Capital*.⁷

This assessment of deindustrialization, which looks to the big picture for answers, is complemented by a second line of inquiry that focuses on a related, but somewhat smaller picture. More historical than theoretical in orientation, the authors of books such as *Capital Moves*, *Farewell to the Factory*, *A Town Abandoned*, and *Industrial Sunset* accept the notion that capitalism is defined by a “relentless revolution”⁸ around production, labour, and markets, but suggest that there was something *unusually* destructive going on in the North American context in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s not fully captured by a general understanding of the “system” itself: the evaporation and/or relocation of millions of industrial jobs in a relatively short, compressed time span.⁹ The “turbulence” of this era in North America is all the

6. David Harvey emphasizes the geographical dimension of this issue in all of his work. See his most recent publication, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (New York, 2010) and *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, 1990), 226–239. His graduate-level lectures on this subject are also available at <http://davidharvey.org/>. The superior mobility of capital over labour is one of the core themes in Cowie, *Capital Moves*; see chapter 7. It is also the theme of Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech, *The Failure of Global Capitalism from Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond* (Sydney, 2009).

7. See the opening sections of Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Heroux, “‘Cracking the Stone’: The Long History of Capitalist Crisis and Toronto’s Dispossessed, 1830–1930,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 69 (Spring 2012): 9–62.

8. Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York, 2010).

9. Evidence for this position – that there is something distinctive about this era – isn’t hard to come by: profits earned by American manufacturers declined by about 40 per cent between 1965 and 1973; nearly 350,000 US autoworkers were handed pink slips between 1978 and 1982; membership in the United Steel Workers of America (to choose but one union) shrank by 105,000 over a six-year period beginning in 1979; and populations in many of the oldest industrial cities, such as Youngstown (Ohio), Gary (Indiana), Camden (New Jersey), Detroit (Michigan), and Sydney (Nova Scotia) declined precipitously, beginning in mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: A Special Report on the World Economy* (London, 1998), 93; High, *Industrial Sunset*, 6, 92–97; Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto, 2007), 4. In 1970, the population of Youngstown was approximately 140,000; by 2005

more arresting when it is contrasted with the preceding decades – between the late 1930s and early 1960s – which comprised the “longest stretch of uninterrupted economic expansion in US history.” Bound economically to its southern neighbour, Canada experienced a similar period of development.¹⁰ This astounding growth in North America was driven in large measure by the heightened production levels of the war years, which were sustained after 1945 due to little economic competition from overseas, strong consumer demand at home and abroad, and cheap and available sources of energy. Peaceful labour relations – derived from a mix of anti-Communism, legal protection for unions, and high wages for workers – was an important element in all of this too. Jefferson Cowie examines some of this ground in *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, before embarking on a sustained consideration of the diminution of working-class political and cultural life in the US in the deindustrializing decades that followed.¹¹

By the mid-1960s, international developments had largely upended the virtuous cycle of economic growth sketched in above. By then, German- and Japanese-produced goods such as steel, automobiles, and consumer electronics were finding ready consumers in the United States and Canada. More efficiently produced – labour costs in the US were 41 per cent higher than they were in Japan, and 37 per cent higher than in Germany in 1950, a divide that only widened over the next fifteen years – these items were therefore cheaper to buy; a profit squeeze in North America was on.¹² At the same time, the era of cheap energy was coming to a close. With the rapid development of oil production in the Middle East and parts of Africa and the creation of OPEC in 1960, the availability and cost of oil now lay largely within the control of non-Western states, turning them from pawns to powers in the global political economy of energy, with decisive consequences. As Judith Stein has written in her recent book *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the 1970s*, “The quadrupling of oil prices in 1973–4 ended the golden age of capitalism,” and with it millions of industrial jobs across the American mid-west, through the Great Lakes region, to the northeastern corner of the continent.¹³

it was about 75,000; this figure was accessed at www.city-data.com. The extensive literature on the rise and fall of industrial Detroit is especially rich and insightful. The following publications provide a good photographic orientation: Camilo J. Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995); Andrew Moore with Philip Levine, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron, 2010); Yves Marchand and Romain Moffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Gottingen, 2010).

10. Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 1.

11. Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010).

12. Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 54.

13. Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the 1970s* (New Haven, 2010), 74.

Only one of Mah's three cases studies fits snugly within this wider analytical and chronological picture. This is one of her key points. On the American side of Niagara Falls, she reports, industrial collapse is nearly complete: over a 40-year period beginning in the 1960s, more than 200 companies mostly dedicated to heavy manufacturing left the region. Among that group were a large number of chemical manufacturers, whose departures were inspired in large measure by the heightened cost of complying with environmental regulations. In contrast, the industrial decline of Newcastle upon Tyne has been a protracted and still unfinished affair, though its onset matches the North American chronology plotted above.¹⁴ In this place, not only has the city's economic mainstay (shipbuilding) been kept partially alive by government contracts but also the city's urban core has been the focus of a significant state-led attempt at rejuvenation. Standing at some remove from these two Western examples is Ivanovo, the "Russian Manchester." Its status as an "ideal socialist industrial city" due to its massive textile works was undermined not by capital flight – as in the case of Niagara Falls and Newcastle upon Tyne – but by the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. While some of its factories still operate, they do so not in response to "normal" market signals, but as part of a large-scale post-Soviet barter system, in which political and financial incentives are swapped for modest levels of employment and production. For Mah, the fortunes of Niagara Falls, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Ivanovo illustrate the important roles that governments and political cultures play in not only calibrating the pace and scale of deindustrialization but also in creating the "uneven geographies" of ruination that so heavily influence post-industrial life.

With this final assertion, Mah reveals the deep scholarly debt she owes to economic geographer David Harvey, whose insights into time, space, culture, capital, and urban life backlight not just her text, but portions of the wider literature as well. Over a lengthy career, Harvey has sought to penetrate the many-sided nature of capital, especially the ways in which its form, content, and power changes as it is accumulated, reconfigured, and deployed. Understanding the dual movement of these processes across time and through space propels much of Harvey's analysis forward. The rise and fall of industry, mobilization of fresh forms of labour, and creation of new markets for goods and services, he tells us, are historical and geographical questions where "neither time nor space can be assigned objective meanings independently of material processes ... it is only through investigation of the latter that we can properly ground our concepts of the former."¹⁵ Mah understands all of this. Yet whereas Harvey has sought in some of his work to produce a "general theory of capital accumulation in space and time," and thus theorized at length about the shift

14. See the British parliamentary debates on shipping and shipbuilding in the northeast in 1962, accessed <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1962/feb/15/shipping-and-shipbuilding> on 25 August 2013.

15. Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 217.

from Fordism to post-Fordism, Mah is reaching for something more specific, less infused with the edge of political economy. It's a gentle rebuke, for the three case studies, she writes, "illustrate the diversity of forms, causes and responses to deindustrialization, as contrasted with the wider literature that tends to suggest that deindustrialization is a relatively homogenous process linked to the inevitable logic of capital." (197) If there is a difference between Harvey and Mah on this point – one prefers the big picture, the other likes the small – the space between the two is reduced when it comes to another matter: their shared interest in the ways people handle far-reaching economic change in cultural terms. Harvey explored this notion in depth in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, which canvassed the rise of modern and postmodern life in Western Europe and North America, and in *Paris: Capital of Modernity*. It is also Mah's starting point: industrial ruination is a "lived process," she writes in the book's introduction. "Where some people see ruins, others see homes situated within painful processes of transformation." (9, 11)

