

• Book Reviews •

City of Neighborhoods: Memory, Folklore, and Ethnic Place in Boston. By Anthony Bak Buccitelli. (Madison: University Press of Wisconsin, 2016. 237 pp., list of illustrations, acknowledgements, notes, bibliography, index).

City of Neighborhoods is a new offering from the multipress collaborative series *Folklore in a Multicultural World*. In this book, folklorist Anthony Bak Buccitelli asks how ethnicity continues to be bound to the local, despite our present mobile, multicultural world. His research explores the idea of traditional understandings of ethnic places as part of the historic memories of the landscapes, advocating that these memories of ethnic ownership matter. Scholars have attempted to explain the continuing resonance of ethnic identity, and in the present volume Buccitelli demonstrates how ethnic groups overlay the same physical space with distinct cultural meanings.

In *City of Neighborhoods*, Buccitelli argues that “through social remembering and traditional practice, local identity in urban spaces can become significantly, if diffusely, bound up with ethnicity” (6). Through case studies, Buccitelli attempts to unpack the competing meanings of the traditional processes, practices, and symbols that hold these varying worldviews, with an emphasis on how social memory maintains an ethnicity’s local importance even after the group’s demographic dominance diminishes. For example, Buccitelli examines how South Boston is considered an Irish place, even though at its peak, South Boston was never more than half Irish. Nonetheless, the dominant image of South Boston as Irish remains even as that ethnic group dwindles.

Buccitelli identifies as a folklorist and shares disciplinary affiliations with the field of American Studies. This combination makes his research particularly interdisciplinary. As a work exploring new directions in folklore research, Buccitelli searches out “social memory as it is expressed in traditionalized vernacular expressive forms” (9), and follows the sources wherever they lead, be they informant interviews, local history pamphlets, or the comment section of blog posts.

Throughout the book, Buccitelli interweaves both ethnographic and historical materials, adding historical depth to the ethnographic present. In addition, Buccitelli considers himself to be a Boston area local, adding a reflexive angle to his participant-observation.

The fieldwork for the author's study was conducted in three neighborhoods in the Boston metropolitan area: South Boston, East Boston, and North Quincy. These neighborhoods have historical and social memory affiliations with Irish, Italian, and European ethnicities, respectively, although all three neighborhoods are currently in the midst of demographic change. The book is not organized geographically, ethnically, nor historically. Instead, Buccitelli organizes by theme to emphasize the "translocal cultural practices in Boston, practices that run across both local and ethnic lines" (16).

The first chapter focuses on what the author calls "social memory works," that is "vernacular works both produced by and intimately concerned with memories of local history, places, and people" (43). He argues that these "social memory works" led to the "ethnic sense of place" that cast South Boston as Irish American. The first chapter is a starting point for later analysis of the ongoing negotiations between social memory works and new and divergent interpretations of neighborhood spaces. The second chapter considers the competing interpretations of shamrocks and Chinese flags. Buccitelli demonstrates how interpretation and reinterpretation brings multiple meanings to these potent symbols as they both support and contest the "ethnic sense of place" in the three neighborhoods. For example, in the case of the shamrock, interpretations can be racist, Irish/Yankee antagonistic, familial, or personal, all of which, Buccitelli argues, arise "out of the historical traditions of interpretation of the symbol" (77). In the third chapter, the author explores local narratives and personal memories. In this pursuit, Buccitelli contends that "it is necessary to identify the patterned social memories of neighborhood ethnic life that run through local discourse" (101). The

author takes a closer examination at how informant interviews cast an ethnic hue to neighborhoods, ones that may disagree with other residents' social memory.

The fourth chapter explores ethnic festivals in Boston, specifically St. Patrick's Day in South Boston, Columbus Day in East Boston, and Moon Day in North Quincy. Following his overarching thesis of social memory work creating an ethnic sense of place through vernacular practices, Buccitelli argues that the festivals show that "the 'sense of ethnic place' is contested or rearranged by shifting the framework of interpretation from ethnic to local, a process by which the establishment of new connections between ethnicity and neighborhood spaces become both natural and permissible" (152). In the fifth chapter, a South Boston victim of vandalism takes to her blog to air her grievances. Buccitelli uses this moment to consider how the digital world is changing local folk geography. He argues "the increasingly interactive nature of the Internet, locative media, and other forms of digital technology suggest that we should no longer look only at communities as bounded either by physical space or by online interaction" (157). In the hybrid digital world, nonlocals can participate in the creation of the local, regardless of their physical location.

Buccitelli has much to be proud of in this book. The project is an exemplary example of how folklore can be used as a source material in American Studies projects. He weaves historical documents and ethnographic materials seamlessly throughout the work, always pausing to provide thorough analysis of the sources he considers. His fieldwork is broad, incorporating a dozen informants from diverse backgrounds across a broad spectrum of Boston. By doing so, Buccitelli demonstrates how folklore behaves in covertly political and multivocal ways, while at the same time renewing emphasis on the study of the construction of the local in folklore studies.

The book has a specific audience and a particular purpose. [1] Buccitelli acknowledges that, working across three field sites, he was only able to spend a relatively short amount of time in each. This methodological choice allowed for a

study of a vast swath of metropolitan Boston, but not an in depth study of any one neighborhood. [2] The shelf life on works of place is often short. The author admits “the situations described in *City of Neighborhoods* have already shifted, sometimes in substantial ways, as work on this book has proceeded” (177). [3] The author chose what may appear at first glance to be a peculiar organizational method. Although the book focuses on three neighborhoods in particular, the chapters are arranged thematically rather than geographically. While more difficult, ultimately, the organization succeeds because Buccitelli’s purpose is to evaluate the negotiation of folk ideas, which are translocal, rather than to provide a thick description of individual neighborhoods. [4] The book is well written, and the tone is strictly scholarly. The learned reader of Boston will be intrigued by sections of the book, but the audience is primarily for folklorists and other academics.

Buccitelli has joined an important stream of ongoing folklore scholarship. Rather than simply studying the folklore of places, folklorists have begun to ask how folklore is deployed to connect people to place. This deployment of folklore is in reaction to a crisis of place and the local, as increased mobility brings decreased stability. Residents attempt to make “natural” again the connection between group identity and the local, especially in places where this identity is currently contested. Buccitelli has given us the opportunity to glimpse the vernacular strategies Bostonians use to carve a place for themselves in a competitive landscape filled with multiple meanings.

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