

*Toward Camden*

Mercy Romero

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Mercy Romero arrived in Camden with her Puerto Rican family shortly after three days of civil disorder in 1971 had put that once vital and productive city into virtual free fall. Fifty years later, an unlikely—in her words—PhD and a college teaching job in California in hand, she reconstructs the city’s social landscape as she has known it, setting her memories in juxtaposition to Camden’s physical decline. Facing the challenge of writing “when the place of my writing is gone,” she tests the power of storytelling to overcome “the discourses of capital accumulation, the extraction of human and raw materials, and the language of consumption and economic production” (40). In doing so, she manages to account for her own as well as the city’s collective loss.

To tell her story, Romero hones in on everyday spaces and places marked especially by absences: vacant lots, lost lives, and empty political gestures. Conventionally, those absences are associated with events, none more than the 1971 riots that accelerated Camden’s “fall.” But — scrutinizing those tropes, Romero sees more. Empty lots become “commons” where folks gather, for better or worse, as they navigate the challenges brought about by decline. Lost lives are recovered by memory. “Politics” are overshadowed by relationships, lives “made visible by everyday acts and made invisible by structures of violence” (31).

No aspect of the city receives more attention than Romero’s own family home at 1029 N 27th Street in the city’s Cramer Hill neighborhood. A refuge in her youth, the home nonetheless could not withstand the ravages surrounding it. Sprinkled throughout the book’s four chapters are the elements of its demise: growing threats from crime; abandonment by Romero’s father, a victim

of post-traumatic stress from his service in Vietnam; her mother's departure for her own safety; foreclosure; and, ultimately, the boarded-up structure no match for those intent on stripping its plumbing hardware for profit. While memories of the home remain a source of personal resilience, the trauma associated with it won't go away. Early in the book, we see Romero in an upstairs bedroom shielding her young son from the sights and sounds associated with a murder that has taken place below her window. Later we learn that a cherished cat was not so lucky to survive a gunshot aimed at her as she howled in heat in the window. "That night . . . I became a certain kind of writer," she recounts. "I stepped into a language and thought to get something out of the experience of her death" (94).

The result, not surprisingly, is a pointed critique. Of the shooting of a Puerto Rican man that ignited the 1971 uprising, she berates the Camden mayor's assertion that "we didn't want him to die" for fear of further violence, not "we wanted him to live." Of the "racialized language of redevelopment," she recounts the proposed reconstruction of the Cramer Hill waterfront during the state's takeover of the city in the early twenty-first century. When "No Cherokee" posters (referring to the designated developer) permeated the neighborhood, Romero identifies them as "part of a beautiful struggle, the constitution of solidarity and community, visibility, and the protest of poverty, and the fragmented archival landscape of collective and communal memory" (35). Even President Obama doesn't get off the hook: when he visited the city to praise its revitalization efforts, she describes him mouthing establishment bromides that barely touched the scars borne by the city's predominantly poor residents.

Happily, Romero confines the specialized language of her discipline largely to footnotes. Rather, it's in the contrast between the lived experience and the puffery of establishment "reform" that her account carries weight. We see both her mother and grandmother eking out enough money

to supplement welfare payments with under-the-table sewing jobs to keep their family afloat. We see her father ill-served by veterans hospitals and even the heralded work of McArthur Fellow Dr. Jeffrey Brenner sacrificing human dignity to the cause of improved systems of medical efficiencies.

No doubt, these stories resonate. Behind the cross in front of Camden City Hall bearing the inscription #67, to help mark the deadliest year in the city's history, is the victim Rasheeda, a sweet girl Romero met while working as a receptionist in a charter school 11 years earlier. Observing the closure of the city's library downtown, she notes not just the shock of its barred entrance but the immense sense of loss as she observes through a window an array of abandoned books waiting for patrons who will never return.

Romero's approach is neither linear nor formulaic. As she asserts, the fall she engages "radically resists the stilled extraction and the smooth recuperation of analysis" (33). In looking to the past, she wills other possibilities "into a future that is not beholden to an empty or state-sanctioned narrative of our histories or cultural practices" (67). Because she has been in and out of Camden during her lifetime, her memories are episodic. Never intending to be the historian herself, she nonetheless reveals in her collective sense of the place the profound effects of dispossession. Neither she nor the people she writes about are objectified, and seeing their humanity, it is impossible for readers to miss the profound costs associated with urban decline. Even revitalization must be interrogated, she suggests, making her point in concluding her assessment by writing: "For me this understanding, this meaning isn't quantifiable or exchangeable, but it is a set of relations worth passing on" (92). In doing so, Romero joins a rare breed of writers who manage to convert hardship to healing, and isolation to more universal truths. Readers who chose to move toward Camden with Romero will be rewarded, not with a full

explanation for what they encounter, but with an appreciation for how the human resilience she recounts and displays can be an inspiration for us all.

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