

*Book Review Symposium*

**Ben Rogaly**, *Stories from a Migrant City: Living and Working Together in the Shadow of Brexit*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5261-3173-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5261-3174-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-5261-3175-1 (ebook)

**Editor's Introduction**

You would walk down the street and first of all you would smell all the different foods that were coming out, you walked past that house there'd be saag coming out ... And then you'd walk past someone else's house and there'd be some Polish food and then you'd walk past the Marcus Garvey Centre, there'd be Bob Marley playing, reggae ... I found out later on that there was this thing, it was called Paki-bashing, if they were driving around and they saw an Indian guy by himself they would just jump him ...  
(Ron Singh in *Stories from a Migrant City*)

As he recounts his experiences of growing up in a multi-racial working class neighbourhood in Peterborough, a small provincial city in central-eastern England, Ron Singh articulates the unease with which conviviality sits with everyday racism. Stories of ordinary citizens and the contested notions of urban citizenship that unfold through them in Peterborough are at the core of Ben Rogaly's book, *Stories from a Migrant City*. Rich with oral history interviews (conducted along with other research collaborators) done over a period of eight years, the book is set at a time of brutal austerity cuts in England and the long shadow of Brexit. Rogaly's objective is to "listen out" for non-elite cosmopolitanism during this time. However, this cannot be done, as

Rogaly points out, without critically confronting England's colonial history and the deep inequalities perpetuated by decades of neoliberal policies.

Suketu Mehta, an American writer and an academic of South Asian origin, in his book titled *This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant's Manifesto* (2019), wrote that "Migration today is a form of reparations". His book begins with a short account of his maternal grandfather, who was born in India, worked in colonial Kenya, and retired in London. Confronted by an angry white British man one day in the 1980s in a suburban London park, who asked him "Why are you in my country?", Mehta's grandfather had replied "Because we are the creditors ... You took all our wealth ... Now we have come to collect". Mehta's grandfather demanded reparation for centuries of loot by the British Empire. Of course, in the case of the United States, the first claim to any such reparation remains firmly with the Native Americans and African Americans, before any others.

Rogaly's book is not about reparation, but by paying attention to the "cosmopolitanism from below" (Hall 2008), Rogaly is listening out for signs of "progressive politics of possibility" without losing sight of the inter-related divisive, nationalist, racist tendencies. At this moment in history, when anger is pouring out on the streets across the United States (and elsewhere) against anti-blackness racism and police violence, when unemployment levels are worse than the time of Great Depression of the 1930s, when national leaders are tightening their borders by passing regressive anti-immigration legislation in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (the US passed similar laws during the Spanish flu in 1918), what "common anger" (Massey 2011) can unite people across differences for radical possibilities to dismantle the structural inequalities and racial capitalism? One way, as Rogaly reminds us, and as Marshall Berman (1984) had written:

Unless we know how to recognise people, as they look and feel and experience the world, we'll never be able to help them recognise themselves or change the world. Reading *Capital* won't help us if we don't also know how to read the signs in the street.

This book review symposium brings together a set of reflections by five geographers to discuss *Stories from a Migrant City*. Each writer draws from their own scholarship as they engage with the book, adding to the richness of the debates around race, migration, mobility and cities. A panel discussion had been planned for the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Denver, Colorado in April 2020. But due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions, it was not possible to hold an in-person conversation. As an organizer of the panel discussion, I asked Darius Scott, Geraldine Pratt, Ilse van Liempt, Kendra Strauss and Michelle Buckley if they would be willing to write their reflections instead; which they generously did. Ben Rogaly has kindly responded to them. While the panelists have reflected on the various aspects of the book, the beautiful, thought provoking stories in the book and Ben's nuanced reflections can only be appreciated when it is read cover to cover.

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### Response 1 – Darius Scott

*Stories from a Migrant City* unsettles nationalist discourse behind England’s Brexit crisis. The book troubles the distinction between racialized “migrant” and “working class English” identities. Rogaly provides vignettes of life in Peterborough and presents at times difficult stories intertwining experiences of conviviality, xenophobia, and undervalued work in food factories. Per Rogaly’s description, the broad aim of the book is centering narratives that evidence non-elite English cosmopolitanism. Such is an important undertaking.

As the 2016 “Leave” campaign and its attendant anti-immigrant rhetoric make clear, now is a time to think yet more critically (as well as audibly) about contemporary claims to national identity, citizenship, and belonging. Early on in the book, Rogaly acknowledges the “indigenous white working class” trope and its non-working class origins. The text does so alongside substantive engagement with Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, and others, which foregrounds stories from oral histories collected in the English city sitting 76 miles north of London. Throughout the text, these stories unsettle toxic claims of brown and black, predominately Muslim immigrants supposedly working to undermine the livelihoods of white English workers. Stories manage to balance rich description of individual lives, across decades, with rigorous critique of underdeveloped public and academic debates that castigate and oversimplify immigrant identities.

*Stories from a Migrant City* aims to be anti-racist. The reader is implored to acknowledge that prejudice is ultimately negotiated in the spaces of everyday life. Narrators recall being misidentified in schools and feeling compelled to embrace Peterborough’s cosmopolitanism due to shared experiences of anti-Asian bullying that crudely undermined boundaries between Pakistan and India. Narrators recall being taunted with the same misidentifying slurs. Narrators also describe workplaces where deserved promotions never came. Exposed are some racial

capitalist underpinnings of life in England, which force working class people to simultaneously fight against racism, xenophobia, and financial precarity.