Consequences

THE STUDY OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION is preoccupied with the end, not the beginning, of industrial employment in specific places or sectors. Not surprisingly, the loss of jobs, unions, cultures, "ways of life" and their consequences are recurring themes in the literature, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* included. Many studies begin by narrating the rise of a particular industry – televisions in Camden, New Jersey, automobiles in Flint, Michigan, carpets in Yonkers, New York – then chronicle the decisions that led to its undoing. In these narratives, the scale of the industry involved is often emphasized – physical plants are "massive" and "monumental," and they "tower" over working-class communities – to better underscore just how deep and abiding the dislocation ran, once the factory, plant, or mine ultimately closed. Sensitivity to loss is evident too in scholarly assessments that focus specifically on the aftermath of deindustrialization. When approaching this specific phase, North American historians have adopted one of two strategies, or occasionally both. The first approach involves an analysis of socioeconomic data related to unemployment, income, home ownership, crime, and migration, among other indices. When it is drawn together with additional evidence related to union density, volunteer rates, property taxes, and government services, it is possible to evoke statistically the "social trauma" – the loss of community – that follows sudden and massive job losses in a particular place. This is precisely the method utilized by Bluestone and Harrison in their landmark study, *The Deindustrialization of America*, which appeared in 1982 and popularized the very term "deindustrialization."¹⁶ Other researchers, such as Michael Frisch and Ruth Milkman, have engaged with this same issue in a more intimate way

16. "Social trauma" is from Bluestone and Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*, 63.

by interviewing industrial workers and community members themselves.¹⁷ This approach, which is indebted to oral history and ethnographic methods and thus privileges the input of ordinary folks, permits a close reading of where people worked, the ways they handled job loss, and how they changed and remained the same after all was said and done. Questions of identity and memory are understandably paramount.

They are in Mah's work. When heavy manufacturers, especially chemical producers, vacated Niagara Falls, they left behind an environmental disaster in the Love Canal, which vaulted to international attention in the mid-to-late 1970s; sharp geographical divisions of race, class, and toxic contamination were left behind too. Among the remaining residents, Mah encountered shared memories that veered between trauma and nostalgia. "The epidemiology of this place is not at all pretty," one of her informants recalled. "You had chemical workers dying, you had people working on nuclear programs during the Cold War here; people were dropping like flies. Nobody got the connection. And nobody cared either, because the families relied on plant jobs." (61) In sharp contrast, Newcastle upon Tyne was spared the sort of environmental catastrophe that befell Niagara Falls: shipbuilding, not chemical manufacturing, dominated its industrial life. There, community memories of a shared industrial past – "articulated with sadness, anger, humour, resignation, or transference" – had yet to settle into a clear pattern, for the requisite economic and psychological rifts between what was and what might be were not yet in place. (95) On the ground, the city's geography was marked decisively by distinctions of class, which afforded some areas access to the funds and policy levers needed for renewal, while leaving others to navigate the post-industrial future more or less on their own. At a tangent to both Niagara Falls and Newcastle upon Tyne is the third of Mah's case studies, Ivanovo. In that context, Mah found that people's perceptions of industrial ruin and perceptions of political collapse were fused and inseparable, while nostalgia for the Soviet era remained muted. While spatial divisions within Ivanovo were not prominent – industrial ruins are spread throughout the city, rather than concentrated in a single spot – the gap between its fortunes and other prominent Russian cities is wide and getting wider. Finally, Mah concludes, in all three jurisdictions people demonstrated an enormously strong, if often conflicted attachment to place, despite or perhaps because of the hard times unfolding all around them: "Landscapes of industrial ruination are rarely truly abandoned." (152)

It is hard not to be affected by descriptions of fallen communities and disrupted lives, especially if written accounts are accompanied by elegiac images, as they are in Mah's book.¹⁸ Nostalgia never seems far from the surface in

17. Michael Frisch, with photographer Milton Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel* (Ithaca, 1993); Ruth Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory: Autoworkers in the Late Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1997).

