ForeWord Reviews

SOCIAL SCIENCES

Traveling Light: On the Road with America's Poor
Kath Weston
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“If you’re looking for some sharp-eyed observation and down-to-earth critique of the health care system, imperialism, the state of the environment, or corporate downsizing, the bus is the place to find it,” writes Kath Weston, an anthropologist best known for books on gender, sexuality, and the formation of voluntary families. She leaves the driving to Greyhound for several multi-state journeys (some made while unemployed), gaining a tremendous range of insight from fellow travelers while losing pitched battles with food poisoning.

The uninitiated don’t conceptualize a motor coach as more than a means to move between cities, but in actuality it doubles as a rolling confession booth. The author as a participant-observer skillfully elicits the working poor passengers’ core concerns and individual personality quirks, very much in the tradition of Studs Terkel *(Working, Hard Times).* From Albuquerque to the Twin Cities via Vegas, from Boston to Florida, in a closed circuit in California, seven years of motion are covered in visually descriptive language which wraps around perfectly chosen metaphors and shorthand images standing in for larger social phenomena.

Bus trips have common elements not found in the “gated communities” known as airports: the driver’s authoritarian rules spiel, the incessant talker who invariably finds the silent solitary one, résumé embellishers, opinionated political thinkers, the family-oriented, the recently abandoned, the military’s enlisted on leave and veterans in various conditions, the people who shrink in on themselves when La Migra or the narcotics squad springs a surprise inspection. A sense of temporary unity prevails. Experienced riders know to develop strategies—the newly impoverished tend toward easy bewilderment. All harbor greater worry over interlocking policies imposed from above or simple bad luck within the context of a stacked-deck economic system than over the threat of violence from other passengers. Under informal bus etiquette one minds strangers’ children, holds others’ places in interminable boarding lines and allows delusional hopes for a better future to stand, because favors are absolute necessities to the marginalized.

Weston’s very happiness is entwined with her greatest vulnerability to critics: a disbelief in establishing significant distance from subjects. She’s tough enough and savvy, but resistant of protective cynicism. Of the next seat’s occupant the author says, “There are people who tear through your life like a meteor and in the flash connection you could swear you’ll see them again, even though you know you probably won’t.” *Traveling Light* convinces with hard-earned authority that “Living poor is not a romance, but neither is it a crime.” A mile at a time, exchange by exchange, Weston puts human faces on the masses in transit, one wicked turn from being crushed beneath the impersonal wheels of business and government. Oh, and she lives another lesson no one else need learn first hand—those who eat chicken which has been sitting out all day may not reach their destination.