

Jun-2005

Book Review: Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America

Jennifer Scanlon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scanlon, Jennifer (2005). Book Review: Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(2), 187-190.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol6/iss2/17>

Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America. Setha Low. 2003. New York: Routledge. 275 pp. Illustrations, photographs, appendices, index. \$27.95 (hardback). \$18.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jennifer Scanlon⁹

When I was a child, members of my large extended family began to leave the Bronx and move to Long Island and New York City's northern suburbs. I vividly remember a housewarming visit to one family, during which suspicious neighbors came over to have a look at these Bronx-bred newcomers. Honing in on their suburban anxiety, and ever eager to make an impression, my father joined them in the yard for a beer, and when he finished one can he tossed it over his shoulder onto the grass and then asked for another. Had this been a gated community, my aunt and uncle surely would have been written up if not written out.

Secured-access developments, fortified communities, gated neighborhoods, fortress America: whatever label you use, increasing numbers of Americans are living, as Setha Low puts it, "behind the gates." Gated communities present their residents with, to use that sordid expression, a "lifestyle." It is, essentially, a lifestyle of restriction: restriction of others, who cannot enter; and restriction of residents, who have to abide by the rules, from the color of Christmas tree lights to the size of garbage cans, in order to keep the communities uniform and exclusive. And in gated communities, access of outsiders is not restricted only to residents' houses, but to all use of public spaces and services, including roads, parks, and open spaces. It creates the most private of privates. If this sounds less than appealing, you, like my father, may not be in keeping with the evolution of the American dream. Gated communities are on the rise, with the largest concentrations in the Southwest and West, but they are sprouting up with increasing frequency in the Northeast and Midwest as well. Altogether, approximately 16 million people live in gated communities. The question of why people choose this housing trend, and what the implications of that choice are for contemporary life, provide the basis for this ethnographic encounter with this complex and fascinating aspect of privatized American domestic and community life.

Low's book gives her the opportunity, as she puts it, to present three different voices as she explores the gated community phenomenon. The first voice, the personal, reveals Low's own vexed relationship to the gated lives of her childhood friends and her otherwise iconoclastic sister, Anna. In childhood, Low's friend Dolly suddenly stopped playing with her. When pressed, Dolly revealed that her mother would no longer allow her to play with Setha, who lived "outside the gates" although on the same school bus run. Whether the decision actually centered on Setha's Jewishness, her lower socioeconomic status, or the physical location of her home, Low came to equate gates with exclusivity, and with pain. Low's confusion returns to her later in life when she visits her sister in a gated community in San Antonio, Texas. The normally adventuresome Anna moves into panic mode when Low accidentally sets off the house alarm by opening a door to get some morning air. "It never occurred to me that you leave

⁹ Jennifer Scanlon is an Associate Professor and Director, Gender and Women's Studies Program, Bowdoin College.

the alarm on when you're home," Low explains. "Why do you need it in a gated community?" Her sister's response reveals the underlying truth: "You don't understand" (5). Determined to understand, Low gains access to the second set of voices in her narrative, her interviewees, gated community residents who reveal their own reasons for choosing this lifestyle. In fascinating detail, these voices reveal the contradictory meanings these Americans attach to family, home, and community. Finally, Low weaves through a third set of voices, those of scholars from a range of disciplines whose work illuminates the largely negative set of motivations the interviewees reveal.

The set of motivations for fortress living includes fear, desire for community, fear, desire for good schools, fear, desire for well-kept neighborhoods, fear, desire for security, fear. If there is one overwhelming mantra of the gated-life dweller, it is safety. In one of the most telling quotes in the book, a woman recalls her family's transition from a suburban community to a gated community. She and her husband wanted to live in a safe neighborhood, with good schools. That package, almost inevitably, includes moving into a community comprised of people who look, act, and behave similarly. Like many of the children in Low's study, this woman's daughter quickly absorbed the fear that difference subsequently came to represent:

We were driving next to a truck with some day laborers and equipment in the back, and we were stopped beside them at the light. She (the interviewee's daughter) wanted to move because she was afraid those people were going to come and get her. They looked scary to her. I explained that they were workmen, they're the 'backbone of our country,' they're coming from work, you know, but.... (9)