18. On the combination of text and images see High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*; images are also key to the film "Detropia" (New York 2012), a documentary directed by Rachel Grady

these assessments. A way to perceive the past, nostalgia is characterized by a desire, often bittersweet or melancholy, to return to a bygone era. Put another way, a nostalgic view creates a kind of imagined, utopian past that stands in stark contrast to the present day, which has been judged deficient in some important way. Why else would one want to revive what has been lost? It is also highly selective, for when the past is viewed this way, it loses many of its negative or undesirable elements, which are usually ignored, distorted, or rationalized so that they may be easily forgotten or at least recalled in a more benign and maybe useful way.¹⁹ In the literature on deindustrialization, nostalgia turns up in many different forms: a sensibility an author brings to the research; a set of feelings expressed by interviewees; a template for acts of public commemoration. The first of these variations is easy to spot. Occasionally the communities that industrial workers made are depicted as inherently wholesome or authentic, while the industrial work process is sometimes viewed as more meaningful and tangible, for “back in the day” workers actually produced real things that real people used.²⁰ For researchers, nostalgia can be dangerous because it makes it difficult to see the communities that emerge after the factory bids farewell in an objective light: in comparison to an imagined past, they will always seem unwholesome, inauthentic, a pale reflection. Similarly, nostalgia makes it easier to forget that when many industrial workers were employed, they wanted nothing more than to escape the daily grind. “That forsaken place was drudgery to me even in the early days when the plant meant something, when it wasn’t the joke it became and has been for

and Heidi Ewing that explores the decline of Detroit, Michigan at the time of the 2008 financial crisis.

19. My thinking about nostalgia draws from a range of secondary sources, including: Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, 1979); Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, “The Dimensions of Nostalgia,” and David Lowenthal, “Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn’t,” in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester, 1989), 1–17 and 18–32; Kenneth G. Pryke, “Cape Breton: Identity and Nostalgia,” *Acadiensis*, 22, no. 1 (1992): 169–84; Robert Summerby-Murray, “Interpreting Deindustrialized Landscapes of Atlantic Canada: Memory and Industrial Heritage in Sackville, NB,” *The Canadian Geographer*, 46, no. 1 (2002): 48–62; High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*, 41–63; Alastair Bonnett, “The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, no. 1 (2009): 45–70.

20. Three different examples, drawn from history, film, and fiction, illustrate this idea. The first is from Lynd, *The Fight Against Shutdowns*: “This was a community in which generations of a family cared for one another, in which grandparents did babysitting, and were themselves cared for by families rather than institutions,” 203. There’s a nostalgic quality in the way that the directors of “Detropia” have represented Detroit’s old factories and ruined buildings. My final example is the novel *Hologram for the King* by Dave Eggers; see Pico Iyer’s review, “Desert Pitch,” *New York Times*, 19 July 2012. On a related note, industrial nostalgia was a leitmotif of the 2012 US presidential election, with both candidates – Obama and Romney – seeking to reconnect with the era when America “built” things. See Kelefa Sanneh, “Sloganeering,” *New Yorker*, 13 August 2012; E.J. Dionne, “The New Politics of Nostalgia,” *Washington Post*, 12 September 2012.

the last fifteen years,” remarks a character in *Carlin’s Field*, a play by a retired steelworker from Sydney, Cape Breton. “I’m 58 years old and I am free for the first time since I was sixteen.”²¹

To her immense credit, Mah avoids this nostalgia trap. From the outset, she refuses to conceptualize industrial ruins in purely artistic terms, as objects of aesthetic imagination, for in that distanced view the temptations of nostalgia lurk. Instead, she opts to view the ruins as part of a tangled skein of geographical, cultural, economic, and political processes. This is the distinction between ruins and ruination I mentioned earlier. To understand the latter, the author immersed herself in the communities themselves, a process that took many years and, in the case of her post-Soviet foray, intensive language training. The closer she got to life in Niagara Falls, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Ivanovo – her methodology is perhaps best described as comparative ethnography – the more difficult it became to romanticize the industrial past, even if she was inclined to do so. “Industrial ruins are only ‘spectacular’ and ‘sublime’ from a distance,” Mah writes about her first encounter with the Russian Manchester. “I felt as soon as I arrived the social reality (stark, depressing, mundane) of living amongst such ruins. To call ruins aesthetically beautiful is already to put oneself at a distance. It is a privileged position.” (147) This hard-won status as an “outsider within” paid other dividends too: it enhanced Mah’s sensitivity to the nostalgia expressed by many of her informants. This is especially obvious in her handling of the memories expressed by residents from Niagara Falls, whose desire for the stable jobs and busy downtown streets of yesteryear was matched by a pronounced ambivalence, even indifference, about the legacies of industrial chemical production in the area, such as toxic contamination, personal health, and corporate liability. Equally subtle is her assessment of gender and generational dynamics in Newcastle upon Tyne in shaping people’s views on the history of shipbuilding: a direct connection to the industry, not the age of the informant, was more likely to produce a yearning for yesterday. With enough distance to spot such feelings of longing, but enough proximity to situate them within wider fields of “lived” experience, Mah makes these mixed memories make sense, which is no small achievement. In doing so, she also raises some additional, important questions. What if the industrial ruins in question are not physical structures that mimic the appearance of art and thus more easily attract aesthetic judgements? What if the industrial ruins are polluted landscapes and contaminated human bodies? Where is the art in that?

