

Carol Lynn McKibben. *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. Pp. 352. Illustrations, maps, tables. ISBN: 9780804776998 (paperback)

Godefroy Desrosiers-Lauzon

Volume 43, numéro 1, fall 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1030811ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1030811ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Desrosiers-Lauzon, G. (2014). Compte rendu de [Carol Lynn McKibben. *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. Pp. 352. Illustrations, maps, tables. ISBN: 9780804776998 (paperback)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 43(1), 46-47. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1030811ar>

et internationaux, correspondances, revues spécialisées, traités, mémoires, etc.

Si le choix de décomposer les batailles de l'hygiène en n'adoptant pas une logique chronologique mais en suivant plutôt les débats et les tensions permet de saisir toute la complexité des processus à l'œuvre, il en résulte cependant des chapitres plutôt touffus dont la cohérence est parfois difficile à suivre. Et pour cause puisque non seulement les cas étudiés sont nombreux, mais aussi parce que l'élaboration des savoirs et les processus de diffusion des technologies n'épousent pas tous la même temporalité. Il suffit pour s'en convaincre de consulter la très utile liste des « affaires étudiées » que l'auteur a pris soin d'inclure aux pages 369 à 371. À de rares exceptions près, on constate qu'historiquement, c'est d'abord la bataille de l'eau potable qui préoccupe, suivie par le problème de l'assainissement (évacuation des eaux usées). Ces deux questions dominent dans les débats et les échanges de la fin du XIX^e siècle aux années 1930. À partir des années 1910–1920 se greffe la question du traitement des ordures ménagères, qui prédomine nettement en fin de période. Des études de cas présentant plus en détail notamment des enjeux (la pollution de l'air), des acteurs (les travailleurs de l'ombre), des villes (Privas) ou des innovations (la verdunisation ou procédé de purification de l'eau) ponctuent de manière utile chacun des chapitres.

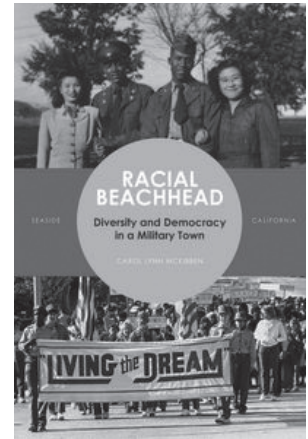
Stéphane Frioux confirme combien la période de la fin du XIX^e siècle et du début du XX^e a été cruciale dans la recherche de solutions pour régler les questions d'approvisionnement en eau potable et d'assainissement urbain. Aussi importante dans le cas français fut l'adoption de la Loi nationale sur les mesures sanitaires de 1902, amendée en 1935, qui rend obligatoire la gestion de la santé publique à l'échelle locale. Or, loin d'avoir attendu cette loi pour mettre en place des mesures d'assainissement de leurs villes, les autorités locales de nombreuses petites et moyennes municipalités ont joué un rôle précurseur sur ce plan. L'auteur en rend bien compte, soucieux d'éclairer le dynamisme des instances à cette échelle et de montrer que, contrairement aux idées reçues, l'innovation circulait autant et parfois plus de la périphérie vers le centre, et des petites localités vers les grandes dont Paris, que l'inverse.

Mentionnons enfin que les lecteurs apprécieront la bibliographie qui présente de manière exhaustive les fonds d'archives consultés et les riches annexes (cartes, illustrations, chronologie) et index (des noms de lieux et de personnes) qui permettent de dégager une vue synthétique de cet ouvrage fouillé.

Michèle Dagenais
Département d'histoire
Université de Montréal

Carol Lynn McKibben. *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. Pp. 352. Illustrations, maps, tables. ISBN: 9780804776998 (paperback).

Carol Lynn McKibben, a Berkeley graduate who works at Stanford, specializes in public history. In *Racial Beachhead*, she studied racial integration in the town of Seaside—a few miles off Monterey in northern California, nestled by beautiful Monterey Bay, as the author says. Why integration in Seaside? Because it has been, since the 1930s, sitting next door to Fort Ord, an important army base. With the policy of racial integration in the military since the 1940s, with about a third of its population being African-American since the war, and with nearly the entire black population of Monterey county within its borders, Seaside's story should be unusual—that is: unusually useful for the study of interracial relations in the United States, and of urban California. Thus the reader, upon opening the book, expects an enlightening community study, an engaging piece of social history, “asking a big question in a small place,” drawing up an exciting narrative of integration fought over, and achieved at a faster pace and with more harmony than anywhere else in the United States. In her words, Seaside shows how “sometimes . . . those [integration] policies worked,” mostly because of the experience of integration that troopers and army officers brought to their host community, but also because integration was formal military policy since the summer of 1948.



The author also positions her book amidst an emerging corpus of studies of minority-majority communities, places where so-called minorities, added together, make up the absolute majority. In Seaside if happened during the 1970s (pp. 85, 118).¹ The book can also be counted as part of a small but much-welcome corpus of case studies of military towns: McKibben credits other case studies of Colorado Springs, Columbia and Fayetteville SC, and New London CT, as showing that integration of the military influenced interracial relations in the towns next door to bases (pp. 80–81).² Still, context mattered: Southern military towns remained segregated through the 1960s (p. 114), while the experience of integration in the military increased the potential for conflict between black soldiers and local whites. Meanwhile integration at Seaside followed the pace of formal desegregation statewide: “consistent with rather than in defiance of California Law.” (pp. 3–4)

What matters most to McKibben, and to readers of urban and ethnic history, is the way interracial coalition-building functioned, if only in local politics, and if only as a “necessity,” given the high proportion of minority residents. That made local politics

unusual, even for California, where, in general, “entrenched white elites” had to be challenged from without (p. 51).