These men, the so-called backbone of "our" country, might as well be aliens. Ironically, however, the people in Low's study claim to move to gated communities not to absolve themselves of community but to engage in it, at least in a form of community that is safe, pristine, and in many cases, white. As Low explains, the residents seek "security, safety, and community in a globalizing world" (10). In the face of the looming threats posed by the restructuring of global capital, the demolition of the welfare state, deindustrialization, and other facets of neoliberal economic and political life, these Americans respond not by engaging politically with the forces of globalization but by developing a fortress mentality against the "other" of the urban, the poor, people of color, the working class. Looming threats of terrorism, combined with media-generated fears of child abductors and urban crime, make the walls and exclusion appear imperative rather than optional. However, like the wall that marginalizes the poor black population in Gloria Naylor's novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, and creates a so-called safe space for middle-class blacks, these walls block in as surely as they block out. Low's sister Anna recognizes the strangeness of it all: "The irony is that we are trapped behind our own gates," she argues, "unable to exit. Instead of keeping people out, we have shut ourselves in" (232). In a further irony, there is little actual evidence to suggest that gates, or security cameras, or security guards, actually make these communities safer than their ungated suburban counterparts.

Low discusses gated living as a form of social ordering, one that in many ways replicates the overall historical development of America's suburbs. These communities are most often segregated by class, segregated by race, and child centered. That child-centeredness both relies on and furthers certain gendered understandings of suburban life. Low mentions gender, and makes use of Margaret Marsh's work on the historical and cultural ideologies of gender in the suburbs, but she could do so in more productive ways. The majority of her New York respondents mention crime as an incentive to invest in gated community life. Yet as Low states, women and men perceive crime differently. Women are more likely to fear violent crime, men to fear burglary. How might the issues of fear of crime, gender, and child-centeredness play out behind the gates? Will gated life become increasingly appealing to single women fearful of crime, regardless of the child-centered nature of these communities? Do traditional gendered and family relationships between women and children in these communities make it more likely that the children will inherit particular understandings of the world and people outside the gates? Low interviews children in gated communities about their ideal living arrangements. One child wishes for higher walls, another for metal detectors in the schools, another for armed guards at the gates. Women repeatedly mention fear of kidnapping and argue that gated life allows their children to be children. Ironically, these same children have enormous fears. Readers of this book will wish that Low had devoted more of her analysis to the gendered nature of these components of gated life. And, not incidentally, critics of gated life and the cultural ideologies they respond to and foster might argue that turning off television news programs and getting children involved in real, diverse community life would more effectively allay both children's and parents' (particularly women's) fears of "others."

However, there is much to recommend in this study. Low impresses upon the reader the recurring themes of safety, security, and a foreboding sense of fear of others, which mark contemporary life for so many Americans. What the book lacks, however, is a deeper engagement with the fear these fortress residents so eloquently reveal. One resident talks about her friend in a "lovely community" outside of Washington, D.C., for example, who was intimidated because a black man knocked at her door. "... and she was very intimidated because she was white, and he was black.... She only bought it [what he was selling] just to hurry and quick get him away from the door, because she was scared as hell. That's terrible to be put in that situation. I like the idea of having security" (145). Such forthcoming revelations of racism demand further engagement, but Low lets this--and others--go. Perhaps she cannot engage further with this particular woman on this issue, but she does have other interviewees, including her own sister, whom she could push further on the core issues that emerge in the interviews. In this regard, Lowe could make better use of both her primary and secondary sources, her interviewees and her scholars, to make a stronger and more compelling argument with her findings.

The fortress of the gated community provides an apt metaphor for contemporary American life. Whether Low would agree on this, I cannot say, but it is difficult to read this book in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election without making some parallels. The looming presence of fear in the gated community mirrors its presence in the election cycle. Democracy takes a great deal of work, but fear promotes stasis, which the gated community, and the contemporary political scene, make seductive. Those who fear that Americans lack not only the time but also the inclination and the literal space in

which to enact democratic practice should take a serious look at the gated community phenomenon. Setha Low's exploration of gated America, while not a perfect account, is thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening, an important read on contemporary American life and culture.