21. Todd Hiscock, ed., *Carrying Their Load: Two Community Plays, Carlin’s Field and Reading* (Sydney, 2005), 39, 42.

Comparisons

COMMUNITY STUDIES HAVE LONG BEEN a staple of research in the social sciences and humanities; the literature on deindustrialization is no exception. With this tradition in mind, Mah has moved in a slightly different direction by drawing together three locales that share significant levels of deindustrialization and visible industrial ruins, yet also possess different economic histories (chemicals, ships, and textiles) and reside in contrasting national contexts. The method at work here is tried and true. By comparing similarly situated places, each one contained within a clearly identified state, commonalities and differences across time and space are thus revealed. “Place attachment” and “spatialized deprivation” existed in all three communities; “old industrial city” identities were strong in Newcastle upon Tyne and Ivanovo, but weak in Niagara Falls; state-regulated industrial decline and “imminent regeneration” distinguished Newcastle upon Tyne, whereas legacies of toxic contamination were unique to Niagara Falls. While this comparative analysis reveals much about local experiences of industrial ruination, it leaves some dynamics at the national and transnational levels underexplored. These are some of the routes not taken.

Near the end of her book, Mah underscores the importance of national contexts, noting not only the different roles that various states played in the process of ruination but also the significance of national “imaginaries” in shaping “how people manage their current situations, what they value and will fight for, and how they relate to processes of change.” (179) The links between these areas of concern are explored to some extent in the context of Ivanovo, where the existence of Soviet-era murals on many textile factory walls, the careful ways people placed their local and industrial history in the national revolutionary narrative, and the conservative politics of the youth movement stand out. Yet in the other two Western case studies, the causal significance of national attachments is muted by comparison, despite some scraps of evidence presented in the text that suggest an alternative reading might be possible. Consider Newcastle upon Tyne for a moment. There deindustrialization was a protracted affair, Mah argues, because local and national governments “tried to keep shipbuilding and heavy industry afloat, if not economically then at least symbolically, through lifelines and contracts.” (198) In this assessment, government policy combined with widely shared symbolic attachments to shipping to slow the pace of industrial decline. This opens up an important set of questions. What *is* the symbolism of shipping in this context? How and when did that symbolism arise and take hold in the community? What are its constitutive elements? My sense is that shipping encompassed a range of powerful, collective associations for people, including Britishness, empire, democracy, technology, masculinity, and regional and class pride.²² Rule

22. My observations on this point were stimulated by Sebastian Sobceki, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 2008); Deborah Withers, “SS Great Britain and the

Britannia! If so, then the symbolic importance of this particular industry was likely more politically and economically significant, more causal its own right, than Mah suggests – and thus it needs to be explained. The work and family histories of shipbuilders themselves might be very useful in this respect.