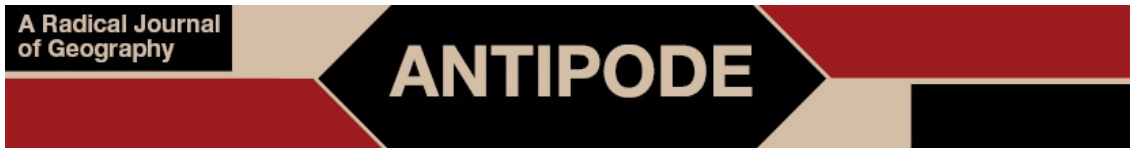
Perhaps being an oral historian makes me biased, but the generous quotations – taken straight from the oral history transcripts – seem to critically potentiate Rogaly’s important contributions. In Chapter 2, on mobility and fixity, the stories cover narrators’ ties to Peterborough and trace family lines, employment histories, and the realities of being “fixed” in place by a dearth of resources. The chapter names challenges of both leaving and coming into Peterborough, which have limited and enabled the movement of the narrators within and beyond England. Some of the challenges are personal such as needing to be near a close relative who lives in the city. Others are circumstantial such as leaving Peterborough for a much-needed work opportunity many miles away. Rogaly troubles “fixed” views of immigrant identities by foregrounding stories of multiple and multi-scalar comings and goings inherent to the flow of a single person’s life. In reading, I found myself caring about the narrator’s stories. I wanted to know more about who they were and how they were managing at present. The text perhaps inspired the conviviality it sought to highlight within me as a reader. I was also impressed with the text juxtaposing sensitive accounts with some of geography’s most rigorous critical theory.

The third chapter focuses on the workplace as a site of inequity. To be sure, the stories again make Rogaly’s insights compelling. The legacies of agricultural gangs and contemporary workings of racialized divisions of labor are traced. The labor history provided – contextualized by insights from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Massey, and others – energizes Rogaly’s own analysis of historical racial capitalist labor mechanizations continuing through problematic recruitment initiatives. The text again goes on to center the voices of participants who recount not only being caught in the cogs of the mechanization but who also provide brief glimpses into resistance and multinational conviviality in the close quarters of English warehouses and factories. I felt anger for the narrators recalling the impossible challenges of meeting targets, or packaging quotas, in warehouse work.

The stories also describe moments of fracture between laborers emerging in real time as well as how they are deliberately engineered. For instance, one narrator describes nationalist differences in a working environment: “If, for example, English or Polishes are talking between each other ... it’s OK. But if others East Europeans, Lithuanians ... say something between each other, he’s coming to you ...”. Such accounts will be familiar to anyone aware of pervasive workplace inequity in the Americas and elsewhere. The text ensures the reader understands the intimacy (i.e. the restriction of speech) as well as the breadth (i.e. the racialization of entire jobs) of the issue as it is encountered in Peterborough.

The fourth chapter goes beyond the workplace to consider stories of Peterborough’s neighborhoods as well as the city itself. Here is where the text does the important work of showing the coexisting strands of conviviality and anti-immigrant actions predicated ties to and contestations over place in Peterborough. The analysis does the work of fleshing out multiplicity amongst working class England. One story that seemed prominent is a narrator discussing a film club as well as the moment her and her daughter’s tastes in film changed. The film club is described as the narrator’s way of helping other Polish residents better learn English: “ ... I thought film club could be the place where we watch movies with English subtitles, they can learn, maybe some English people or other nationalities will come and slowly we can build that confidence in these people”. Such stories of conviviality are told in the context of Rogaly’s analysis of contested claims to citizenship, which ensures the stories contribute to a rigorous critique of Brexit claims.

By the fifth chapter, which draws from published personal narratives concerning Peterborough, *Stories from a Migrant City* has deftly reached its goal. Early in the text, Rogaly marks his intention as “listening out for an anti-racist, non-elite cosmopolitanism”. As a reader, I was compelled to not only hear the possibility of non-elite cosmopolitanism but to bear witness to it through narrators’ descriptions of life and work in Peterborough. To be sure, Rogaly’s lucid



insights will enrich both academic and public audiences. Many people would benefit from reading this book.

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## Response 2 – Geraldine Pratt

*Stories from a Migrant City* is a beautifully written, intimate account of life and work in Peterborough, a small provincial city in central-eastern England that has been at the center – not the margins – of some of the most significant economic and political trends of the last 50 years. Established as one of England’s New Towns in 1968, the city attracted investment in manufacturing, distribution, and housing infrastructure, and has become an important logistics hub, including large retail distribution centers for companies such as Tesco and Amazon. It has long been a destination for newcomers, from London and the rest of the UK, Italy, Pakistan, India, the Caribbean, Kurdistan, and, since the 2004 expansion of the EU, from Central and Eastern Europe. It became in the 2000s a place through which policy makers, politicians, and journalists debated immigration and EU membership at the national scale. “[G]o to Peterborough”, the leader of the anti-EU UK Independence Party invited BBC Radio 4 listeners in 2015, “and see the fact that we don’t have integration ... ”. The majority of residents of Peterborough voted to leave the EU, at a considerably wider margin than was the national average (61% voted to leave compared to 52% nationwide).

It is within this place that Ben Rogaly takes on the challenge of destabilising the binaries and categories that have fueled Brexit and anti-immigration debates: locals/migrants; fixity/mobility; racism/conviviality; provincial/cosmopolitan. Against stereotypes of a localised white working class versus cosmopolitan elites, Rogaly harnesses individual life history stories to render working class residents of Peterborough as mobile, multinational, and multiethnic, and as simultaneously cosmopolitan, convivial, and (sometimes) racist. He returns us to Doreen Massey’s (2007, 2011) questions, “To whom does place belong?” and “What does a place stand for?”, to explore the potential for solidarity through common anger – not towards immigrants and racialised others, but towards a shared adversity created through an intensification of workplace regimes, labour precarity, and austerity politics. He invites us and those he writes

about to refuse what he understands to be elite-driven attempts to divide through categories of race and migration.

The book insists on the creativity, generosity, and capacity, along with the imperfections, of the ordinary people whose lives are written about. This is a matter of both saying and doing; of theory and method. Of writing and representation. The life stories have been gathered over many years, in the context of a number of projects, and Rogaly tells us that he turned to oral history because it produces “a certain kind of knowledge” that is especially attentive to the inadequacy of closed categories and to the diversity of experiences within them. The way he writes himself into the book, especially in the chapter on a number of cultural productions that have come out of Peterborough in recent years, including his own film project, is worth a close study. He writes into this chapter, through his fieldnotes and remembrances, his own biography as a researcher, and he does this in a way that keeps alive and brings to life the creative process of both his own projects (including this book) and those about which he writes.

