



## Frontlines of an American Dream

Audrey Petty

### *PINK HOUSES AND FAMILY TAVERNS*

Becky Bradway  
Foreword by Michael Martone

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Little wonder that Becky Bradway prefaces *Pink Houses and Family Taverns*, her collection of essays, with song lyrics from Woody Guthrie, John Prine, Bob Marley, and Aimee Mann. These lyrics about arrival and return, longing and regret, gather resonance as one traverses Bradway's meditations on place and identity.

The title of Bradway's book itself brings to mind music: John Mellencamp's "Pink Houses" (a hit from the 1980s). In the collection's title essay (subtitled "A Ride through Mellencamp Town"), Bradway takes on the subject of Mellencamp, first as rock star, then as pegged-down (and more interesting) mortal.

I knew a lot of guys like John Mellencamp: physically messed-up (too scrawny, too big, too weathered, not fashionable), feisty, obstinate, occasionally mean, argumentative, macho, hurt by women, heavy drinkers, proud of where they came from, religiously superstitious true believers. Maybe Mellencamp isn't personally like that...but his music is, which is why just about everyone I've known from small towns played his music and recognized themselves in it.

She adds, "He was everything I wanted to leave behind, every jerk relative and bully classmate."

The essay describes Bradway's evolving relationship with Mellencamp's evolving music. No longer trying too hard "to be Guthrie-esque and rural," a middle-aged Mellencamp comes into his own by being true to his roots. Throughout the entire work, Bradway explores and complicates the notion of being true to one's roots. As the daughter of working-class folks, brought up primarily in southern, rural Illinois, the first in her extended family to go to college, as a writer who now makes her living on the page and in the academy, Bradway is experienced, if not expert, in negotiating divides. *Pink Houses and Family Taverns* makes clear that upward mobility is not all it's cracked up to be.

Writing from the frontlines of an American Dream, Bradway is a restless soul. Her book illustrates small-town scenes where rest and motion create and elucidate powerful tensions. The narrator unfolds memories in which she is often in motion—roller-blading, driving, pogo dancing, moving from home to home (as an adult, she has

already lived in twenty houses)—memories in which others are intentionally, markedly still. Small-town people porch-sitting. Small-town people train-watching. Her grandfather planted in his regular seat at the local tavern. While Bradway is careful to emphasize the daily labors of family and friends from back home ("Like everyone in my family, Grandpa worked nearly all the time..."), it is striking that she so vividly dramatizes their stillness. It is her Grandpa, one of the most compelling characters in her essays, "the carpenter, the poker player, the guy who could keep his car running for twenty years," who teaches her a certain stillness as a girl. He teaches her to fish. Ultimately, she uses the pole "as an excuse to laze away the day reading in the sun." Stillness takes her outside of the outside.

Bradway's ambivalence about her peripatetic routine is made all the more poignant by her focus on those who root themselves. She presents the reader with stand-ins for herself: women who stay put in the small town, on the farm, near the family, and pay different prices for their permanence. This is who I might have been, Bradway suggests, sometimes with regret, sometimes with relief, sometimes with a mixture of the two.

Bradway's reaction to popular culture's representations of "country ways" is more clear-cut. From *Hee-Haw* to *Petticoat Junction*, country ways of life have often been parodied, misunderstood. At root, it is, to some extent, an oppositional culture. It wasn't always that way. "When the American dream was about room to roam to plant and to harvest, those who lived off the land were the fortunate ones. People referred to the ripening landscapes as 'God's country,' but as 'God's country' turns into industrialists' subdivisions, the phrase has mostly died out." Increasingly, country ways are rooted in struggle. And country is in peril. The working poor are losing ground, losing land. "Nobody sings much about these losses."

Again and again,

Bradway locates fault lines—between the underprivileged and the privileged, rural and urban, Downstater and Chicagoan, Southern and Northern, stillness and movement, "town and gown," black and white. She is not the only one who straddles such divides. Her own students often serve as her doubles: those ones who feel out of place at the private college where she teaches. Many of her students are the first in their families to go the college. Conventional wisdom would presume that upward mobility presents itself as a benevolent and irresistible force, but Bradway knows otherwise; she pays special attention to those who hover at the fault line instead of simply leaping across it, never looking back.

Some of these students she portrays are Af-

rican American. Bradway is attuned to the idea that race represents an obstructed fault line on the path to success. "Hiding class background is a matter of choice; the goal is to climb the ladder and leave all that behind. We can lose ties and history. Nobody leaves race." Bradway's investigation of her troubled relationship with moving up the ladder hints that this fixed reality may not be altogether deleterious in its effects on the African American psyche. Nonetheless, Bradway is refreshingly candid and sensitive in describing the everyday racism often bound up in Midwestern small-town cultures.

### *Upward mobility is not all it's cracked up to be.*

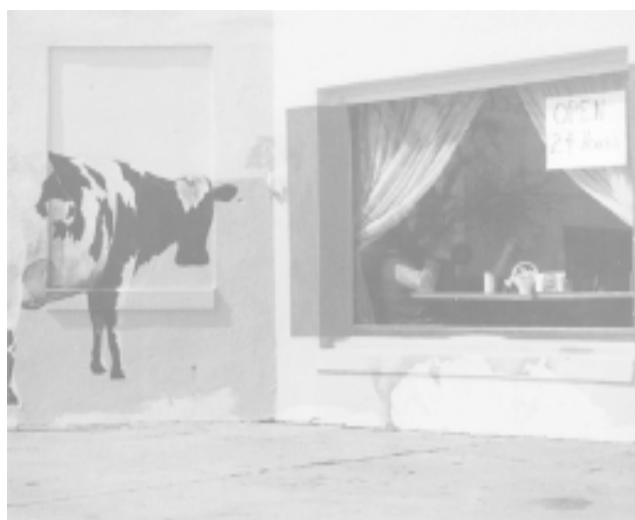
Bradway opens *Pink Houses and Family Taverns* with an essay about Decatur, Illinois' reaction to Jesse Jackson's response to the local high school's expulsion of six black teenaged boys who fought each other and created a disturbance in the bleachers at a school football game. "The community was against the school board's decision until Jesse Jackson came to town." In the ensuing close reading of her community and herself, Bradway makes clear the ways in which the gaze of an outsider can mobilize a community to define and redefine itself.

My one minor criticism of her work is that she doesn't take into account the great migrations of African Americans from the Deep South to Chicago as she maps the communities of Illinois. She writes, "Although we tend to think of the South as, well, south, the Mason-Dixon line creates an invisible border across the center of Illinois...." Here, Bradway's careful grasp of cultural geography slips a bit. The South is in Chicago amongst black Chicagoans. The South is in the speech, in the church, on the stovetop, and in the old-timey blues clubs.

Throughout her book, Bradway's gaze is a curious, intelligent, unblinking one. It is also a shifting one that constantly acknowledges and engages insistent, tangled dilemmas. Several striking black-and-white photographs of Illinois and Indiana landscapes and of the open-faced people who reside there form an integral part of *Pink Houses and Family Taverns*. These images, beautifully captured by Raymond Bial and Katharine Wright, invite the reader into each essay and spur her to struggle with Bradway's complex concerns.

As the misfit who breaks away and still somehow stays "a danger" in her family, as the academic mining these landscapes, Becky Bradway asks and asks again: Do words really count? Indeed they do.

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