Underplayed in Mah's text, the link between nationalism and trajectories of industrial ruination is at the centre of Steven High's *Industrial Sunset*. Working within a comparative framework and indebted to oral history, the author argues that industrial workers in the United States fared much worse than their Canadian counterparts because the industrial sector there was older and thus reached "obsolescence" sooner; American unions lacked broad support from liberals, leftists, and students due to sharply different perspectives on the Vietnam war; and American workers not only earned uncompetitively high wages but also relied on the rhetoric of "community" to resist plant shutdowns, a discourse that was easily manipulated by the very corporations they were attempting to fight.²³ In striking contrast, he continues, Canadian workers in Southwestern Ontario had a different experience. Not only was the industrial economy there somewhat newer and more diversified but also the weak Canadian dollar allowed employers to absorb the cost of higher wages and higher energy prices. More importantly, and this is the crux of the author's position, Canadian workers were better able to resist or mitigate deindustrialization because they – unlike their American counterparts in Michigan or Ohio – were able to tap the mobilizing power of Canadian nationalism to create broad communities of interest, and thus could bolster union ranks and lobby effectively politicians in Queen's Park and Parliament Hill.²⁴

There is an elegant analytic simplicity to High's argument. National contexts mattered: the geographic organization of people and industry, legal framework governing unions, and (critically) the collective associations available to workers varied markedly on either side of the border – with significant implications for the ways deindustrialization unfolded. Yet there are some soft spots too. How Canadian autoworkers filled the empty category of "nation" with value and meaning, and thus transformed it over time into a shared attachment and collective resource, needs to be identified and explained. Whether corporate decisions in manufacturing were directly affected by this vibrant working-class nationalism, or were more responsive to Canadian monetary policy and trade agreements, needs more careful sorting as well.²⁵ Nevertheless, High's more general observation about the importance of trans-local affinities is indeed highly suggestive in the context of Mah's work. It isn't

Containment of British Collective Identity," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 17, no. 3 (May 2011): 245–60.

23. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 110, 130.

24. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 191.

25. On this point, see Dimitry Anakstakis, *Auto Pact: Creating a Borderless North American Auto Industry, 1960–1971* (Toronto, 2005).

hard to imagine similar dynamics occurring in Newcastle upon Tyne, where collective attachments to shipping (and thus nationalism) likely produced some of the friction that slowed the hard pace of deindustrialization down. This may be the crucial variable. It is also worth asking why in Niagara Falls, where the chemical industries were so closely identified with the Cold War and thus American exceptionalism, that broader, national “imaginaries” did not have a similar impact.

The insights to be found by delving deeper into national contexts, specifically the link between state policy and nationalism, are matched by the significant upsides to be derived from a transnational approach. Writers interested in this vantage point typically focus on the “processes and actors that move across territorial boundaries of diverse nation-states” and see – as Julie Greene has noted – “this flow and movement itself as constructive of change, as causally significant.”²⁶ Jefferson Cowie’s *Capital Moves* fits this paradigm. It explores the movement of one industrial employer, RCA, across the United States and ultimately to Mexico. Driven by the search for labour peace and labour savings, the company became the “largest *maquiladora* in the largest *maquila* city” by the 1970s. Adios to the factory indeed.²⁷ Similarly, *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond* by Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech considers the ways workers and communities from peripheral Canada (Cape Breton) and peripheral Colombia (Tobaco) are linked by the global political economy of energy: coal from the latter locale is used to create electricity in the former. Like Mah, these authors spend much time with discrete, local experiences, but instead situate their analysis in a transnational framework: neoliberal economic policies have drawn workers and communities from different parts of the world together into a single, economic framework, which has gutted Cape Breton’s coal-dependent industrial economy, pried open Tobaco’s energy resources, and created inequality and environmental harm in both places. By shedding their bordered perspectives, Cowie and Gibbs and Leech explain effectively how the movement of capital, commodities, and ideas within and between particular places can bring about the deindustrialization of one zone and the industrialization of another. In these two books, a transnational perspective also has the added benefit of placing in the foreground a single, easily identifiable theme, bringing a layer of coherence to their overall analyses that span different populations, cultures, and continents. Mah’s comparative approach using three case studies is well suited to highlighting diversity and complexity on the local level, but it is not always well suited to linking these contexts together in a clear way, or to forcing a single argument out into the open.

26. Julie Greene, “Historians of the World: Transnational Forces, Nation-states, and the Practice of US History,” in Leon Fink, ed., *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York, 2011), 13.