By the 1970s, the shapes and means of multiracial harmony had become a banner of Seaside politics and identity. McKibben notes the easier school integration, the number of churches (35 in 1980), and the initiative of residents of Filipino descent in 1970, which led to International Day, a community celebration of ethnic culture. In 1976, Seaside elected their first black mayor, army veteran Oscar Lawson, while the first black majority on the city council was elected in 1982 (p. 195–6). Near page 190 the author lists an impressive number of events showing the vitality of interracial and inter-ethnic relations: for instance, the Monterey Bay Blues Fest created in 1986, and a federal lawsuit brought by Seaside leaders against racial jerryandering by Monterey County authorities (pp. 192, 202–3).

This is where the book is at its strongest: showing the construction of interracial coalition politics to address the pressing issues of the 1960s and 1970s. The author has done a terrific work of collecting firsthand testimonies from local leaders, most of them through interviews. As a result of this method, the community-building depicted here takes place between local leaders, members of the middle classes, military personnel working next door in Fort Ord, and veterans settled in Seaside. The resultant politics is accordingly progressive and “centrist,” which, as depicted here, is a factor of success (for instance page 213).

By the final chapter, the remainder of the story gets messier and more complex, because by the early 1980s Seaside was struck by typical problems of the era: unfriendly reporting of “black” communities in the media, a moral panic over violent crime, a crisis of public funding, local competition for development capital, and the closure of Fort Ord army base around 1990.

The closing of the army base loosened the bonds of community in Seaside, but that is also depicted, and seen by locals, as a partial result of a surge of Latino immigration. Ethnic tension and economic hardship ensued, but integration won in the end. That’s the main conclusion of the story: Seaside’s collaborative, interracial, harmonious political and civic cultures helped to include Latinos in the local community (for instance on p. 263). Meanwhile the debate over the reorientation of Seaside post-Fort Ord was settled by fits and starts in the mid-1990s, by a new place-ideology emphasizing regional connections, a multiracial community “but less obviously black,” (233–240). This reorientation became part of the solution to the challenge raised by the coming of Latinos to Seaside: local harmony was preserved by the application of a pre-existing local political culture emphasizing interracial cooperation.

Such a community study has the qualities and defects of the genre. On the positive side it provides an immersive experience with the viewpoints and situations of the agents of Seaside’s history, mostly by its reliance on interviews and testimony. It also provides a refreshing, welcome, and still-rare case study of interracial coalition-building in the postwar United States. It does it elegantly, with an often emotionally moving use of quotations.

Also, the author has done her homework, as she frames this community study into the questions and narrative lines drawn by authoritative scholarship. Readers of American urban history will see the familiar names of Joe Trotter, Kenneth Kusmer, Jon Teaford, Dolores Hayden, as well as Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. As well, the new scholarship about race, class, and gender at the metropolitan scale in the postwar US played a defining role in this case study, as the names of Becky Nicolaides, Matthew Lassiter and Kevin Kruse show.

Most of the limitations of this case study are also inherent to the genre. *Racial Beachhead* raises questions about life beyond city limits: Latinos are left out of the picture—sometimes referred to offhandedly—for most of the book, until they make a remarkable entry into Seaside demography and politics in the 1990s. That is mostly a casualty of plain demographics: in fragmented, exurban California, municipalities used to be (and are) segregated like that, enabling black-identified Seaside to exist next door to, but largely indifferent to, Latino-magnet Salinas. Also understandable is the general disregard of the army base as a community in itself: this is a city history focusing on local politics and civic life. Yet the reader can’t help but wonder how military brass and the rank-and-file saw their involvement with a local community, if ever, of whether there was a “base policy” or politics in Fort Ord regarding civilian neighbors. Future research will have to show how community-building works in a more networked fashion, showing how the chosen community interacts with neighbours, region, as well as mid-level agents and structures.

Finally, McKibben’s subject material, and her methodological approach, leads her to adopt the viewpoint of local leaders. No plain boosterism here, but now and then we are told about the development potential of this growing, bustling town by beautiful Monterey Bay. The view from the Chamber of Commerce becomes more prevalent in Chapter 5, as the military base closure sharpened the urgency of questions about economic development and inter-city competition for investment and developable space.

But these defects only highlight the usefulness and necessity of such research. Readers will come out of the book with their own urges for research raised to a fever pitch, which is what case studies do best.

Notes

- 1 McKibben credits Professor Albert Camarillo of Stanford University for initiating the research which led to this book. Professor Camarillo is part of a budding network studying the “urban histories of ethnic and racial minorities,” in comparative fashion.
- 2 Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century* (Beacon Press, 2002); Andrew H. Myers, *Black, White, and Olive Drab: Racial Integration at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of Virginia Press, 2006); Beth L. Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Polly J. Smith, *The Impact of Military Desegregation on Segregation Patterns in American Cities: A Case Study of Colorado Springs, New London, and Fayetteville* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

Godefroy Desrosiers-Lauzon
Université du Québec à Montréal