The book is an ambitious political and theoretical intervention. Rogaly challenges the geographical thinking that permeates migration debates and much of migration scholarship. Migration debate and scholarship tends to focus on international borders, and pay less attention to mobilities within nations. There is a scalar hierarchy, Rogaly argues, with migration across long distances considered to be more important than movement closer to home. Rogaly draws persuasively on life history stories to make the case that movement within England was sometimes remembered more vividly or as more significant or life-altering than migration to England from, for instance, Pakistan or Uganda. That is, moving within a nation can be as or even more meaningful than movement between nations or into another. Rethinking places as always already dynamic also disrupts immigration debates that play on binaries of us/them; local inhabitants/migrants; and stasis/mobility. Mobilities and immobilities, he argues, co-exist simultaneously. These are important arguments and interventions, and I wonder how they push us to think further about context, place, and theory. That is, might we need to not only theorise

about context but in context. Rogaly builds his important argument about the significance of intra-national mobilities from the life histories of three South Asian men who each migrated to England as children (from ages 9-12). Might children, who bear few of the responsibilities of managing family migration across national borders, be less attentive or susceptible to a scalar hierarchy? So too, I wonder whether the analytical and political mileage that comes from attending to intranational mobilities as compared to national borders depends on the context and depends on what is under debate. In the case of Brexit, attempting to disrupt a sense of England as a stable, previously homogeneous national place has been essential. In the case of the increasing criminalization of immigrants in the United States, a mobilities approach might not be as effective. The debate in this case seems to require a different combination of theoretical resources, including a focus on the carceral state, the prison industrial complex, a history of US international geopolitics and border management regimes. Theory works differently in different contexts; this too is an important geographical argument.

I also very much appreciate the book's arguments about race, class, and migrant status. Rogaly is rightly critical of the ethnicisation of class, specifically the presumption that the English working class is and has been white, and that the Brexit Leave vote can be explained by the racism of this disaffected white working class. This obscures the racism of the middle classes and elites, a multi-racial working class, as well as aspects of working class cosmopolitanism that may coexist with racism. He directs our attention instead to the dynamics of racial capitalism, in particular, how employers use racial distinction to divide workers and to profit. He develops this argument through life stories of workers in Peterborough's warehouses and distributions centers. Many workers in these warehouses have migrated from Eastern and Central Europe and Rogaly argues that, though white, their migrant status has become an element of racialisation. Concerns about the migration of workers from the EU slide towards other racialised residents as well, including older generations of immigrants to Peterborough who are victimised by increased hate crimes. This is a nuanced and helpful argument, although I was left wanting to engage the author

further about the inter-workings of race and immigrant status. Rogaly notes in relation to warehouse workers that although there is some conviviality across white EU nationals and people they do not identify as white, it should not be assumed that relationships are frictionless. He notes the whiteness of the multi-national film club created and run by a Polish immigrant in Peterborough. Tracing the transit across discourses of migrant and race, as Rogaly does, does not require folding one category into the other. And perhaps Rogaly is not; it would be good to hear more. I raise questions about the contextuality of theory and the risks of conflating race and migrant status, not as criticisms but because these theoretical interventions are important enough to warrant closer attention and debate.

This is a compelling book: based in years of in-depth oral histories and ethnographic engagement in place; grounded in and contributing to some of the most pressing issues of our age; and written with a clarity of prose that holds the promise of bringing the reader and those who are written about into the same conversational space.

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### **Response 3 – Ilse van Liempt**

*Stories from a Migrant City* is a very rich book that emerges from eight years of research (and 80 biographical oral history interviews) with residents of Peterborough resulting in fascinating perspectives. Through the lens of this small provincial city in Brexit-era England the book uses people's stories to reimagine and reconceptualize what the commonly used terms “migrant”, “immigrant”, “migration”, and “immigration” mean and to whose bodies they become attached. The book is organized around a reframing of immigration and key questions about the role of place are answered. Moreover, it offers an important bottom up approach to cosmopolitanism and the related concept of conviviality. And finally, it is written at a time when notions of migration have frequently been drawn on to frame an “Other” responsible for society's ills to be contrasted with the local perspective.

In the preface the author explains four main contributions the book makes. I will briefly describe these as they are all very relevant, but will also add a fifth one. The first contribution of this book is that the biographical approach used allows us to move away from a local/migrant dichotomy because by listening to people's biographies a binary division of people into categories of local and migrant does not make sense at all. Moreover, when combined with an analysis of the working of structural inequalities this approach importantly challenges the sometimes automatic association of people who move with privilege, and of those who stay put in the place they grew up in as lacking the resources to do otherwise. It is not only those seen as migrants but also long term residents such as Ron Singh, who is extensively portrayed in the book, whose dynamic stories are part of what links a place to places beyond in a particular constellation of social relations. Such stories show that to understand geographical mobility it is equally important to grasp the social relations that produce its opposite, fixity. The biographical approach thus helps to avoid the “fetishisation of migration” itself, seeing it rather from the more distanced perspective of an individual's whole life.

The second contribution is that the book contests the idea that being at ease with racialized difference is characteristic of a so-called cosmopolitan elite and has a specific geography to it. To link cosmopolitanism and the metropolitan elite is a straw person argument which has the divisive effect of undermining ordinary non-elite and provincial expressions of cosmopolitanism. Listening to people's biographical oral histories complicates ideas about who is local and who is a migrant. In itself this fulfills a key purpose of the book. To refuse the automatic association of a cosmopolitan disposition with elites by listening out for non-elite conviviality and other cosmopolitan acts and practices, it shows that the cosmopolitan elite versus indigenous white working class argument is dangerous because it reproduces and perpetuates a racialized hierarchy.