27. Cowie, *Capital Moves*, 124.

Conclusion

AWARD-WINNING AND DEEPLY RESEARCHED, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* explores the causes and consequences of industrial ruination in three different places, with greater emphasis on the latter variable in this scholarly equation. This preoccupation with people's lives after the end of industry is consistent with the general orientation of much recent scholarship in the field, including to some extent *Industrial Sunset* and *Stayin' Alive*. Other work, which focuses on collective memory in deindustrialized places, the public history of industrial heritage, gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods, and environmental and human health effects of heavy industry, has cemented this scholarly interest in "life after industry" firmly in place.²⁸ Few scholars (in North America and Britain, at least) remain interested in the political, economic, and labour history of industrial production up to and including the moment when the factories started saying farewell. Interest is now running the other way, "beyond the ruins."²⁹

Through an examination of "industrial ruination as a lived process" in Niagara Falls, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Ivanovo, Mah evokes vividly the persistent social, economic, and political turbulence in each jurisdiction. Equally palpable are the ways in which the rise and (partial) fall of industry has shaped and reshaped the very places, both real and imaginative, where people conduct their lives – their homes, places of work, and communities. Along the way, Mah reveals some of the important challenges associated with studying her subject – challenges that are useful for other writers considering different research questions to think about. Conceptually there is a tension between the search for unique patterns of industrial ruination and the utility of a singular, broad explanatory framework – Harvey's "general theory" – that may or may not capture the distinctive textures of local experiences. Similarly tricky is the methodological relationship between being an outsider in a given

28. Mike Wallace, "Industrial Museums and the History of Deindustrialization," *The Public Historian*, 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1987): 9–19; Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins*; Summerby-Murray, "Interpreting Deindustrialized Landscapes"; Octave Debary, "Deindustrialization and Museumification: From Exhibited Memory to Forgotten History," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 595 (2004): 122–33; Cheol-Sung Lee, "International Migration, Deindustrialization and Union Decline in 16 Affluent OECD Countries, 1962–1997," *Social Forces*, 84, no. 1 (2005): 71–88; Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (New York, 2005); Bethany Haalboom et al., "The Risk Society at Work in the Sydney 'Tar Ponds,'" *The Canadian Geographer* 50, no. 2 (2006): 227–41; special issue of the *Urban History Review*, 25, no. 2 (Spring 2007), titled "The Politics and Memory of Deindustrialization in Canada"; David Stradling and Richard Stradling, "Perceptions of the Burning River: Deindustrialization and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River," *Environmental History*, 13, no. 3 (2008): 515–35; Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Spaces* (New York, 2010).

29. Steven High spotted this trend several years ago in "Capital and Community Reconsidered: The Politics and Meaning of Deindustrialization," *Labour/Le Travail*, 55 (Spring, 2005): 187–96. My point is that it is now firmly in place.

research community, yet also desiring the credibility (and thus access) that comes with being an insider. Analytically speaking, the relationship between local experiences and wider frames of reference, meaning, and causation is also fraught with complexity. Mah's handling of the ways locally set collective identities intersect with broader sources of shared attachment illustrates this final notion well; so too does her sense of the connections between the political economy of specific industrial sectors, national political cultures and policy frameworks, and transnational forces of change.

The city I live in is not so different from those that have come under Mah's revealing gaze. Place attachment, spatialized deprivation, community solidarity, collective "old industrial city" identities, a prolonged effort to sustain or rebuild industry, traumatic memory, ambivalent nostalgia, toxic legacies of contamination, and protracted, state-regulated industrial decline: it's all here in one form or another. Some of these local dynamics I have come to understand by just living here; they are easily glimpsed in the pages of the local newspaper, picked out of the debates and slogans of election time, or encountered by walking around the city's back alleyways and fenced-off lots. Yet many of them I now recognize only because *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* has provided me with the concepts and vocabulary necessary to do so. I am indebted to the author for providing me with these tools and the subsequent change in perspective I have experienced since learning about them.