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Rebuilding Shattered Worlds

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Rebuilding Shattered Worlds

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Rebuilding Shattered Worlds

Creating Community by Voicing the Past

Andrea L. Smith and Anna Eisenstein

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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Terminology and Transcription Conventions

Much of this book concerns a former way of speaking. Our speakers use many different and sometimes old-fashioned-sounding ethnic labels when describing each other or the neighborhood, for example, “Syrian” for Lebanese immigrants and “Afro-American” for black people, a practice we discuss at length in the chapters that follow. “Syrian Town” is used as a place-name even though it is a misnomer: the people about whom we write are Lebanese. Throughout the text, we continue to use our speakers’ archaic terms, introducing them with quotation marks at first. The reader should keep this in mind and imagine quotation marks throughout the text. Where we do use quotation marks subsequently, it is to indicate particular instances of usage.

This work includes extensive excerpts from audiotaped interviews. We use the following transcription conventions:

- . . . pause in speech
- sudden break in speech, usually to indicate that the speaker has changed topic midsentence
- word speaker’s emphasis
- word* authors’ emphasis
- [] information provided by the authors

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1. Ethnography of the Expelled

In a small city in eastern Pennsylvania, elderly men and women have been gathering to talk about the past. Ostensibly planned as elementary school reunions, these meetings allow participants to recollect a whole neighborhood. We have been following this activity since 2007; this book is the result of this inquiry.

What makes this reunion activity especially intriguing is the fact that the neighborhood these men and women are so keen to discuss is completely gone: it was obliterated during 1960s urban renewal projects. Many of the eighty- and ninety-year-olds meeting up in the dingy basement social hall are encountering each other for the first time since they were “scattered” by the demolitions. Now, a half-century after wrecking balls “took the heart out of the city,” as one speaker puts it, they are reuniting to reminisce about the past. What is prompting them to meet, to meet here, and to meet now?

This is a study of memory and place, of place-loss and recovery. The effects of midcentury urban renewal on minority communities and urban landscapes are well documented in studies focusing on the nation’s largest cities, such as Chicago, Boston, and Detroit.¹ Less examined have been the smaller cities, which also took advantage of generous federal funds to remove so-called blighted landscapes. This ethnographic study, conducted a half-century after renewal struck Easton, Pennsylvania, explores the ways a demolished neighborhood continues to reverberate in the imaginations of its former residents. This neighborhood, once known locally as “Syrian Town,” was densely packed and inhabited by Lebanese Americans, Italian Americans, and African Americans, among others, and was noteworthy for its unusually integrated nature. Our book follows neighborhood reunions and the intersecting languages of blight,