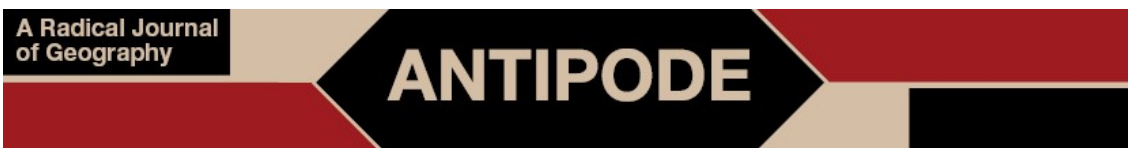
The third contribution is that the particular way of framing cosmopolitanism is also linked to the way place is theorized. By following Doreen Massey's line of thought, place is seen as porous, extroverted, and always connected to other places elsewhere, rather than being bounded or fixed. It is also acknowledged that places might be contested, that they exist at multiple scales (for example, as buildings, workplaces, streets, neighborhoods, towns, cities, nations, and continents), and that they change over time in relation to both their own pasts and to the pasts of places elsewhere. This is an important statement if we want to move beyond static thinking.

The fourth key intervention of the book is to understand changes in capitalist work through the workplace stories of current and former workers. By taking this bottom up and life history approach it is clearly illustrated how conviviality does not operate outside racisms but is rather interwoven with them in specific space-time configurations. *Stories from a Migrant City* shows that in certain spaces and at particular times non-elite people of all backgrounds show themselves to be at ease with such difference. By recalling individual experiences of provincial life in England it is shown how ordinary it often is to be at ease with difference. This is not a

romantic portrayal and it is also made very clear how this may very well exist alongside ongoing racism.

Even though Brexit is discussed implicitly throughout, I would like to add a fifth important contribution of this book. It offers a really important challenge to the often taken for granted understanding of Brexit-era England which makes the book a real must-read for insiders as well as outsiders to the debate. It is often stated that the 2016 referendum was a revolt by people and places that were left behind by decades of de-industrialization and neoliberalism. This book clearly shows how this oversimplified explanation ignores other ways in which class inequality and racism contributed; for example, through super-rich Leave campaign funders and through the inclination of white middle class people based in the south of England to vote for Brexit. It also shows how the push back against international migrants and ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims, that formed part of the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum did not come out of the blue. It was prefigured at different scales, especially throughout the whole period of austerity, declining wages, and deteriorating job qualities that followed the 2007/8 financial crisis.

As Rogaly shows, the binary often presented between locals and migrants needs to be looked at critically, especially the narrative around how migration was portrayed as endangering wages and jobs and how English national identity was promoted as white and nominally Christian. One year after the city of Peterborough voted to leave the EU it elected a black Labour MP, Fiona Onasanya, who was in favour of a softer and anti-racist approach to Brexit. By rejecting the narrative that cosmopolitanism is necessarily a disposition of a metropolitan elite the book shows how there is also potential for solidarity rooted in common experiences of class and place across differences in ethnicity, national identity, immigration status, and length of residence which provides essential hope for the future.



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#### Response 4 – Kendra Strauss

In what ways can post-referendum politics in the UK be understood through the social construction of the local/migrant binary? How does a contextualized, historicized, and place-based analysis of the ways that immigration becomes a “racialised signifier” contribute to the process of thinking through how to live together in the shadow of Brexit? *Stories from a Migrant City* provides nuanced, thoughtful, and creative reflections on these questions. I started this book in the first full month of the COVID-19 shutdown in British Columbia, Canada, where I live, reading *The Guardian* online daily to follow the UK Conservative Party’s flailing response in England that seemed premised on the idea that “herd immunity” could be achieved largely through the sacrifice of front-line and low-income workers and their communities. I am writing these comments as mass demonstrations against anti-Black violence and white supremacy fill the streets in the USA and beyond. The salience of these questions, then, and their broader applicability to who is considered “local” and when localness is valorized or pathologized, is stark. At the same time, the careful and critical exploration of non-elite cosmopolitanism and “convivial citizenship” – the “listening out for anti-racist, non-elite cosmopolitanism” that informs this book – also foregrounds the challenges of finding the common in the particular (*pace* debates in geography about “scaling up”), and undoing border imaginations that may underpin models of citizenship.

*Stories from a Migrant City* is the product of Ben Rogaly’s decade-long relationship with the city of Peterborough. Peterborough, he ironically notes, has been largely ignored or actively denigrated in the London-centric narratives of value described by Doreen Massey in *World City* (2007) – until Brexit made it the place to understand the phenomenon of the “left-behind” white working class. Rogaly situates his connection to Peterborough both in relation to ongoing collaborative research (with Kaveri Qureshi and other team members) on the impacts of post-2008 austerity, and in relation to his own background, to explain his focus on non-elite

cosmopolitanism. The latter is just one dimension of what makes the book compelling: it is relatively rare for non-racialized academics writing about racialization to reflect on their whiteness alongside other intersecting aspects of identity like class and gender. It gave me pause, as someone who researches migration, and made me think about how often I talk about my own background when I narrate myself to others, but how seldom I acknowledge it in my “professional” writing. I am the daughter of Chilean and American immigrants to Canada, but my father’s ethno-national identification is complicated: his parents were Argentinian and German Jewish. Middle class privilege and light skin meant that we were generally not seen in Canada as an immigrant family. Growing up I didn’t question how we became Canadian by way of the colonial state’s ability to grant the right of settlement to immigrants on unceded Indigenous lands (on which I still live). And when I went to live in the UK (where I eventually attended graduate school and obtained my first academic job), my path was smoothed again by the Commonwealth regime that granted me citizenship after just a few years, never labelling me a migrant. As Rogaly writes in the introductory chapter, categories of “migrant” and “local” are politically constructed and socially negotiated by people and communities with complex and evolving attachments to place. The political construction of those categories often elides or pathologizes some mobilities, both across and within borders, while normalizing and celebrating others. This includes, of course, academic mobilities, as Rogaly notes in relation to his own PhD research in India.

