

**Book Review: Waverly Duck, *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-226-2906-1 (Paperback). 153 Pages. \$25.00.**

**Reviewed by Gary L. Grizzle<sup>1</sup>**

*[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2017 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

Waverly Duck first encountered the “Lyford Street” housing development when he went there to collect data in support of a legal contention that “the code of the street” as described by Elijah Anderson (1999) is such a powerful force that its presence should constitute a mitigating circumstance in some criminal cases. Over the following seven years, Professor Duck remained connected to this community, known locally for its flourishing drug trade, and conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork which resulted in his book *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*. In this work, Professor Duck provides an account of life in Lyford Street that is equal parts commendable, disconcerting, and lamentable.

What is commendable about this work is its depiction of Lyford Street as a poor black community that can only be understood in terms of its isolation, its entrenched drug trade, and the impact of these factors on the life choices of its denizens. Professor Duck makes the case for this characterization of Lyford Street through refreshingly incisive treatments of a variety of topics, the most important of which are as follows.

First, Professor Duck provides a concise treatment of the history of Lyford Street from its origins as a white suburban housing development in the early 1940s to the onset of its racial transformation during the white flight movement of the late 1960s to its devastating economic decline following the deindustrialization movement of the 1980s. He describes the product of these events as a now overwhelmingly poor black community characterized by inadequate schools, limited access to

---

<sup>1</sup> **Gary L. Grizzle**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology & Criminology at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida.

legitimate job opportunities, little faith in government institutions, and a thriving drug trade. He describes the population of this troubled community as consisting of two essential groups: those directly involved in the drug trade and their more conventional relatives and neighbors who disapprove of, partially depend upon, and ultimately resign themselves to its presence. Through his treatment of the history of Lyford Street, Professor Duck offers readers a firsthand account of the confluence of conditions that gave rise to its isolation, its drug trade, and the ambivalent social relations engendered by that trade.

In addition, Professor Duck provides a succinct treatment of the drug trade in Lyford Street and its impact on the local “interaction order” as defined by Erving Goffman (1983). Regarding the former, he describes a desperation-driven trade run by independent entrepreneurs who market powdered cocaine to whites from outside the neighborhood employing a complex division of labor and a variety of creative strategies for minimizing legal, financial, and personal risk. Regarding the latter, he describes a context wherein residents are well-versed in the practices of the local drug trade and tailor their actions (where they go, where they look, how they dress, how they walk, how they interact with authorities, and so on) to its demands. Participation in this interaction order, he emphasizes time and again, results in even those residents with the most conventional of values appearing to condone the drug trade in the eyes of many outsiders, including some social scientists. Through his treatment of the drug trade and its impact on local behavioral patterns, Professor Duck reveals the underlying forces that shape life choices in Lyford Street.

Most importantly, Professor Duck augments his descriptive treatments of life in Lyford Street with a judicious delineation of the theoretical and practical implications of his observations. In doing so, he suggests the following.

First, he suggests that on a theoretical level his research reveals that individual and group explanations fail to capture the dynamics of life choices in Lyford Street. Specifically, he suggests that such choices reflect neither an absence of morals on the part of Lyford Street residents nor the presence of a set of cultural norms and values that are at odds with those of mainstream society: approaches to life choices in poor communities that, he notes, appear in a variety of forms in the social sciences. Rather, in his view, participation in the drug trade is a rational response to institutionalized economic constraints. Likewise, resignation to the presence of the drug trade on the part of nonparticipants is a rational response to both institutionalized economic constraints and the

daily need to negotiate a volatile environment. Thus, Professor Duck suggests, life choices in Lyford Street reflect adherence to a readily identifiable, understandable, and malleable code of conduct, not a deep-rooted estrangement from mainstream society.

