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# A Nation of Gated Communities

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## PROLOGUE

On our first visit to my sister's new home in San Antonio, Texas, my husband, Joel, and I are amazed to find two corral gates blocking the entrance to her development. I push an intercom button on the visitors' side. Getting no response, I hit the button repeatedly, finally rousing a disembodied voice that asks whom we want to see. I shout Anna and Bob's last name. The entrance gate swings open, and we accelerate through onto a divided drive enclosed by a six-foot wall covered with bougainvillea and heavenly bamboo.

Inside, large homes loom beside small vacant lots with "for sale" signs. The houses are mostly southwestern stucco painted Santa Fe colors with terra cotta tile roofs. There is a sprinkling of brick colonials with slate shingles and wood trim. Uniformly attractive with neat lawns and matching foundation planting, they look like a scene from the movie *Pleasantville*. It is not just peaceful, wealthy, and secure but unreal, like a doll's house or a planned development in Sim City.<sup>1</sup> Everything looks perfect.

Even before we see men playing golf, we are jolted by speed bumps announcing a right-of-way, and we stop as two twelve-year-old kids cross in their shiny red golf cart. We drive up and park in front of an enormous Scottsdale-style house, sea foam green with a dark tile roof and two-story, glass entrance hall. Anna and my niece, Alexandra, stand dwarfed by the scale of the building.

"I am so glad you are finally here," Alexandra says, pulling away from her mother and throwing her small arms around my neck. She takes my hand and starts dragging me toward the door. "Come and see my room."

Inside, the bright sunshine filters through the closed shutters. My boot heels clat-

ter on the marble floors and echo down the long hallway. I see the green slate kitchen floor from the landing as I walk up the white carpeted stairs to the guest room. Everything is huge and out of scale, giving the impression that I have stepped into a five-star hotel complete with a guest suite, master bath, and walk-in closet. Each room is more spacious than the next, with tall windows, ten-foot ceilings, wide hallways, and long vistas from one part of the house to the other, and on the second floor a view of the golf course and cottonwoods beyond. A stucco wall encircles the house, blocking views from the first floor.

The next morning I get up early to have a cup of tea. I go downstairs to the kitchen and start water on a glowing glass-covered burner. Shimmering sunshine draws me to the window, through which I can see a brick patio with a wrought-iron table and chairs surrounded by a high wall. Imagining how pleasant it would be to sit outside, I unlock the French doors and slowly push them open. With no warning, a harsh wailing disrupts my tranquillity. For a moment I panic, wondering what I have done, and then realize it is the burglar alarm.

Anna comes running from her bedroom. “What are you trying to do?” She shuts off the alarm. “Trying to wake the neighbors and call the cops?”

“I wanted to enjoy the morning air,” I protest. “It never occurred to me that you leave the alarm on when you are home. Why do you need it living in a gated community?”

“You don’t understand,” she says.

“You’re right, I don’t,” I reply.

Ever since that visit I have been fascinated by why Anna and her family want to live behind gates with a guard who watches them enter on a video camera, in a place where they are regulated by a thick book of rules dictating everything from the color of Christmas tree lights to the size of their trash can. This chapter draws upon ethnographic research that I undertook to answer this question.

## UNDERSTANDING GATED COMMUNITIES

This chapter examines the dramatic increase in the number of Americans moving to secured residential enclaves—sixteen million people, or about 6 percent of all households.<sup>2</sup> Gated communities now include high-rise apartment complexes for the working and lower-middle classes; townhouses and garden apartments for the middle class; retrofitted housing projects for urban poor; and single-family enclaves for the upper-middle class.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the allure of gated communities, I spent ten years studying six gated communities in the city and suburbs of New York City and San Antonio, Texas. I identified gated housing developments located approximately thirty to forty minutes’ drive from their respective downtown city center. Each has its own regional style and distinctive design features, but all are enclosed by a five- to six-foot ma-

sonry wall or iron fence broken only by entry gates and monitored by a guard or video camera from a central station. The gated developments included apartment complexes in Queens, New York; townhouse developments in San Antonio and on the border of New York City; and large single-family homes in the San Antonio northern suburbs and suburban Long Island.

I found that people move to gated communities for safety, security, “niceness,” and community; they talk about a fear of crime and other people and express a deep-seated sense of insecurity about the world and their everyday life. These issues are not new, but in this American dream with a twist security is gained by excluding others and providing services privately. This version of the dream embodies a politics of fear that justifies gating as well as private governance, increased social controls, and surveillance. Gated community architecture and its accompanying politics threaten the viability of public spaces through increasing enclosure and separation of people in a rapidly globalizing world.

Unfortunately, people are not necessarily safer in gated developments, nor do they enjoy any greater sense of community there. And while residents say they feel safer and happier in their secured enclaves, they worry about having a “false sense of security.” There are also many negative repercussions: children may feel more afraid of people outside the walls, greater costs are involved in maintaining the infrastructure, taxpayers’ costs soar when the development is turned over to the municipality, residents surrender their freedom of speech through private contracts, and outsiders to the community see the walls and gates as insular and threatening.

#### STARTING THE RESEARCH

I climb into Felicia’s Volvo station wagon, carefully setting my tape recorder on the dashboard. Outside, the twisted junipers and gray-green cottonwoods of San Antonio flash by. The six-lane highway posts a seventy mile per hour speed limit, but we are doing eighty. New gated developments with partially constructed houses and bulldozers leveling wild grass fields stretch as far as I can see. Then they suddenly disappear, leaving countryside that looks untouched for the past hundred years. The small town past contrasts with the suburban present as we speed north.

