

# Hormel, L. (2023). *Trailer Park America: Reimagining Working-Class Communities*. Rutgers University Press.

## Review by Lora A. Phillips

Over the course of several decades, an absentee landlord fails to perform minimally sufficient maintenance on their rental property, compounding design flaws associated with its original construction. Residents are subsequently exposed to a years-long water crisis, as raw sewage and its associated bacteria enter their drinking water. Despite this, most of the property's working-class residents not only remain in place, but also advocate to keep their community intact. Unfortunately, the landlord refuses to make the costly repairs necessary to resolve the water crisis. The state subsequently condemns the property, thus forcing its residents to relocate.

In *Trailer Park America: Reimagining Working-Class Communities*, Leontina Hormel uses a sociological lens to understand the above scenario which, at first glance, could easily be misconstrued as individual failures leading to appropriate state intervention to protect an at-risk group of residents who should have “seen the writing on the wall” and moved out long ago. Indeed, this precise narrative was pervasive in local public opinion and media reporting on the Syringa Mobile Home Park in the Palouse region of Idaho, the site of Hormel's scholar-activism. Drawing on over five years of meticulous research—including ethnographic work, interviews, needs surveys, and public sociology—Hormel poses a compelling argument for why the decline and closure of Syringa Mobile Home Park more accurately reflects structural forces that not only directly harmed residents of the park, but also have dire implications for working-class communities across America. In doing so, Hormel movingly reframes popular perceptions of mobile home parks and the humans who live in them.

Specifically, Hormel elucidates how the ecological crisis and ultimate displacement faced by Syringa's residents can be traced back to the political economic forces of settler colonialism and capitalism. The existence of Syringa was exclusively viable due to settler colonialism, which displaced the site's Native Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) peoples and transformed its natural resources into property that would become privately owned, managed, and developed at its owner's discretion. Guided by the ethos of capitalism, which purports that land is best suited to its most profitable use, the original owner constructed Syringa Mobile Home Park on the site of a seasonal wetland that was unviable for commercial farming. Given the unique tenure arrangement of most mobile home parks, wherein residents own their home but pay monthly rent on the lot that it sits on, the owner could therefore draw monthly income from the land.

Hormel further illuminates how the decline and closure of Syringa Mobile Home Park must be understood to represent the confluence of settler colonialism and capitalism in the context of an additional structural force: neoliberal politics. Syringa's poorly constructed water and sewerage system, combined with the reality that it was built on a seasonal wetland, led to the water crisis that would be attributed to the park's closure. This combination of factors was, in part, made

possible due to the rural location of the park, which subjected the landowner to less government oversight and fewer construction regulations.

As conditions in Syringa deteriorated, decades of privatization and deregulation culminated in a scenario whereby government agencies were powerless to compel the park's owner to repair the dangerous water and sewerage system. In the absence of the owner's voluntary compliance, the state turned to what was ostensibly the only tool at its disposal: condemning individual mobile homes and, ultimately, formally closing Syringa Mobile Home Park. The consequences of neoliberal politics for park residents were, perhaps, most on display during their involuntary displacement, wherein a dearth of government programs and assistance found residents falling through the cracks of the housing system, with already overburdened community and faith-based organizations stepping in to fill the gaps.

Thus, rather than improving living conditions for the long-suffering residents of Syringa, government (in)action had the perverse effect of harming residents in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to: a loss in the assessed value of their mobile home; for those mobile homes that were functionally immobile, a loss of the home itself; and fostering local social stigmatization that resulted in difficulty securing new housing.

Moreover, the closure of Syringa Mobile Home Park led to the destruction of a working-class community—not just in its physical form, but also in terms of the mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and profoundly meaningful social relationships that tightly bound residents together and contributed positively to their health and well-being. The importance of this deep sense of community cannot be overstated; beyond partially motivating residents to advocate for Syringa to remain open, their shared sense of community directly facilitated a variety of impactful collective action activities—activities that are notoriously difficult to successfully coordinate within any group, let alone within a group of people who are often construed as socially disorganized and lacking in agency. Ironically, successful collective action among the residents, situated within the broader political economic context, contributed significantly to the mobile home park's closure. Syringa residents scattered as they were forced to individually secure new housing. Over time and distance, relationships were lost.

Hormel's overarching narrative regarding how relational class inequalities acted to expose Syringa residents to ecological hazards and housing precarity is a moving case study of how external forces slowly destroyed a vibrant working-class community. In fact, I find Hormel's valid assertion that mobile home parks are working-class communities to be a key contribution of *Trailer Park America*. Nonetheless, the labeling of mobile home parks as working-class communities is simultaneously one of my few critiques of this book. Throughout the chapters, Hormel impressively weaves an intersectional analysis into what is already a rich and complex narrative. Her demonstration that mobile home parks are not only home to a particular social class, but are also feminized spaces that sometimes house differently abled individuals, leads me to wonder whether mobile home parks are *just* working-class communities. Future scholarship might seek to answer the derivative questions: Mobile home parks are working-class communities *for whom*, and, how does this compare to other working-class identities and communities?

Although Hormel does reference contemporary concerns in the housing market, including rapidly rising housing costs and the growth of investor-owned properties, her policy recommendations focus more narrowly on reducing precarity for the residents of mobile home parks. While this makes good sense in the context of a book about mobile home parks, I was particularly struck by the reality faced by Syringa residents upon their forced displacement; namely, that there was a shortage of comparable working-class communities across *any* housing type for them to relocate to. Beyond implying the need for broader, market-level policy changes, the reality faced by Dawn Tachell, Shannon Musick, Jim Ware, and other Syringa residents whom I had come to know, provoked me to wonder about the current state and future prospects of working-class communities in America and the social relations that emerge from them.

In sum, Hormel presents a compelling case study that makes vividly clear how political economic structures in the contemporary United States operated to destroy the working-class community of Syringa Mobile Home Park. Past scholarship concurs that these structural forces—namely, settler colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberal politics—affect working-class Americans regardless of the type of housing they reside in. I believe that *Trailer Park America* is a must-read for current and aspiring community engaged working-class scholars, as Hormel skillfully centers the experiences and voices of park residents while also demonstrating how their lived experience is relevant for sociological theory. Overall, this book will leave you pondering what working-class communities should look like in the future, and it will inspire you to act upon that conclusion.

### Reviewer Bio

**Lora A. Phillips** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario. Her research seeks to answer three broad questions: Who has access to a stable life, and who does not? Why do observed social class, age, and racial-ethnic differences in exposure to precarious circumstances exist, particularly as it relates to the role of spatial and temporal context? And what are the consequences of exposure to material precarity, and inequalities therein, for individual and community health and well-being?