Second, Professor Duck suggests that on a practical level his research reveals the folly of traditional attempts to address social problems in Lyford Street. Specifically, he suggests that such attempts are doomed to failure because they ignore the unique conditions of Lyford Street and instead treat its residents as wayward middle-class Americans. That is, as citizens with the same opportunities, resources, and choices as the typical suburbanite but who need (based on their flawed individual or group moralities) to be prodded into making better choices; prodded by code enforcement departments, welfare departments, police departments, traffic courts, family courts, criminal courts, and prisons. Unfortunately, he notes, such prodding is not only unnecessary – these citizens would make different life choices if they had the opportunity – it is also counterproductive in that it further reduces the limited financial and human capital of Lyford Street residents. Thus, Professor Duck suggests, by ignoring the structural influences on life choices in Lyford Street in favor of their less generous understandings of the community, policymakers are merely punishing its citizens for their rational adaptations to conditions that are largely beyond their control, thereby exacerbating rather than ameliorating their plight.

In sum, in his book *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing* Waverly Duck both draws from and expands upon the work of his predecessors (most notably Erving Goffman and Elijah Anderson) to challenge what he views as archaic theories and policymaking strategies regarding poor communities in America. In doing so, he provides a colorful expression of the sociological imagination teeming with the voices and stories of Lyford Street denizens. An expression that is certain to engage social scientists and policymakers of all stripes, perhaps enlightening some of them along the way. This I find to be commendable.

What is disconcerting about this work is the insensitivity that Professor Duck sometimes displays regarding the residents of Lyford Street in his otherwise worthy account; an insensitivity that resulted in the margins of my copy of *No Way Out* overflowing with expressions of utter dismay. This disturbing tendency appears in several contexts, most notably the following.

First, it appears in Professor Duck's treatment of the impact of the drug trade on Lyford Street and its residents, about which he declares:

“Except for the aggressive police presence it provokes, the drug trade did little direct harm to the neighborhood” (12). Granted, his finer point is that the drug dealers are selling powdered cocaine to whites from outside the neighborhood and not crack cocaine to community residents, and thus the phrase “little direct harm” is nominally accurate. That said, there is no denying that the drug trade in Lyford Street has a devastating impact on its residents. In fact, on page after page Professor Duck chronicles the damage this trade leaves in its wake. For instance, he describes the proliferation of trash piles and broken street lights as being components of that trade. As are the guns and drugs stashed in those nightly darkened trash piles. As are the gunshots fired into the air to test a weapon or to intimidate rivals. More importantly, he describes the heartbreaking process whereby young boys are both lured (by money and acclaim) and coerced (by fear of retaliation) into the drug trade setting in motion a trajectory from which, by his own account, they seldom recover. So, fine. The drug trade does little direct harm to the residents of Lyford Street. It does, however, indirectly render the lives of community members quite precarious (to borrow an apt term from the title of this work) and though I have no objection to marveling at innovative structures and their attendant interaction orders while simultaneously holding authorities accountable for their ill-advised policies, I find it insensitive to downplay the indescribably tragic consequences of the drug trade in Lyford Street for the sake of irony.

Second, this insensitivity appears in Professor Duck’s treatment of the quality of life in Lyford Street, about which he declares: “Full and happy lives are lived under conditions that would make most Americans cringe” (2). The “make most Americans cringe” part I get. The “full and happy lives” part, however, is simply beyond me. How can people live full and happy lives in a community wherein “a level of unpredictability remains, creating a situation in which nothing can ever be taken for granted” (49)? How can people live full and happy lives in a community wherein for many “being in the know is a matter of life and death” (68)? Wherein “stray bullets are an ever-present threat” (71)? How can people live full and happy lives in a community wherein “the only people who succeeded in avoiding involvement in drugs and crime were those who limited their interactions with others in the neighborhood” (26)? Finally, how can people live full and happy lives in a community wherein “because the practices that so closely circumscribe daily interaction support an illegal activity that conflicts with residents’ deeply held values, they have no opportunity to act on their values” (46)? I understand that most residents of Lyford Street and like communities

manage to live their lives with grace and dignity as well as to foster what joy they can find under the most trying of circumstances. I also understand the role that local interaction orders play in allowing them to negotiate the hazardous conditions created by both their oppressors and their less obliging fellow residents. Nonetheless, I find it insensitive to diminish the astounding economic, emotional, and existential terror that these folks experience on a daily basis in support of such a desperate and tenuous response to systematic abuse.

