Abstract

The rust belt and its cities have often been characterized as little more than failures. Histories written and research done about this region have likewise sought to show that this is the case, and further provide the details of how exactly this failure happened. In this thesis, I shall contend that this narrative about the rust-belt city covers over a more subversive truth: the rust belt did not fail, it is not a unique occurrence-it rotted from the inside out because of oppressive forces placed onto it, created by inequalities inherent to capitalism. This rot has not gone away, but continues to work in more hidden ways within our society. In order to address this rot and the shortsighted narratives which it creates about the rust-belt city and further reveal the ways traditional research methods silence the rust-belt residents, I critique an influential history of Detroit written by Thomas Sugrue. In doing so, I show the shortcomings and dangerous potential of understanding the city only from an outside perspective as a totalized object. I then respond to this critique by engaging in a multi-sited critical ethnography of five rust-belt cities, the marginalized people who make their lives within them- including homeless men and women, Black street artists, squatters and anarchists, and the working poor.-and the individuals who attempt to work with and for these people. From these narratives I work to extract new theoretical frameworks with which to reexamine and critique the study of rust-belt cities and the system of capitalism as a whole. These new frameworks provide new lenses and axes that cut across geographies, peoples, times, and politics in ways that both unify and divide them, revealing new potentials and possible futures-trajectories, lines of flight. What is likewise shown in this study is the radical contingency of these futures and the people who work to bring them about; therefore what this project seeks to do is amplify these people's stories and sharpen the critique that they bring with their lives such that their work can be remembered as a key step past the oppressive restraints that capitalism places on human society, and ensure that their names shall not be forgotten. What is to follow is their story, a deep fragment of the continually shifting narrative that is the rust belt, that is U.S. society, that is our collective identity.