Review by: Mary Pattillo
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**Book Reviews**


Mary Pattillo

*Northwestern University*

Most Americans live in the suburbs, but sociological research has taken a while to catch up. I admit to being in the guilty party of scholars who just can’t stop studying the city, assuming cities are where all the action is. Mary Barr’s *Friends Disappear* and Simon I. Singer’s *America’s Safest City* are excellent examples of how to get past the figurative and literal gates of the suburbs in order to explore themes and processes that are central to sociological inquiry—inequality, social control, intergenerational reproduction, racial stratification, family relations, delinquency, school sorting, and many more. Singer even questions the usefulness of a city/suburb distinction when he announces that “the new American city is a suburban city” (p. 34). Both books are deeply personal and rigorously researched, and both make important contributions to the growing literature on the suburbs.

*Friends Disappear* is inspired by a photograph that the author had hanging on her refrigerator door and that graces the book’s cover. The snapshot is of a group of friends from 1974, six black boys and seven white girls in the summer before they were to begin high school in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. In addition to doing archival research on desegregation battles in Evanston around the time of the photograph, Barr also found her former classmates and interviewed them in the 2000s. But she could not interview all of them since two of the black boys in the photo had died. The book is haunted by the worry of one of Barr’s white friends that “pretty soon there won’t be any black guys left from our childhood” (p. 1). In other words, “Heavanston” wasn’t so idyllic and nurturing for all of its residents.

Barr’s first challenge to the ideal of suburban perfection is her argument that the comfortable lives of Evanston’s white residents were made
possible by the labor and discomfort of black people in Evanston and Chicago, even though this association often went unseen or ignored by whites. Barr gives examples from the archives and interviews, and she also does not shy away from interrogating her own family’s participation in these relationships of inequality. An African-American woman named Zelma Dunlap lived and worked in Barr’s family’s home, basically raising her younger sister, who called Mrs. Dunlap “Ma.” As Barr poignantly notes: “My opportunities were directly related to the ones Mrs. Dunlap didn’t have” (p. 13).

The preservation, protection, and hoarding (à la Charles Tilly) of resources by and among affluent whites in the community is another challenge to the stories of harmonious racial integration that the suburb likes to tell itself and others. It’s not that Barr’s history of the 1960s and 1970s is one of complete acrimony. There were many whites—including many of the parents of the white girls in the photograph—who wanted and valued racial diversity. Many of the book’s priceless photographs show black and white children happily eating, playing, dancing, singing, and protesting together in all of their 1970s splendor. At the same time, however, heated and sometimes shameful controversies over the active desegregation policies of a white superintendent (who was eventually fired), and over open housing and school lunch programs, reveal that Evanston had an ugly side as well.

Finally, Barr explodes the myth of racial equality and exposes practices of exclusion and segregation in the experiences of her black and white friends at Evanston Township High School. Echoing the findings of Karolyn Tyson (Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White after Brown [Oxford University Press, 2011]), Barr shows how “poor and minority students [were] segregated into occupational training programs in order to preserve the academic curriculum for mid- to upper-class students” (p. 217). Interestingly, neither Barr nor her white friends were high achievers in high school. But that was not so negatively consequential for them as it was for their academically marginal black peers, who were basically harassed, policed, and demeaned to the point that several did not finish at the high school, setting them up for precarious economic situations throughout life. In contrast, Barr writes, “with no concrete goals, my white friends and I drifted after high school. Financial and emotional support from families provided a bottom we could not fall below” (p. 246).

America’s Safest City offers a nearly equivalent observation about the maintenance of privilege among white suburban families. Using multiple waves of survey and interview data with children, parents, and service providers in Amherst, New York, outside of Buffalo, Singer concludes, “I found no effect of delinquency, substance use, cheating, and emotional troubles on subsequent educational and occupational attainment. It seems that
Amherst youth were mainly able to mature into adulthood and reproduce the largely middle-class lives of their parents” (p. 237). How is it that “few Amherst youth experienced the full legal consequences of their acts of delinquency”? (p. 141). Singer’s answer is in the networks of people and institutions that coordinated to offer support, plan positive activities, recognize signs of trouble, marshal resources to address such trouble, and give second, third, and fourth chances when necessary. “Maximum tolerance” (p. 239) is what Singer calls it at one point, contrasting this approach to the zero-tolerance policies in urban schools and neighborhoods that ensnare poor and minority youth in the criminal justice system with disastrous consequences.

Unlike Barr, who illustrates the relational quality of privilege and disadvantage, Singer has a very different notion of relationality. He highlights the importance of complex relationships for supporting young people and shepherding them through the risky period of adolescence. “Relational modernity” refers to the web of actors that is necessary to make sense of conflicting, disorienting, unstable, fast-moving, and alienating messages and experiences that young people must navigate in suburbs where people are transient and the landscape isolates people into their cars, basements, backyards, and bedrooms. It’s not that America’s safest city has no criminal offending. As Singer reports about the youth he surveyed, “The vast majority (71 percent) committed a delinquent act that could have landed them in juvenile court” (p. 209). But, instead, they were sent back to their parents, given community service assignments, or referred to psychologists and drug treatment centers. This kind of safety net and assumption of innocence forestalls more serious crimes and ensures a happy ending, but only for those lucky enough to live in places like Amherst, and then lucky enough to be included in those systems of support.

Neither book is flawless, of course. Barr could have paid more attention to the intersections of gender, race, and class. Low-income whites get a few mentions but are missing from the analysis, while white boys and black girls of any class are nearly absent from the book. Singer’s book is strongest when analyzing the original data and weakest in its theorizing. For example, chapter 4 tries to replace the “street-corner view of delinquency” that has been developed from years of ethnographic study of poor inner-city neighborhoods with a theory of “a multitude of interconnecting suburban roadways” (p. 128). It doesn’t work. Despite these flaws, both of these books would be fine additions to course syllabi and could be particularly provocative for undergraduates, many of whom will see themselves in these studies. The books definitely convinced me of the important sociological action in the suburbs.