Where we live matters. In the public imagination, this fact has become increasingly apparent since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008. In narratives forwarded by the mainstream press, poverty, in particular the kind associated with racialized inner cities, has moved into working-class and industrial suburbs throughout the country. However, as Jennifer F. Hamer tells us in her moving text Abandoned in the Heartland: Work, Family and Living in East St. Louis, this post-2008 “new reality” is merely an acceleration of processes that have been taking place in one form or another since the second half of the 1960s.

Like other U.S. manufacturing suburbs, such as Gary, Indiana, and Newark, New Jersey, East St. Louis, Illinois, witnessed periods of sustained growth in the first half of the twentieth century, only later to see industry depart first for the non-unionized Southern and Sun Belt states and ultimately to the Global South. Similar to how the mechanization of agriculture previously pushed generations of African American sharecroppers into the urban work force, the post-1960s relocation of industry meant that demand for black workers plummeted, thus sending shockwaves through their entire class structure (Wacquant 2001:105). Nowhere is this trajectory more evident than in East St. Louis; once a center of manufacturing and a transportation hub, this suburb of St. Louis,
Missouri, is now known (and stigmatized) for its homicide and unemployment rates, government corruption and civic dysfunction, and reputation as a haven for gambling and prostitution.

While such accounts should seem familiar to many, rarely have they been documented with the ethnographic richness that Hamer provides. Assuming a stance that is at once critical of the structural factors that have caused the city so much hardship and sympathetic to the plights of its residents, the author details the myriad challenges that East St. Louis’s African Americans currently face after decades of job losses, deterioration of schools and public services, and neglect on the part of politicians at all levels. In this vein, we hear of stoic women who remain as care providers long into “retirement,” adrift men who look for meaning and opportunity amid stretches of unemployment and incarceration, and resolute families who try in vain to protect loved ones from abusive police and blighted surroundings.

How the residents of East St. Louis engage in remunerated and reproductive activities occupies a central part of Abandoned in the Heartland. With few marketable skills and limited transport options, they are forced into poorly paid, monotonous, and heavily supervised service-sector jobs in fast food restaurants, low-end retail establishments, and chain hotels. Hamer’s interlocutors describe these jobs as “lifeless, dead-end things, passed around in meaningless lateral moves that added up at best to shuffling the deck” (76). As the author reports, a “decent job” in this context is anything seen as stable or that pays above the paltry minimum wage. That the jobs available to the African-American working poor combine low pay, little upward mobility, and low-
prestige tasks means that they offer to their holders few if any opportunities to achieve even a nominal semblance of the American dream.

To fill this void and maintain horizontal mobility, or even ascend the socioeconomic ladder in the rare instance, residents frequently complement formal employment, or simply substitute it altogether, with “hustling.” “Clean” hustles include off-the-books work as a car mechanic, landscaper, maid, driver, or cook. “Dirty” hustles usually involve prostitution or the selling of drugs. Whether dirty or clean, hustles are both a necessary and possible, though at-times risky, means to escape deprivation and hopelessness. Like “formal” employment, they follow a distinctive (if unstable) social logic and require that individuals be entrepreneurial, resourceful, and shrewd (Wacquant 1997:347). Unlike “formal” employment, however, and regardless of whether or not a hustle is successful, practitioners lack the protections that more secure workers may take for granted, such as paid sick and vacation leave and unemployment and health insurance.

From the vantage points of Hamer’s informants, it is obvious that the benefits associated with hustling outweigh the risks. Such strategies are especially important to older women who serve as caregivers to multiple generations of kin. Often without spouses to help, these women frequently juggle poorly paid “real jobs,” hustles (usually clean), and child- and geriatric care. Long into old age, they work overtime for no remuneration to attend to those around them, sometimes at the expense of their own health. The more they help others, Hamer finds, the less likely they will be able to seek medical attention for themselves, due to time constraints and high transport costs.
Abandoned in the Heartland is not without a few shortcomings. First, Hamer occasionally juxtaposes in a simplistic fashion the plights of East St. Louis residents with those of the “white middle class” from “surrounding communities,” thus making for an opposition that serves to “prove” whatever analytic or descriptive point she is trying to make. A more nuanced treatment of these phenomena would instead point to the complex race-poverty nexus that defines contemporary U.S. metropolitan areas. For example, in the past thirty years, immigrants from Latin America have increasingly come to occupy certain job-market niches formally filled by working-class African Americans (Wacquant 2001:105). Second, although Hamer makes it a point to show the socio-economic diversity found in East St. Louis, she tends to let people with “pathologies” stereotypically associated with low-income African Americans stand in for the whole of the city. While her account does include the ethnographic detail that other sources usually lack, she can in places reproduce stereotyped versions of poor African-Americans, such as the “high-school dropout,” the “drug dealer,” the “prostitute” and her “pimp,” and the “single-mother breadwinner.” Additionally, the “adaptive practices” that Hamer finds among East St. Louis residents – such as flexible household arrangements, older female kin providing childcare, and information networks – are frequently found in contexts as diverse as the slums of urban Africa, the mining towns of Appalachia, and the peasant countryside of Latin America. Perhaps such strategies are more a function of class than entrapment in a post-industrial suburb?

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, Abandoned in the Heartland should serve as a wake-up call to a society that witnessed in 2008 both the election of the first African-American president and the start of a multiyear economic crisis that has attained
Depression-era proportions in low-income black communities. In this regard, conditions for the inhabitants of East St. Louis have most likely gotten a lot worse since Hamer began her fieldwork in the city in the mid-1990s. Concerns over intrusive surveillance measures, the militarization of local police forces, and the privatization of public space and services have probably been added to residents’ perennial worries over good jobs and reliable transportation. More recent developments aside, Hamer’s text is an important one for how it personalizes the numerous structural challenges facing a long-stigmatized and marginalized population. The author portrays East St. Louis not in state of anomie, but rather as organized according to different principles, ones carefully articulated by the city’s inhabitants in their attempt to live normal lives despite the unremitting cultural constraints that bear down on them like on no other segments of U.S. society.

REFERENCES
