



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 39  
Issue 4 December

Article 12

---

2012

**Review of *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*. Carol Lynn McKibben. Reviewed by Laura S. Abrams.**

Laura S. Abrams  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Abrams, Laura S. (2012) "Review of *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*. Carol Lynn McKibben. Reviewed by Laura S. Abrams.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 4 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol39/iss4/12>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

particular, the use of social workers as key informants is novel and enlightening, and recognizes the unique perspective that social workers can bring to analyzing how public issues result in private troubles. Historians, public health researchers, and sociologists should take note of this under-utilized source of information and perspective. This book is well-written and straight forward with a natural use of quotes. The time spent on writing and data gathering shines through, and the voices of the participants ring clear and true. It is refreshing to encounter a book that takes on the themes of globalization and neoliberalism without resorting to jargon.

This book should be read by those interested in labor and women studies, community organizing, and occupational health and safety in the service sector. It would also make a great addition to the social work curriculum as a model of how the social work perspective can be embodied by a qualitative research methodology and as a text which shows how the adage "the personal is political" still resonates.

*Jennifer Zelnick, Touro College Graduate School of Social Work.*

Carol Lynn McKibben, *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town* (2012). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. \$24.95 (paperback).

A number of texts have examined and deconstructed the history of twentieth century race relations in America, from broad sweeping views of the politics of racial relations, like Gerstle's 2001 *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, to more regional or focused accounts of racial politics and community change (Bayor's 2000 *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* and Bernstein's 2011 *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-century Los Angeles*). One largely unexamined piece of this history is the role of military towns in the transformation of race relations in American society. Here historian Carol McKibben makes her contribution to the literature, using a variety of sources and documents to lay out the history of race relations, politics, and progress in the town of Seaside, California, the former location of the Fort Ord military base. In this work, she seeks to tell the story of how a small military community in Northern California was

able to establish a peaceful, racially integrated society when so many others have failed in these attempts. In a turn from other accounts of federal civil rights policies, McKibben illustrates how one arm of the government—the military—promoted racial integration in this small coastal community.

The author begins by describing the founding of the town of Seaside in 1917, a community nestled close to the popular tourist destinations of Monterey and Carmel in Southern California. In presenting this history, Seaside is situated in a larger economic and demographic context of the California coast. The next chapter focuses on the demographic transformation of Seaside during the period of the 1930s and 1940s. The author traces how the influx of military personnel drove the residents to incorporate as a city. During this period, the residents experienced a clash between federal housing policies that enforced segregation and the needs of the military to house its high ranking black officers on par with others. Other ethnic and cultural groups also settled in the area during this time, including many groups of Asian Americans, as well as migrants from Mexico. With initial periods of some disarray, all of these groups managed to settle into a largely integrated society.

Chapters three and four trace the major post-war developments in Seaside in regard to race relations. She describes how local Seaside leaders were able to take advantage of government efforts to desegregate housing to redevelop major parts of the city. At that time, the politics of the city continued to actualize racial integration in economic, political, and social spheres. For example, city records show that the city council was racially diverse and, surprisingly, its citizens did not vote for local officers along racial lines. McKibben argues in chapter four that the common bond of the military shaped the identity of the community more so than color or ethnic lines.

Lastly, Chapters five and six delve into the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, which ushered economic crisis, crack cocaine, and rampant crime into the major California cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland, but none of which had a dramatic impact on Seaside. Yet by the end of the 1990s, Fort Ord had shut down and the population demographics changed dramatically. As McKibben's central argument is that the military culture facilitated racial integration with a unified

identity, she likewise documents the struggle with race and culture that ensued after Fort Ord's closure.

The author's carefully crafted history of Seaside offers a glimpse into an untold story of racial integration and harmony on nearly all levels of this unique community. The strength of the work is in the careful historical analysis and use of a variety of sources to bring to life this hidden coastal town that represented great racial progress in practice. On the other hand, the idealism invoked by this account of Seaside leaves the reader to wonder at times if this sense of racial integration was experienced by all groups and parties involved. With such diversity as Southern African Americans, West Coast Whites, and Mexican migrants, it would make sense that there would be several layers of cultural and racial misunderstandings or missteps. Nevertheless, by placing the developments of this community within a larger social and political context, the author most certainly contributes to a greater understanding of race relations in the twentieth century and the role of the military in facilitating racial integration.

*Laura S. Abrams, Department of Social Welfare,  
University of California, Los Angeles*

Robert Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (2012). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. \$27.50 (hardcover).

Chicago, according to Robert Sampson, is "arguably the quintessential American city" that "captures the full range and intensity of American passions" (p. 76). In *Great American City*, Sampson, currently a member of Harvard's sociology department and formerly at the University of Chicago, shows how Chicago embodies important components of political, social, economic and cultural histories and continues to serve as a great laboratory for urban research. His 'interrogation' of Chicago's neighborhoods and communities advances our knowledge of how social space and place are intertwined with physical space. Early on, he argues that "differentiation by neighborhood is not only everywhere to be seen, but that it has durable properties—with cultural and social mechanisms