

## REVIEW OF “DOGTOWN: DEATH AND ENCHANTMENT IN A NEW ENGLAND GHOST TOWN” BY ELYSSA EAST

Review by Richard W. Amero

In the summer of year 1937, I was thirteen years old and in the seventh grade at Eastern Avenue School in Gloucester, Mass. I, the son of a carpenter, and Daniel Saunders, also thirteen, the son of a barber, spent almost every day tramping through Dogtown Commons, which was so conveniently near where we lived that a path into its interior began virtually at our doors. As Elyssa East tried to do in “Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town: (Dogtown (Free Press, New York, 2009), it is a philosophical must for me at the age of eighty five to attempt to separate illusion from reality. The Dogtown my friend and I knew was an adventurous Tom Sawyer/Huckleberry Finn place unlike the narrow streets and eclectic jumble of run-down buildings where we spent most of our uninformed pre-pubescent years. The narrow, vehicular-occupied streets embodied business and fear. A fear induced in me because bullies harassed me. Coming from hardworking but minimally educated parents, Dan and I were not good conversationalists. The extent of our vocabulary was to say whether we liked or disliked something.

I liked maple ice cream frappes, which I savored at the end of many of our jaunts in a sidewalk shop in the town of Rockport. But getting these frappes was not the purpose of our excursions. It was Dogtown that represented to us open space, fresh air, solace, and freedom. Though only a mile from the ocean, the air carried the tang of salt. We had not been told to fear Dogtown. Our parents were so busy earning a living; they had little time to supervise their children’s doings.

I never got lost in Dogtown as trails were marked and open spaces were not hemmed in by trees fighting one another for their meager patches of soil. I remember climbing a wood tower, near “the bird sanctuary.” Though the tower was not high, it was high enough for me to see the outline of the city and the broad ocean beyond.

I am sure Dan and I ate wild blueberries, and I am even surer we came back with rashes from poison ivy. My encounter with a skunk did not take place

in Dogtown, though I knew they were there. It took place closer to my home. Was it the harsh soap my father used to get out ineradicable stains and odors that finally got rid of the overpowering smell?

My second memory of Dogtown was in 1942 when I assembled some of the elite members of my high school graduating class; “elite,” or so we thought ourselves. We took off from the Cherry Street entrance and spent an entire day going from the Gloucester southwest end of Dogtown to the Rockport northeast end. Here we visited a class member who preferred Gloucester’s High School to Rockport’s. Unlike my wordless wanderings with Dan, this experience was social. My hormone-charged companions enlivened the walk with learned observations and clownish jokes. We took photographs of ourselves in front of breaching boulders in the shape of a Whale’s Jaw, a Gloucester landmark almost as famous—if not as photographed—as “The Fisherman at the Wheel” on Stacey Boulevard.

Now after reading the writings of Frederick Law Olmsted, this country’s pioneer landscape architect,—before him there were only landscape gardeners—I have come to have a more erudite view of Dogtown. I can’t agree with author Elyssa East or poet Charles Olson or some of the other dogmatic people she cites, that Dogtown is a mysterious place where good and evil are in combat with evil often winning the contest. I will concede that Dogtown has a “genius.” This is the term landscape architects use. As a boy I sensed the incongruity of Roger Babson’s paid-for inscriptions on boulders: “NEVER TRY NEVER WIN; IF WORK STOPS VALUES DECAY.” These are things ad-men are likely to say. For all his deference to tolerance, Babson was too convinced of the Protestant work ethic not to let go by an opportunity to warn idlers of the folly of their ways.

I agree with enemies of technological progress that the construction of Highway 128 through Gloucester has accelerated the disappearance of part of Dogtown. I know today that there are estranged and bitter people who hang out in Dogtown. Among these was my uncle, an ex ladies’ man who had succumbed to the bottle. When I was an adult, I sometimes came across him parked in his automobile at a Dogtown entrance. There are others who retreat to, escape to, or hide in Dogtown who don’t fit in because of general disability or lack of education or because of private grudges. Dogtown is a two-sided place, but then this can be said of any neglected public space anywhere in the country. One has to be on one’s guard in city streets and in woods wherever they may be.

I have no sympathy for Peter C. Hodgkins, Jr., the delinquent who murdered Anne Natti whom author East uses as an omen of the lurking evil she senses in Dogtown. Dogtown may have helped to bring out Hodgkin's inadequacies, but the seed had been sown. East's dramatization of events during Hodgkin's trial gets melodramatic, but her histrionics don't move me. Whether it be nurture or nature (or both) Hodgkins was a selfish and unfeeling criminal.

The trees author East cites as having taken over Dogtown to the extent that they shroud the terminal moraine boulders—its chief scenic attraction—are still omnipresent. Even at thirteen years I noticed that neighbors had planted groves of pines. Like Babson's boulders, I had the feeling that these cultivated trees did not belong. They looked like part of a factory, not part of a wilderness. But, if there is an eerie menace in Dogtown, aside from the human bipeds that peer out from its foliage, it is these formidable and faceless trees.

Every trained landscape architect, town planner, botanist, zoologist, pedologist, ornithologist, geologist and hydrologist must have ideas what to do with Dogtown. There has been so much interference that the land's pristine look—if it ever had such—is no longer there. To let nature take its course, as some die-hard preservationists would do, would invite chaos. Something must be done to bring out the attractiveness of Dogtown. Arborists must decide what to do with the trees. Detectable paths have to be re-created. Except for vehicles used in rescue operations, automobiles have to be kept out. Controlled burns must be monitored. Parasitic pests must be fought. Whatever remains of an estimated 3,600 acres must be kept intact. Incursions are already evident in the industrial business and residential complexes that have effaced topography and uprooted plants around Dogtown's periphery.

Elyssa East never did find the source of Marsden Hartley's painting "Mountain in Stone," that provoked her interest in Dogtown. She thinks she found a likeness by following the advice of T.S. Eliot in "Ash Wednesday," the same advice that set painter Hartley on his search: "Teach us to care and not to care/Teach us to sit still/ Even among these rocks." In the end of her book, East concludes, like the inward-looking poet Wallace Stevens but not the outward-looking poet Charles Olson, it is the perceiver who endows the

object perceived with qualities, and not the other way around, an observation that would please psychologists and displease artists and scientists.

In all those ways in which Dogtown is unique it is unique as each snowflake, each pebble, each plant, and each animal is unique. I value my youthful experience in Dogtown. I value parts of Dogtown today; nevertheless I do not value Dogtown as I value the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone or Yosemite, or Death Valley. For all their attachment to Dogtown, Gloucester conservationists know the differences between natural as distinct from man-made places on this continent are quantitative as well as qualitative. But they also know that if Dogtown were gone, as with so much of the other historic, working and scenic parts of Gloucester, the city would no longer be the, complementary, contrasting and bracing mixture it is today. As Gloucester's orphic poet, Charles Olson, prophesized, Gloucester would become homogenized USA.