

BOOK REVIEWS

Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of the Places Not Yet Forgotten. By Kate Brown. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 198 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$25.99, hard bound.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.93

“[T]here are two aspects to being in place, Kate Brown tells us in her new book: “One is simply the location. The other is a corporeal state of being that reminds a person of his or her biological position within the animal kingdom and the natural world” (96). Her *Dispatches from Dystopia*, then, reflect precisely this dual logic of being localized. As an observing subject, with a more or less clear research agenda and a plan of study, Brown moves from Seattle to Chernobyl, from Kyshtym (Russia) to Uman’ (Ukraine), from Karaganda (Kazakhstan) to Billings (Montana), exploring “a succession of modernist wastelands,” as she calls it. Each move, she insists, “is not always an act of appropriation.” In fact, Brown often frames her academic trips as stories about academic failure of sorts. For instance, she travels to Ozersk, a town with nuclear facilities in the Urals, only to discover that the security forces block her access to the place. Similarly, her plans to observe the religious pilgrimage of Hasidic Jews to the Ukrainian town of Uman’ would be thwarted by the gender orthodoxy of the believers. Yet, Brown turns these “failures” into opportunities, demonstrating how her futile attempts to get things done *as a researcher* could open up other modalities for engaging with locations and communities. In Uman’, the help came from local policemen. Disguised in a cape, with the officer’s hat on her head (always ready to slip), Brown visited the local synagogue (flanked by a policeman on each side) to steal a glimpse of its “sacred discotheque” (91). In Ozersk, there was a different kind of revelation. Preoccupied with security and secrets, Brown was pushed to recognize their presence in plain view when an interlocutor interrupted her narrative in order to demonstrate the ultimate imprint of the secrecy regime: the surgical scars on the belly, recording the personal history of exposure to isotopes from the nuclear plant.

As Brown passionately insists, such events are more than acts of digression, inevitable in any fieldwork; they are crucial moments that jolt the researcher out of her routine, pushing her to explore a trajectory that has been intentionally ignored or left unnoticed. Using Donna Haraway’s term, she defines her approach as “embodying objectivity”: a deliberate insistence on not hiding herself behind the masks and devices of an impatient, remote, and uninvolved narrator. Brushing the comfort and confidence of the third-person voice aside, she embraces instead the awkwardness of her own exposure, as well as that of others, with all the vulnerability, occasional embarrassment, and dependency that these public acts of revelation might entail.

However, Brown’s dispatches are not yet another exercise in self-absorbing auto-ethnography, a genre that has become prominent among scholars in the last three decades. When read together, her disparate observations merge into an important methodological message, framed succinctly as a deceptively simple question: “What is wrong with acknowledging being there?” Indeed, what is wrong in explaining the procedure through which the documents have been procured? What is wrong in admitting the partiality of knowledge that shaped the decision about selecting (or discarding) evidence? What is wrong in revealing one’s own affective relation to the people encountered and the topics discussed? The short answer is nothing. Brown’s perceptively-narrated book is an inspiring example of historical research that treats uncertainties not as deficiency but as a reason for questioning the conclusiveness and finality of the organizing and mapping practices of historical research.

If there was one common theme that could bring all the chapters together, it might be the idea of discarded or abandoned archives, those “orphan sources that come without identification numbers or certification” (16). In the chapter “The Panama Hotel,” Brown explores the possessions left behind by Japanese Americans in Seattle before they were forcefully “evacuated” in 1943 to a “relocation” camp in Idaho as “enemy aliens.” Never reclaimed, these possessions stayed for decades in the basement of the hotel, archiving the painful history of dispossession. The second dispatch—from the Chernobyl zone—is also a story of a forced abandonment. Brown uses the zone to highlight a problematic distinction between “artifacts” and “documents.” Discarded but not destroyed, this spatial archive of a major catastrophe exhibits “what happens to ‘truth’ when we no longer know how to authenticate it” (55). In the chapter “Bodily Secrets,” Brown shifts her focus from possessions and places left behind to the people who have been used, abused, and finally neglected by the state. The bodies of her interlocutors, former workers of a nuclear plant in Ozersk, became crucial archives, storing “strontium-90 and plutonium in bone marrow, iodine-131 in thyroids, cesium-137 in endocrine glands, hearts, spleens, soft tissues, and muscle” (66), with no instruction as to how to read these “corporeal repositories.” “Sacred Spaces in a Sullied Garden,” the fourth dispatch, explores yet another agentive power of objects. In this case, Brown focuses on the history of the grave of Nahman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Elieser. Buried in 1810 in Uman’, Nahman became a cult figure for his disciples, who would spend every Rosh Hashanah by his grave. The Bolshevik revolution, wars, and the Holocaust interrupted the tradition; however, in the 1990s, the pilgrimages resumed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the grave continues to act as a site of attraction for thousands of worshipers, seemingly unperturbed by a complete lack of the original context. This synchronicity of spatial distinctions is foregrounded even more in the fifth dispatch from Kazakhstan and Montana. Comparing Karaganda, a place that emerged out of a Gulag labor camp in the Kazakh steppe, with Billings, a railroad city in Montana, Brown shows how these two icons of modernity shared the same foundational desire to see in the land inhabited by aboriginal peoples nothing but an empty canvas that should be turned into a gridded space. The ordered urbanism of these locations, then, emerged as a perceptual trace of the erased pre-histories of modernity, as an archive of destruction in the name of progress. The final dispatch from Elgin, Illinois is a way of homecoming: it is about Brown’s own hometown, yet another emblem of the rust belt of America, a material leftover of industrial modernity.

“Places of advanced marginality,” as Brown calls them, these locations are more than sites of melancholic investment and romantic fascination with the “ruins of porn and rustalgia” (149). As the historian convincingly suggests, these places allow us to “conceive of history outside of the nation-state and detached from national histories” (150). Superbly written, persuasively argued, and emotionally nuanced, this book should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the humanities.