Last, for the purposes of this review, this insensitivity appears in Professor Duck's dismal portrayal of Lyford Street and its residents; his optimistic declarations regarding its drug trade, its resultant interaction order, and its conduciveness to full and happy lives notwithstanding. What disturbs me greatly is that the community we encounter in this work does not differ appreciably from the poor black communities we encounter daily in the most conservative of mainstream media outlets. Specifically, we encounter a community rife with drugs, guns, robberies, killings, absentee fathers, dysfunctional relationships, rampant impulsive behavior, and on and on. While I do not doubt that such phenomena exist in Lyford Street, I am certain that decent behavior is equally prevalent in this community, albeit perhaps less public: decent behavior that warrants celebration in any account of the undervalued in my opinion. I understand the need for a work of this nature to portray the devastation that results from our collective choices and policies but I find it insensitive to reinforce, however tacitly, the one-dimensional view of this and other poor black communities that so many people already harbor.

In expressing the preceding concerns, I am certainly not questioning Professor Duck's motives or his commitment to the people about whom he is writing. That he has the best interests of these folks at heart is abundantly clear. However, I think it is important to note that in his effort to champion Lyford Street and its residents, Professor Duck is often guilty of inadvertently romanticizing and disparaging them as well. This I find to be disconcerting.

Finally, what is lamentable about this work is its treatment of social stratification in Lyford Street, about which we hear very little of substance. We do hear that some folks are more likely than others to escape the drug trade and its trappings; that some folks are more likely than others to cooperate with outside authorities; and that some black folks attribute the decline of Lyford Street not to white flight or deindustrialization but to the arrival of some other black folks in the neighborhood. We even hear that these divisions are related to age,

education, and social class. What we don't hear is that race is but one dimension of stratification affecting Lyford Street and that other dimensions warrant serious consideration as well. In fact, we don't even hear about other dimensions of stratification when Professor Duck notes that "the chance of an African American male going to prison was one in three" (131). This, even though two of the sources that he cites in this regard indicate that this statement is true largely because the imprisonment rate for poorly educated black males approaches twice that figure (Petit and Western 2004; Wildeman 2009) – the other source that he cites (Bonczar 2003) only breaks imprisonment rates down by cohort and ignores other intragroup differences. I suppose that for the purposes of this work these missing dimensions of stratification are somewhat peripheral and that their passing mention should suffice. However, it is apparent that there are important issues regarding stratification in Lyford Street that Professor Duck fails to explore; issues, the exploration of which, would have enhanced both this work and our collective understanding of the nuances of race. This I find to be lamentable.

Despite the foregoing litany of complaints, I ultimately find *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing* to be a quite worthy volume. After all, the shortcomings that I mention, while comment-worthy, are common enough in discourses having to do with race in America. That is, in addressing racist practices and their consequences we oftentimes teeter on becoming apologists in our efforts to indict; denigrators in our efforts to shame; and reductionists in our efforts to illuminate. One need look no further than the recent literary sensation (both inside and outside of academic circles) *Between the World and Me* (Coates 2015) for a contemporary example of this unfortunate tendency. More positively, Professor Duck provides an engaging and informative glimpse into the lives of some of the most forsaken among us while at the same time proffering an exemplar of politically engaged social science. Thus, the readership of this journal will likely find this work to be both compelling and inspiring. In addition, readers with more conventional views of the role of social science and readers from the public at large will likely find this work to be a compelling, unassuming, and accessible introduction to the possibility of a social science that enhances both our communal knowledge and our chances of achieving social justice. In my experience a work with such broad appeal and such potential for widespread illumination is a rarity in scholarship and is therefore something to be celebrated.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bonczar, Thomas P. 2003. *Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Duck, Waverly. 2015. *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226298238.001.0001>
- Goffman, Erving. 1983. The Interaction Order. *American Sociological Review* 48 (1):1-17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095141>
- Petit, Becky and Bruce Western. 2004. Mass Imprisonment and the Life-Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration. *American Sociological Review* 69(2): 151-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900201>
- Wildeman, Christopher. 2009. Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage. *Demography* 46(2): 256-80.