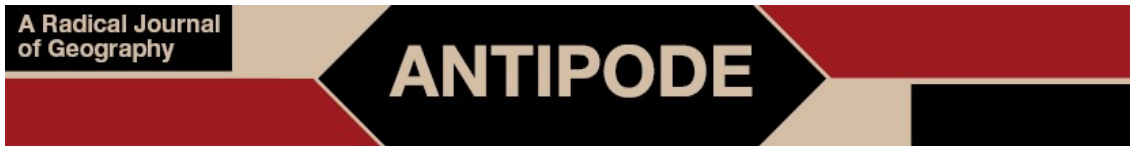
The book is structured around four main chapters that address his twin themes of challenging the migrant/local binary and listening for non-elite cosmopolitanism and conviviality in the stories people tell about their own lives. The methodological foregrounding of oral histories, and the interweaving of those histories with both conceptual/theoretical discussions and different sites, objects, and scales of analysis, produces a richly textured whole grounded in Peterborough’s unique place-ness. Yet Rogaly avoids romanticizing the local and downplaying the antagonisms that co-constitute moments and spaces of conviviality. Rubbing conviviality and

cosmopolitanism up against each other is itself productive: it reminds us that conviviality is not necessarily cosmopolitan, nor is cosmopolitanism necessarily convivial. It is the way that differential mobilities and immobilities co-exist spatially and temporally, in people's own lives and in where they live and work, that produce the socialities that *Stories from a Migrant Cities* "listens for" and narrates.

In this sense the book is both a contribution to the evolving geographical scholarship on the new mobilities paradigm, which it brings into constructive conversation with debates about subaltern cosmopolitanism, and a methodologically and empirically rich example of how qualitative data can speak to the "macro" political economy (and vice versa). This is done in part through the way Rogaly builds on his impressive scholarship on labour process restructuring and workplace relations. The experiences and sites of paid work feature prominently, grounding and historicizing individual and firm-level experiences of intensification in the broader sweep of evolving temporary and contingent labour relations, in particular temporary agency work. These processes are connected to modes of urbanization and civic governance in ways that highlight the interconnections of labour market and urban change – as Michelle Buckley has pointed out (see e.g. Buckley 2018), themes often ignored by labour geographers. And the same time, the oral histories in the book speak back to the idea that work, employment, and economic restructuring are the primary lens through which we should focus on migration and racialisation. So too does Chapter 5's exploration of forms of "amateur" cultural production in Peterborough, through which Rogaly explores how four quite different books "channelled and produced cultural change in and beyond the places where they were made". Deindustrialization, the rise of the service economy, intensification of workplace regimes, digitization and surveillance, the post-2008 austerity regime...all of these create both structures of opportunity and structures of subordination that intersect with migration regimes, yet they are felt and understood through social relations, family, community, and neighbourhood. These insights offer a grounded

approach to racialization as a fluid and contested process, which is sometimes lost in more macro-level accounts of racial capitalism.

The question we are left with as readers at the end of *Stories from a Migrant City* is the one it also starts with: how do communities in the UK live together in the long shadow of Brexit? The COVID-19 pandemic has shone light on who is really essential in our economies, and it is precisely the precarious low-paid workers who fulfil our Amazon orders, harvest and process our food, and look after our elderly – many of them the migrant and immigrant workers and racialized Britons targeted by the Leave campaign and the Conservative government’s “hostile environment” policies. Rogaly shows everyday conviviality and cosmopolitanism from below as daily lived realities in communities that are often ignored or denigrated in national discourses. He likens these lived realities, in Chapter 4, to modalities of urban citizenship that disrupt and challenge legal inclusion based on parentage or place of birth. Does citizenship always ontologically require a non-citizen Other? Rogaly posits openings rather than solutions, but by illustrating both longer histories of migration and racialization, and the impacts of austerity policies and precaritization, he shows how places and their meanings are constantly remade. That, in and of itself, is a politics of hope.



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### Response 5 – Michelle Buckley

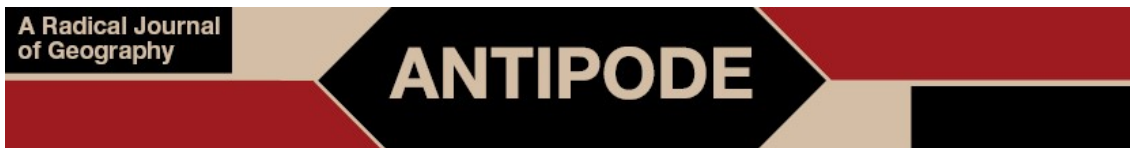
Ben Rogaly's new book, *Stories of a Migrant City*, is a rich and thoughtful foray into the connections between working class cosmopolitanism, place- and meaning-making, and white nationalism in contemporary Britain. Centred in the city of Peterborough in the 2010s, Rogaly explores the tensions and nascent possibilities of non-elite cosmopolitanism among residents in the city in order to subvert discourses about white Britishness and its connections to place. Peterborough, a smaller urban centre shaped by multiple generations of white and non-white immigrant settlement, and marked by a concentration of logistics and food processing sectors, comes to life through Rogaly's deft threading together of the oral histories of some of its residents. Drawing on the narratives of internally-mobile white nationals, Eastern European newcomers, and second-generation Britons of South Asian heritage, one of the central aims of this book is to prise apart and complicate ideas about who is a "local" and who is a "migrant" in the city. Rogaly attunes us to the importance of exploring non-white, working class cosmopolitanisms in a smaller urban centre – both places and objects that are often at the margins of theory making in urban geography – and the importance of doing so at a time of deepening divisions "between people and countries". In doing so, Rogaly argues that cosmopolitan ease with social difference is not solely a feature of elite worlds but also of working class life in Peterborough. In these encounters, Rogaly signals a set of political potentialities in these convivial encounters between vastly different residents on the factory floor, in the streets, or in people's homes. At the same time, drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy (2004), Rogaly also points out that within these cosmopolitan moments, conviviality is always interwoven with various forms of racism "in specific space-time configurations" amidst residents' encounters with social difference.

