

My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965. By *Becky M. Nicolaides*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xviii + 412 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, tables. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$24.00. ISBN 0-226-58300-7; paper 0-226-58301-5.

Reviewed by Merry Ovnick

This is the story of South Gate, an industrial-residential suburb on the southern fringe of Los Angeles. If it were nothing more, *My Blue Heaven* would be a valuable contribution to urban history, representing one of the closely focused, minutely researched community studies that have followed in the wake of pioneering city biographies and early, broad-brushed suburban studies, such as Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* and Sam Bass Warner's *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870–1900*. *My Blue Heaven* turns out to be more than a community study, as it ventures beyond the boundaries of Nicolaides' stated thesis—that South Gate's political, racial, and cultural dynamics between 1920 to 1965 stem from the home-ownership patterns of this working-class community—to construct a case study of a phenomenon of possible nationwide significance.

In the 1920s, South Gate, especially those sections beyond the reach of the streetcar lines, offered cheap land to white working-class home seekers, many of them from the southeastern United States. There they could self-build small houses while raising chickens and growing vegetables to feed their families and to market as income supplements. These homes offered a “sweat equity” means of economic survival. Marginal finances made their owners frugal citizens, who resisted street paving and other amenities that would raise their taxes or assessments. Residents in the poorer districts, in spite of a predominantly southern heritage, elected to send their children to the cheaper integrated schools, resisting until 1932 tax-costly solutions to the “race problem.” Such tight-fistedness created tensions with the pro-improvement merchants who dominated local government. The Depression of the 1930s hit South Gate hard. One response of these producer-residents was to create a barter economy and establish co-ops. The 1920s' local culture of self-reliance yielded to New Deal dependency and a sense of entitlement.

Although Nicolaides treats the history of South Gate as an organic whole, her data indicate otherwise. Over half of the “sweat equity” home owners of the 1920s lost their homes and moved away in the 1930s. World War II transformed South Gate as war industries and jobs burgeoned. Empty land filled up with war-worker and postwar tract housing. The population doubled in a decade. That the new population would continue the “individual, family-oriented

existence, where the ideal of self-help was embraced by necessity,” cannot be assumed (p. 182). Aided by government home-loan insurance and plentiful jobs with union wages, the owners of the new tract houses viewed their homes as a form of entitled security. Still largely blue collar, postwar South Gate resembled Levittown, complete with middle-class consumer values. Unions were strong in the humming factories. Strikes for cost-of-living increases occurred regularly. Nicolaides explores why the unions failed to rally support in local politics. Instead, veterans’ groups assumed civic leadership based on themes of patriotism and anticommunism.

In reality, then, *My Blue Heaven* is not about the evolution of a single community of working-class home owners but is an account of two kinds of working-class communities connected by place and home ownership: one of self-reliant settlers from Tennessee and Texas who built minimal dwellings and depended on home produce and civic frugality, and a second made up of Caucasian war workers and veterans, blue collar but better paid and with federal assistance, living in stucco box tracts of look-alike houses and assuming conservative, middle-class values and politics. Both industrial-worker societies formed social networks, used the political process, related to their employers, and found meaning in homes and families in a unique set of patterns that Nicolaides has fleshed out in detail, with the help of oral histories, an impressive grasp of current scholarship, and a thorough mastery of quantified data. The contrasting patterns that emerge for each period illuminate labor issues, the appeal of conservatism, suburban community building, and racial politics.

In the concluding chapters, Nicolaides takes the South Gate story into the 1960s. Here she offers a compelling sequence of events to argue a second thesis: that the “racialized politics” of South Gate were a significant cause of the 1965 Watts Riots.

Alameda Street divides South Gate, long kept white by city code, real-estate practice, and social convention, from what was then the African American community of Watts. Nicolaides traces the escalation of racial tension during the Civil Rights era as South Gaters, feeling threatened in their home-owning hearts by a state fair-housing law and school integration proposals, rose in defensive activism. South Gaters’ racist editorials, a cross burning, demonstrations at the board of education, and agitation for an initiative to overturn the state fair-housing law confirmed the intensity of their racial prejudice to the black community on the other side of Alameda Street. When tensions touched off violence in Watts in August 1965, armed South Gaters took up positions on their roofs, ready to defend their homes from black “invaders.” Lacking the wealth of demographic data that informed the first two sections of the book, we cannot decode the gun-toting South Gate segregationists of the 1960s or the role a home-owning culture played in their actions. (The home-ownership rate in South Gate had dropped to 57

percent by 1960.) Nicolaides' proposal of white suburban culpability in the Watts Riots, and the evidence she does present, is of great moment, however, and it deserves further study.

My Blue Heaven takes up Richard Harris's work with owner-built suburbs and carries it to a second and third generation of working-class communities. It is especially interesting because population flux and the changing conditions of industrial labor produced distinct political and social cultures at each stage. The epilogue, ironically, reveals that after the Watts Riots, South Gate experienced white flight (going from 4 percent Latino in 1960 to 83 percent Latino in 1990), deindustrialization, infrastructure decay, and the phenomenon of poor people doubled up in garages without utilities. Once again, South Gate is made up of working-class residents, this time immigrant sweatshop laborers who are part of a globalized, post-Fordist economy. I hope Becky Nicolaides will some day write a sequel that explores this new community as fully as she has examined its predecessors.

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