

BOOK REVIEW**Gangs in Garden City: How Immigration, Segregation, and Youth Violence Are Changing America's Suburbs****By Sarah Garland****New York, NY: Nation Books, 2009**

Reviewed by William Riggs

Enthnoburbs; immigrant enclaves in suburban ghettos; suburban balkanization; these are not new topics, but they are new to the “garden city” Long Island suburbs described by Sarah Garland in her book *Gangs in the Garden City: How Immigration, Segregation and Youth Violence are Changing America's Suburbs*. In a tone that echoes Françoise Gaspard's description of extremely polarized, segregated suburbs around Paris (Gaspard 1995), Garland grapples not only with the inner workings of “one of the world's most dangerous gangs” but also with cultural divides that are fracturing families and communities.

Garland's book is an ethnography documenting the lives of three suburban gang members and their struggles. Garland, who resides in Brooklyn, obviously understands her subject matter, as attested by this well-researched and thoughtfully written book. She carefully reconstructs the lives of gang members, leaning perhaps on the side of being overly sympathetic to their plight (as opposed to the experience of non-gang-members fearful of violence).

The book's humanization of gang violence and the tragic toll it takes on the families depicted are important stories to tell. They illustrate the difficulties of dealing with immigrant gang violence — that it is a muddled and “wicked problem” that has local, national, and international policy implications. Garland clearly understands the policy connections of her work, neatly summarizing the topic in her Epilogue, in which she questions the finality of President Obama's 2008 declaration of a “post-race society.”

If the book has one fault, it is that it focuses more on the “gangs” than it does on the “garden.” It fails to fully grapple with the idea of “slumburbia,” service-class ethnoburbs that have formed in places like New Jersey and Los Angeles (Li 1998) (Li 2009). It does not explore the impacts of 21st century immigration in post-WWII U.S. suburbs and alternate versions of the American dream that could be described as

dissident utopias. Early in the book, the first pages are devoted to an overview of the “garden city” concept and the development of the U.S. suburban model. This could easily have led to a wider discussion on the ethos and implications of the anti-melting pot, but disappointingly did not.

She would have had plenty to draw on. John Archer in his essay *Suburbia and the American Dream House* relates issues of suburbia in the U.S. to “possessive individualism”—what he calls an underpinning fact of American culture (Archer 2009). He describes 20th Century development as

...reframing of the dwelling and its grounds as a castle-like domain for defenses and preservation of the private self... Through means ranging from landscaping and property restrictions (planned communities) to furniture design and media equipment (“cocooning”), the dream has incorporated the romanticized isolation of the individual (or nuclear family unit) in a manufactured Arcadian preserve.

Garland does not explore this connection between the ideas of individualism and fragmentation, nor does she discuss how gang issues could be connected to suburban development and a dissonant view of the American Dream—which, given the complex physical and social fabric in these neighborhoods, compromises her argument about gang members as victims of circumstance.

That said, Garland may not have intended to grapple with these larger topics. Given how readable and engaging her book is, her decision to omit them is forgivable. Her book is written to appeal to a mass audience, but it also opens up a broader urban planning dialogue on urban form, gang violence, and immigration policy. This is an important starting point for readers, and her passionate writing takes them on an illuminating journey through suburban houses, streets, and malls, creating a positive framework for thinking about social change.

References

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