Methodologically, the book shows a similar concern with multiplicity and nuance to understanding contemporary life in Peterborough, as Rogaly combines an analysis of local

photographic essays, cookbooks, and fiction set in or about Peterborough, with residents' oral histories. In the hands of another writer, this could have been a jumble of eclectic methods that fails to cohere. In Rogaly's, personal accounts are combined with an array of textual materials in ways that nimbly move between the humanities and the social sciences. Particularly striking is how oral histories are set in conversation with one local artist's photographic essays about Peterborough residents; unfolding across multiple chapters, Rogaly enlists these to paint a detailed picture of particular moments in Peterborough's history which powerfully unravels popular narratives about white Britishness and migrant/native binaries. Meanwhile, drawing on the work of scholars of diaspora such as Avtar Brah and Gurinder Bhambra, and Doreen Massey's classic interventions on place, difference, and relationality, Rogaly's method seems as much concerned with the content of these narratives and texts as with the process of their production and creation. In doing so, he shows how the formation of residents' identities and their experiences with social difference through the performance of their life stories or art are wrought through, and productive of, place. The use of oral histories allows the chapters in this book to touch down on multiple sites in the city – as it moves its attention between diverse sites and scales such as the workplace, the local pub, the neighbourhood, and the nation state. Eschewing any single representation of Peterborough as a place (although importantly this is at the same time one view curated by a single author's choices), Peterborough becomes complex, mutable, and prismatic; the city is refracted through capitalist labour practices in the food processing industry, visual and textual representations of Peterborough and its people, and the contradictions of a city firmly situated in the rising nationalist tide of white supremacist and classed campaigns about authentic "British-ness". These mixed methods, moreover, reflect a broader orientation that runs through the book. Whether weaving together a multi-vocal set of life histories from "white" migrants and non-white longtime residents, or using a mix of methods to get at the dynamic relationality of place, the book continually juxtaposes multiple axes of difference to illuminate an array of political and intellectual possibilities.

Rogaly takes care to tread a careful line between “listening out for a more hopeful politics” in residents’ friendships and encounters that might serve to counter Brexit-era xenophobia and nationalism, while seeking to avoid the pitfall of romanticizing or fetishizing non-elite forms of cosmopolitanism. The precise political potential latent in these stories, however, is mostly left to the reader to discern. The book’s rich insights are thus like seeds, germinating hopeful questions worth cultivating beyond the confines of both Peterborough and the moments the book describes. Such questions include: Is there actually substantive potential in these everyday forms of working class cosmopolitanism to meaningfully foster anti-racist presents and futures? Potential then for what, exactly? And what are the relations between racism, cosmopolitan conviviality, and integrationism in specific moments documented in the book, such as the English-language film screenings that Polish immigrant Agnieszka Sobieraj hosted in the local pub? Informed by an array of anti-racist scholarship including the work of Cedric Robinson and Stuart Hall, multiple frameworks for understanding racism are at work here, as the book seeks to hold together the racial capitalism of segmented labour arrangements in logistics and food service sectors, the colonial and racist foundations of Britain’s immigration regime, and individuated encounters with racial discrimination by neighbours, co-workers, and bosses. In light of this, these questions above could perhaps have been given more explicit treatment in particular points in the book, as could the specific challenge to various forms of racism that these moments might pose. Finally, what is also worth noting is that among the many contributions of this book, one is its timing; with field research beginning in 2011, Rogaly notes the “murmur” of Brexit-era white nationalism percolating across Peterborough at the time, one that reached fever pitch with the eventual victory of the “Leave” campaign. Rogaly’s book thus not only captures but also grounds a crucial period in the histories of white supremacy in the UK, at the same time as it invites us to consider some of the less visible political possibilities latent in those places and communities so often located at the heart of contemporary British nationalism.





## Reference

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### Authors' Reply

I would like to begin by thanking Madhumita Dutta, whose idea this symposium was, and my critics, Darius Scott, Geraldine Pratt, Ilse van Liempt, Kendra Strauss, and Michelle Buckley, for their generosity in engaging with *Stories from a Migrant City* during the COVID-19 pandemic. When everyone agreed to take part in an author-meets-critics session at the Association of American Geographers annual meeting in Denver in April 2020, none of us had any idea that, not only would the conference be cancelled, but that by the end of June, over half a million people would have died from the pandemic globally, and we would soon be in an unprecedented lockdown with all its complex and unequal implications.

Yet running through Madhumita Dutta's introduction and the five reviews of *Stories from a Migrant City* in this symposium are the themes of hope and possibility. As I respond in what follows to specific questions posed by the reviewers, I will keep returning to these themes because of their salience to the present moment. *Intercepted* podcast presenter Jeremy Scahill (2020) recently put it thus:

We are living at a moment of tremendous change and upheaval, a time of immense pain and suffering, but also a time of hope and tremendous possibility.

Hope and possibility were also on the minds of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Paul Gilroy (2020) in a conversation recorded on 7 June, the day that the statue of 17<sup>th</sup> century slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled during a Black Lives Matter protest in Bristol, England. The two leading scholars note how COVID-19 has both revealed and heightened racialised inequalities. Their conversation then offers a tentative, fragile opening towards hope. Gilroy, making reference along the way to Achille Mbembe's (2020) idea of the "Universal Right to Breathe", puts it like this:

... when we look back on this and it's passed – when we do that the categories, the habits, that we have acquired for thinking about race politics will have to be amended to take what this Covid crisis is telling us about the nature of our connectedness and our shared being in the world ... that sense of big, a common – a common vulnerability, a common sense of humanity. I mean maybe some of the things that are going on in this mobilisation, some of the things we're learning from Covid, and here's my utopian hat going over my head, maybe they speak to the possibility of a different future for the human than the one that we feared is coming towards us. I mean, am I going too far?

Gilmore replies:

Oh I hope not, I hope you're not going too far ...

