

# **High S. (2022) *Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class*. McGill-Queen's University Press.**

Review by **Jill Schennum**

Historian Steven High adds a beautifully nuanced account of Montreal to the literature on deindustrialization with his new book, *Deindustrializing Montreal*. High's expertise on deindustrialization, as evidenced in one of his prior books, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rustbelt*, is applied to this study of two working-class neighborhoods in Montreal. He understands Montreal as a revived, thriving city but one in which postindustrial development plays itself out unevenly across lines of class, race, and residence in two communities.

High structures the book as a comparative study of Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy, two working-class neighborhoods in Southwest Montreal, one white and the other multiracial. The book takes the reader through waves of deindustrialization: the decline of the railroads with the growth of automobile culture; the closing of the Lachine Canal to ship traffic; and shutdowns, over decades, of the many factories along the banks of the canal. It also explores the histories of changing social policy in and around cities, exploring the impact of suburbanization, urban renewal, and gentrification on these neighborhoods.

High's histories are supported by his in-depth, long-term, ethnographic work in these two communities. Steve High lives in Point Saint-Charles, has worked extensively with students and community partners in both neighborhoods, has collected oral histories, planned public events, conducted neighborhood walk-throughs and engaged with local institutions for more than 15 years. This long-term, deeply embedded research results in incredibly rich archival materials, including oral histories, photographs, and primary documents, most of which have been collected by High and his students.

The book is a beautifully curated, multi-media representation of these two Montreal neighborhoods, from post World War II to today. The book includes photographs, maps, songs, graphic art, and visual art. Photographs, spanning a long period of time, include aerial photographs; photographs of buildings, bridges, and factories (the built environment of these communities); and many photographs of people in their communities – with their families, in their churches and clubs, at work, and in their neighborhoods. High includes images that show the “birds-eye perspective” (maps, charts, photos) of urban planners and developers but contrasts these to the many images of ordinary people living their daily lives. One chilling series of photographs documents city officials taking “expropriation” photos of homes and small businesses in preparation for urban renewal, their aim being a documentation of the perceived dirt and blight of the neighborhoods, all while ignoring the vibrant community life. High's wide-ranging access to visual materials, and his skill in archiving and presenting them are central to this book.

The extensive oral histories High and his students have collected also reveal people's own narratives of their lives, locating these neighborhoods as central places in Canada's Industrial Revolution and in the movement of people and goods in industrial Canada. The residents of Point Saint-Charles reminisce about childhood daring in riding the swing bridges as sailors from around the world threw candy to them, swimming in the polluted Lachine canal, the sounds of the neighborhood – train, ship and factory whistles, and the anticipation and excitement of the annual circus ship. These stories of industrial childhoods capture, so beautifully, what High describes as an “industrial culture of feeling”. Through relating these vivid memories, High pushes back on dominant narratives that abstract work from community, representing the loss of work as natural and inevitable and communities as impoverished. These memories instead document the lively community life intertwined with work in the many factories strung along the canal.

These oral histories also reveal the complicated history of a multiracial neighborhood in the northern part of Little Burgundy. High documents the vibrancy of the neighborhood, relating kids playing in and around the railyards and the strength of Black churches, clubs, and organizations. But with Black Canadians excluded from factory work, these stories also speak of racial discrimination. High describes how one of the few jobs available to black men, as railway porters, improved through union struggle, only to be lost with the decline of passenger rail as automobile culture and the highway system expanded. The success of porters' fight for better wages and benefits led to them moving out of Little Burgundy to suburbs in the 1940s, even earlier than white factory workers, separating the Black, middle-income working class from urban neighborhoods and undermining black community institutions.

Throughout the book, High is critical of dominant narratives that muddy or downright eliminate class relations and class struggle. For example, High is concerned that urban scholars' and policy makers' framing of urban renewal as solely a racist attack on Black neighborhoods, directed by the state, erases the importance of class relations, the complexity of working-class neighborhoods, and the role of capital in these processes. This rings true for me, as in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where I do my work, urban renewal initiated by the city eliminated a multiracial, working-class neighborhood called Northampton Heights in the 1960s, allowing Bethlehem Steel to build a new basic oxygen furnace on the site, clearly demonstrating the collusion of state and capital.

High pushes scholars to link race and class in examining how interrelated processes of deindustrialization, suburbanization, urban renewal, and neighborhood decline play themselves out. High argues that Little Burgundy became “stigmatized as a racial ghetto” rather than understood as a neighborhood hard-hit by deindustrialization and suburbanization, and this stigmatization then elicited different policies, including public housing projects and over-policing, that further damaged the neighborhood. Analysis solely through the lens of race can erase the ways processes of deindustrialization impact working-class Black Canadians earlier and harder than white Canadians. This can (and did), for example, lead to scholarship and public policy discourse that created a racialized ‘underclass’ category and then ignored class projects that “pauperized” neighborhoods. We need more analyses that foreground these relationships, like this one and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly's nuanced ethnography of West Baltimore, *The Hero's Fight*.

High also critiques the dominant urban policy discourse of “social mixing” that emerges in the postindustrial era. This ideology redefines gentrification as progress, emphasizing the role of

socially mixed neighborhoods in alleviating the effects of poverty, thereby supporting policies that encourage gentrification. But as High points out, gentrification displaces and disenfranchises working-class Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy residents.

High is also critical of industrial heritage projects that provide “political and intellectual cover” for gentrifying processes. Representations of a sanitized industrial past, as so often happens with industrial heritage efforts, erase the lives of workers, the history of class struggle, and the devastating effects of factory closures and urban renewals. High gives examples of this revisionism in Parks Canada historic panels, photographs, condominium panels, and in the “industrial aesthetic” that takes priority over a more accurate representation of industrial history.

I found it interesting that High’s interviewees, the residents of these communities, were reluctant to talk about the union. This is, perhaps, related to blue-collar exit to the suburbs, in many urban communities, that preceded factory closures. High argues the very success of union struggles producing better wages and benefits also led to workers moving out of Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy to the Montreal suburbs, thus weakening connections between community and union activism. We could also examine how suburbanization narrowed the circle of those who had access to union wages and benefits and removed the economic benefits of union wages (supporting restaurants, taverns, grocery stores) from working-class communities. The movement to the suburbs severed workers from densely structured working-class communities while simultaneously encouraging a middle-class identity through tying workers’ identities to private property through home ownership.

In conclusion, this book contributes greatly to our understanding of relationships between class, residence, and race in understanding deindustrialization and the transformation of urban communities. For United States scholars, the similar yet different histories of race and class in Canada are also fascinating, including differences such as the importance of language in shaping class relations, the politics of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, and the different labor and migration histories of Black Canadians.

Steven High leaves us with important questions about urban revitalization. Who benefits from this reconstituted, postindustrial economy and city? What happens to the descendants of working-class residents of these communities? How do revitalized economies and gentrified communities make invisible the precarious service sector work that supports them? In High’s words, how can we understand the “entangled histories of race, residence and class” to analyze the uneven inequalities forged in contemporary capitalism? And, given those understandings, how can we better connect contemporary workplaces and communities in current labor and activist movements?

#### **Reviewer bio:**

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