



## Review of *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool Through Malay Lives*

**Tim Bunnell.** *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool Through Malay Lives*. 2016. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. 304 pages, ISBN 978-1-118-82773-4 Paper (\$34.95).

This is an excellent book. In it, Tim Bunnell traces social and cultural connections – or maybe connects social and cultural traces – underpinning the perspectives and practices of Malay seafarers who ‘settled’ in Liverpool. In so doing *From World City to the World in One City* unpacks some of the ways in which “lived geographies of Malay Liverpool [encompass] comparative imaginings and relational (re)framings” (217). I learned a great deal from reading this intriguing book and recommend it wholeheartedly to anyone who is interested in urban social change in general, and diasporic communities and migration in particular.

I think it is worth risking a self-indulgence to say that I know well the areas of South Liverpool that feature prominently in Bunnell’s book. On most days on my way to the university, I cycle past what was until 2008 The Malay Club, one of the key sites for the study, often go to the monthly street market in the neighbourhood, and have a number of friends who live within a stone’s throw of where the club was. This is one of the areas of Liverpool that have been subject to what is sometimes called ‘regeneration’ (read as having been rearranged due to all all manner of political and economic experiment). The myriad interventions – including the withdrawals of governmental support services and other collective resources – that are characterized as ‘regeneration’ have also seen the ‘Liverpool 8’ district of which Bunnell writes being represented in different ways for a long time (see for example Frost 2002; Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004; Thompson 2017; *A Sense of Place* 2018). Recently the area has in some respects enjoyed culturally-elevated status, associated



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with being home to a collective that won the Turner Prize, an extremely high-profile art award, and its neighborhood being the site of a pioneering community-led housing project. Global media interest and celebratory accounts of an area characterized, in part, by poverty and related social problems have followed (see *A Sense of Place* 2018).

Located in this part of Liverpool, The Malay Club (1963-2008) in Jermyn Street was a site of belonging and interaction for the Malay seafarers and commercial sailors whose reflections and experiences form the basis of the “more-than-economic worlds of connection” (9) that are Bunnell’s focus. Bunnell has made an important and scholarly contribution to our understanding of this fascinating area. Drawing on over ten years of fieldwork in and around the club, which actually led him to a variety of linked locations far and wide, Bunnell avoids the twin tendencies of, on the one hand, exoticizing his participants and the spaces in which they operate(d), or on the other, developing a ‘deep’ but narrow descriptive account that is only of interest to people who were there at the time, or who are anyway interested in the area or city in question.

In fact, it is in so skillfully unpacking some of the entanglements between here and there, the social life and the things that are assembled in support of such, that Bunnell has written a book that will resonate far outside of the group of us who are, for one reason or another, interested in Liverpool’s environs. As an area of the city that is home to other diasporan communities (see Frost 2002), the relational nature of Bunnell’s argument – and the care with which it is made – is absolutely crucial. Accordingly, this is somehow a book about Liverpool, but at the same time, not really; indeed, Bunnell himself questions the presence of the city’s name in the book’s title as he reflects on these issues. Addressing the Malaysian diaspora and their relation with the urban fabric of Liverpool provides a ‘way in’ to a much wider sets of concerns and ‘everyday’ sets of practices and ‘relational geographies.’

Never voyeuristic, the book reflects the generosity of the participants in sharing memories of themselves and of each other in times past. In my opinion, simply reporting the words of participants is a regretful and limited interpretation of ethnography that is evident in some other urban studies, which fall short of capturing the complex picture of social context and fabric. Quite the opposite is the case with *From World City to the World in One City*, which is reflective of the animated and complex, entangled social lives of the seafarers in many respects. So vivid are the descriptions of the areas around the Malay Club that I made a number of purposeful visits to Jermyn St, and felt I was experiencing the familiar sites and spaces anew for having read this engaging book. In general, *From World City to the World in One City* is uncluttered and extremely well-written. I mention this not to damn with faint praise – far from it – but rather as a compliment to the clarity of Bunnell’s analysis.

A brief email exchange aside, I don't know Tim Bunnell, but having read his book I'm sure he'd have a lot of insightful and analytic things to share about the politics, exclusions, and social changes in the city more generally. While he does have something to say about this in the book, Bunnell is clear that he does not want to take 'the city' as a default scale of analysis; in fact, he makes a strong case throughout as to why this can be limiting and reductive. Yet from my point of view, it would have been nice to have heard more regarding Bunnell's take on the wider spatial and social shifts associated with recent (and not-so-recent) urban restructurings in the wider city, which have shaped neighborhood contexts in a variety of ways (as per Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004; Thompson 2017).

Symbolic re-workings are often self-same parts of practical transformations of areas (which, in turn, often have socially-damaging effects on the very communities that are being celebrated in place-marketing initiatives). While *From World City to the World in One City* manages to capture so well the participants' collective memories of particular sites, it is tantalizing to note that significantly resonant representations of the city – and Liverpool 8 – come from other social positions and political vantage points. These are by and large dealt with in passing. For example, the very place-marketing discourses that gave us 'The World in One City' as a tagline for Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture 2008 were part of strategies to privatize large swathes of space, change policing practice, shift the relationship between 'core' and 'peripheral' sites in the city, and much more (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004). In other words – to quote the always-quotable band Half Man Half Biscuit – "Y'all think on/While you're capturing the zeitgeist/They're widening the motorway." These political shifts can sometimes seem somewhat distant to the lives and perceptions of Bunnell's participants.

I well remember as an undergraduate being taught about 'globalization,' which I was wont to approach as an abstracted set of inquiries. As a budding sociologist, this was a major mistake; the practical action and material relations that underpin the connections between people and things must not be overlooked. Bunnell's book illuminates these interconnections and interdependencies of urban social life in a careful, thoughtful way. *From World City to the World in One City* captures how and why place matters in often unanticipated ways; in this important book, Bunnell reminds us that communities are always socially dynamic, and based on all manner of associations that do not observe rigid geographical or cultural boundaries.

### References

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