So the important questions Michelle Buckley raises in her review of *Stories from a Migrant City* are especially pertinent at this time: “Is there actually substantive potential in these everyday forms of working class cosmopolitanism to meaningfully foster anti-racist presents and futures? Potential then for what, exactly?” Buckley understandably pushes for something more explicit than she finds in the book. As she puts it elsewhere, the “precise political potential latent in these stories ... is mostly left to the reader to discern”. In fact the book goes a bit further in the concluding chapter, detailing historical instances when first the British colonial state and secondly a large fascist street movement in London have been threatened by multi-racial, sometimes multi-lingual and multi-nationality, working class unity. Noting the elusiveness of hope in an environment of continuing white supremacist violence in various national contexts, and specifically the reemergence of far right graffiti in some public spaces in Peterborough in 2019, I go on to invoke Angela Davis' (2016) reflection that “Sometimes we have to do the

[preparatory] work...” so as to be organised when the chance to push for a changed narrative comes, “...even though we don’t yet see a glimmer on the horizon that it’s actually going to be possible”. As part of a response to the racializing, divisive effects of the terms of the immigration debate in the UK, I end by suggesting that:

Collectively, through their portrayal of universal human experiences of loss, absence and death, ... [the stories in the book] provide a vision of common humanity and thus make their own contribution, however, small, to preparing the ground for future struggles against all forms of racism, class and gender inequalities, workplace exploitation and climate injustice.

Buckley’s questions thus made me think further about biographical oral history – the key source (though not the only one) of the book’s stories – and especially about how it can unsettle the ways in which people come to be categorised. Oral history involves listening. It is intersubjective – the interviewer and narrator both have dynamic roles and both embark on the interview in relation to wider contexts (as Lynn Abrams [2016] has shown). My argument in the book is that, as oral history interviews are multiplied and shared among people who have narrated them (and with others who have not), conversations emerge which can move us away from viewing each other through preconceived categories. They can affect the reader too. In his review, Darius Scott writes about how snippets of oral history transcripts quoted in the book made him care about the narrator, the speaker. “I wanted to know”, he continues, “more about who they were and how they were managing at present”. Moreover, he adds, the “text perhaps inspired the conviviality it sought to highlight within me as a reader”.

Although he does not emphasise biographical oral history in the same way, Les Back has worked on the “art of listening” for many years and, in a recent *Antipode* Lecture, takes a grounded approach to hope in dangerous times (see Back 2007, 2020). Back advocates

attentiveness to the social world, making the case for documenting “hopeful possibilities”. Sometimes, as in the case of the silent walks in the neighbourhoods around London’s Grenfell Tower, which he discusses in detail, hope emerges out of anger. *Stories from a Migrant City* involved many hours of listening to people reflect on their lives and on places they had lived or worked in or were connected to in other ways. All of those whose stories were recorded were, at least at the time, residents of Peterborough or one of its surrounding villages. In response to Back’s question “Where might we look and listen for hope?” my answer in this book was that one such place is the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-nationality working class of the small city of Peterborough. The hope lies in how this pushes back against nativist, nationalist attempts to ethnicise class in the divisive concept of “white working class”. Instead people may come to recognise the possibility that by working together they can most effectively contest the conditions that oppress them. At the same time it is important for Back (2020) that what he calls “hope’s work” does not entail naïve optimism about the future.

At the end of Kendra Strauss’ review she writes of finding a “politics of hope” in the book’s “illustrat[ion of] both longer histories of migration and racialization, and the impacts of austerity policies and precaritization” as means of “show[ing] how places and their meanings are constantly remade”. My aim was to attend to such changes at multiple scales, including the national scale. In writing the book in Brexit-era England, I was attuned not only to the stories of individual people that Kaveri Qureshi and I recorded, but also to the wider politics of the nation expressed through broadcast and print media, social media, and the pronouncements of politicians. There is a battle over narrative underway. This came to a head at the time of the 2016 referendum and in its aftermath. It was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic when widespread Black Lives Matter protests in many UK cities, following those in the US, forced UK institutions to confront their own complicity in benefitting from the legacy of slavery and colonialism. On one side of this battle lay the attempt to delegitimise the idea that people with different individual histories of movement or staying put, different skin colours, different degrees

of affiliation to one or other established religious tradition (or none) could coexist peacefully and with equal rights and representation in a particular territory. In other words, to push away from seeing all humans as human. Such ideas were portrayed (often by rich “mainstream” journalists) as elite, the pronouncements of rich, comfortable people, and should thus be dismissed. On the other side, as in *Stories from a Migrant City*, Britain’s multi-racial working class and everyday urban multiculturalism were emphasised. Significantly, both in the US and the UK, the Black Lives Matter uprisings and protests have been multiracial.

If a politics of common humanity emerges from sustained engagement with each other’s stories as people, this also holds potential for unified resistance to the depredations of capitalist employment, including the digital, algorithmic capitalism of the contemporary warehouse and distribution sector. I use the concept of racial capitalism in a very specific way in the book. This draws on conceptual and theoretical work by Cedric Robinson (1983), Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017). For each of these authors racial capitalism has a profound importance for their underlying analysis of global change and continuity. In *Stories from a Migrant City*, racial capitalism is used to refer to employment relations and to the ways in which employers and labour contractors in UK warehousing and distribution take advantage of racialized hierarchies circulating in wider society to deliberately instil division in the workforce. Through everyday workplace management practices and discourses, certain people are portrayed as being worthy of less pay or worse conditions. In *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) shows how white workers were encouraged to believe this of black workers in the period leading up to the civil war.

Bhattacharyya provides some important caveats – capitalist enterprises do not always or inevitably play on or seek to create divisions in this way. Further, difference is mobilised along a number of other axes too, such as gender. As she puts it in *Rethinking Racial Capitalism* (2018):

there remains something in the invocation of the “racial” that lets us understand the arbitrary attribution of statuses that then become apparently unchanging and inescapable. The combination of rigid hierarchisation and boundaries between groups of people with a hailing of what is natural or given seems to go to the heart of what has been named “raciality”, however elastic and variable we admit that process to be. So racial capitalism it remains.

In *Stories from a Migrant City*, I also draw on John Berger and Jean Mohr’s *A Seventh Man* (1975) on the subject of men based in Southern Europe, many of them in rural areas, travelling across borders to work in factories in Northern Europe. As the men crossed borders, Berger and Mohr show they became “migrants”. I argue that this is not only a bureaucratic function of the border but also a kind of racialization in the sense that, categorized in this way, these men became seen as appropriate for particular low status, low paid roles and ways of living. Associating a category of person with a category of job had strong resonance with the food factories and warehouses around Peterborough where international migrants became racialized by others in the city as a collective category of people suitable for intense work that British nationals and long-term residents were less likely to do.

I would like to return at this point to Buckley’s question about the potential of “everyday working class cosmopolitanism”. While warehouse workplace regimes often featured targets, sanctions, digital surveillance, and callous management attitudes towards health and safety, they were also sites where the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-nationality workforce sometimes came together across difference to protest against oppressive working conditions. With little or no unionisation the workers involved risked their jobs. Judita Grubliene lost hers after organising a group of colleagues to make a complaint against a manager who zealously policed toilet breaks and discriminated against people on the basis of nationality. The oral history extracts in *Stories from a Migrant City* suggest that some individual workers, including Judita, remembered the

relationships with other workers warmly and these could last well beyond the length of time spent in a particular job.

In her review, Ilse van Liempt, suggests that, in addition to the book's stated contributions, it also offers a "challenge to the often taken for granted understanding of Brexit-era England". She points, for example, to evidence cited in the book that demonstrates the importance of the white middle class Leave vote in the 2016 referendum result. Van Liempt also highlights an argument in the book, building on work by John Clarke (2018), that Brexit was "prefigured" at various scales and shaped by multiple historical processes, including, importantly, the legacies of British colonialism, 40 years of neoliberal policies, and the post-2008 financial crisis years of brutal austerity.

But if Brexit forms the context for *Stories from a Migrant City*, what is the status of the book's use of critical mobilities theory to question dominant understandings and discourses around migration and immigration? This question is posed in Geraldine Pratt's review and exemplified by a further question regarding whether the theory would be less effective, say, in the US context, with "increasing criminalization of immigrants"? I share Pratt's caution regarding the generalisability of theory across contexts as well as her suggestion that theorizing is needed not only "about context" but also "in context". However, while the US context that she highlights in making this point is indeed different in many ways from the UK one, they are also intimately connected, and, moreover, there are some important similarities. The UK has a long history of criminalizing international migrants and their descendants. Stuart Hall and his colleagues' classic analysis of the media's moral panic about 'mugging' in the 1970s bears this out (see Hall et al. 1978). In the current conjuncture, the UK state pays private companies to run detention centres, specifically to incarcerate people suspected of being in violation of immigration rules. The deportation of people in late middle-age who may have moved to the UK from the Caribbean as children is a major component of what became known as the "Windrush scandal" – involving a whole range of brutal bordering practices on people with Caribbean



heritage. Operating across many years this treatment formed part of the UK government's "hostile environment" towards international migrants.

As El-Enany (2020) has shown, the UK state's treatment of prospective and actual international migrants has roots in the country's history as a colonizer, including its involvement in the slave trade and profits made by UK-based companies and institutions from plantation economies in the Caribbean and the US. This does not detract from the usefulness of critical mobilities theory. Offered as an improvement on the narrow, often depoliticized categories and analysis of migration studies, critical mobilities theory has relevance in contexts where immigration regimes involve incarceration, for example, because it takes fixity as seriously it does mobility, viewing both through the lens of structural inequalities and uneven geometries of power. Racisms, class, and gender inequalities mean that some people are forced to stay put or to move while others can make their own mobility and fixity choices. The unequal and differentiated ways in which borders (both external and internal) affect the degree to which people can choose to be mobile or stay put are a central part of this.

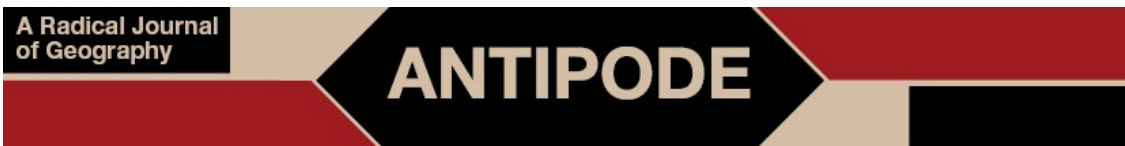
Pratt also asks about the critique offered in the book regarding the scalar hierarchy often found in migration studies that pays more attention to international moves – and transnational living – than to movements and stretched out lives within national borders. Again she is raising an important point. The idea behind my critique comes from earlier work I did with historian Becky Taylor in a mainly white British working class social housing estate in another English provincial city, Norwich (Rogaly and Taylor 2009). Here, we queried taken for granted ideas about migration based on listening to people not classified as (or seen by others as) "migrants", who nevertheless related powerful stories of their own or their family members' moves within or across borders. I take Pratt's point that children "who bear few of the responsibilities of managing family migration across national borders" may be "less attentive or susceptible to a scalar hierarchy". However, the oral history narrators in Chapter 2 of *Stories from a Migrant City* were looking back as middle-aged men. They did have vivid memories of the intensity of

their childhood moves. Yet decisions made throughout their lives about moving or staying put and, at some points being forced to do one or the other, within the UK, were also remembered with much feeling.

To return to the beginning, Strauss' review connects the book's questioning of who is considered "local" and who is seen as a "migrant" to the "demonstrations against anti-Black violence and white supremacy ... in the USA and beyond". In the UK the terms "migrant" and "immigrant" are highly racialised and become attached to people of colour regardless of their place of birth or citizenship. As Pratt infers in her review, the book explores the interconnection between ideas of "race" and migration without folding them into each other. *Stories from a Migrant City* is an attempt to reach readers beyond academia, as well as within it, to raise this and other questions about taken-for-granted categories and thus to contribute to a shift in thinking, in however small a way, towards the notion of a common humanity. The reviews, and this symposium, give me hope that this may be possible.

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