Felicia is a tall, thin woman in her mid-forties who sits straight upright in the driver’s seat. Her long fingers clutch the steering wheel as she drives, telling me about her college and graduate degrees. Despite her educational qualifications, she decided to stay home to take care of her seven-year-old daughter. She and her husband moved from California because of her husband’s job and the opportunity to have a more comfortable life with a bigger house. They now live on an attractive cul-de-sac in a two-story, four-thousand-square-foot Scottsdale model located within a gated subdivision on the northern edge of the city.

She is articulate and gets right to the point. When she and her husband were

shopping for a house, they did not look specifically for gated residences; school district and aesthetics were the important considerations in their decision making. In fact, she had some reservations about living in a gated community because it would have only one exit if there was a fire. But now they feel good about their choice because they feel safe when their child goes outside to play; as Felicia puts it: “We’re near San Antonio, and I believe the whole country knows how many child-nappings we’ve had. And I believe that my husband would not ever allow her outside to play without direct adult supervision unless we were gated.” Their choice of residence allows them the freedom to walk around the neighborhood at night, and their daughter and her friends from nongated neighborhoods can ride their bicycles safely.

Yet Felicia also thinks that the gated community produces a false sense of safety. The guards aren’t “Johnny-on-the-spot,” and anybody who wanted to could jump the gate. Residents could be lulled into a false sense of security “if there was ever an attack.” For instance, when she walks in the community, she does not look to see who is coming out of a driveway, as she would on an open city street or in another suburban area. “You don’t rely on your own resources so much,” she adds.

The development is made up of people who are retired and don’t want to maintain large yards, or people who want to raise families in a more protected environment. There is a lot of “fear flight”: people who have moved in the last couple of years as the crime rate, or the reporting of crime, has become such a prominent part of the news. She knows people who are moving in because they want to get out of their exclusive subdivisions that don’t have gates, and she mentions one family that was shopping for a house in her community because they had been robbed many times.

Her neighbors are upper middle and middle class, white, Christian (apart from one Jewish family), and quite homogeneous—mostly businessmen and doctors, with stay-at-home wives who have no college educations. On their street, she and her husband know everyone by sight and visit with neighbors who have children, but they no longer have a party when new people move in. The houses are “very pretty,” architecturally designed and custom built, though she worries the new ones will not be as tasteful or beautiful.

Felicia feels safe inside the community but expresses considerable anxiety about living in San Antonio:

When I leave the area entirely and go downtown, I feel quite threatened just being out in normal urban areas, unrestricted urban areas. Please let me explain. The north central part of San Antonio by and large is middle class to upper middle class. Period. There are very few pockets of poverty. Very few. And therefore if you go to any store, you will look around and most of the clientele will be middle class as you are yourself. So you are somewhat insulated. But if you go downtown, which is much more mixed, where everybody goes, I feel much more threatened.

Felicia's daughter was four years old when they first moved, and I wonder about the psychological impact of moving from a rambling, unfenced Californian suburb to a gated community. Felicia says her daughter feels threatened when she sees poor people because she hasn't had enough exposure: "We were driving next to a truck with some day laborers and equipment in the back, and we stopped beside them at the light. She [her 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 . . ."

So living in a secured enclave may heighten a child's fear of others. It is unclear, though, whether Felicia's observation reflects many children's experience of growing up in a gated community or simply her daughter's idiosyncrasy and modeling of her mother's anxiety.

Felicia and her husband wanted to buy the nicest house in the best school district, while providing a safe environment for their daughter, one where they could be cloistered from class differences. They consider the neighborhood as "a real community" where you know your neighbors, although they say it is not as friendly as where they used to live. For them, the gated community provides a haven in a socially and culturally diverse world, offering a protected setting for their upper-middle-class lifestyle.

Desires for safety, security, community, and "niceness," as well as the desire to live near people like oneself because of a fear of "others" and of crime, are not unique to this family but are expressed by most residents of gated communities.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of a fortress mentality and its phenomenal success are surprising in the United States, where most people live in open and unguarded neighborhoods. Thus the rapid increase in the numbers of Americans moving to secured residential enclaves invites a more complex account of their motives and values. While to a large extent they want the same things that other middle-class Americans want, the seemingly self-evident explanations for their choice of residence encompass deeper meanings and concerns.

Living in a gated community represents a new version of the middle-class American dream precisely because it temporarily suppresses and masks, even denies and fuses, the inherent anxieties and conflicting social values of modern urban and suburban life. It transforms Americans' dilemma of how to protect themselves, their homes, and their families from danger, crime, and unknown others while still living in open, friendly neighborhoods and comfortable homes. It reinforces the norms of a middle-class lifestyle in a time when everyday events and news media exacerbate fears of violence and terrorism. Thus residents cite their "need" for gated communities to provide a safe and secure home in the face of a lack of other societal alternatives.

Gated residential communities, however, are not safer than nongated suburban neighborhoods; they merely intensify the social segregation, racism, and exclusionary land use practices already in place in most of the United States. Residents acknowledge their misgivings about the possible false security provided by the gates and guards, but at the same time gating satisfies their desire for a sense of security associated with childhood and neighborhoods where they grew up. In many ways gating resolves middle-class neighborhood tensions concerning individuality and conformity, independence and community, and freedom and security, yet it also produces unintended problems. The contradictions in what residents think, feel, and talk about provide an opportunity to understand the psychological and social meaning-making processes they use to order their lives.

This chapter reviews the consequences of living in a gated community, drawing on resident interviews, behavioral mapping, and participant observation field notes. I begin with a history of gating and then use ethnographic examples to explore gating's psychological, social, economic, legal, and political consequences. I conclude with a discussion of "community" as it is being reconceived in the United States through private governance and gating and outline what we can do to ameliorate its negative aspects.

#### HISTORY OF THE GATED COMMUNITY

A gated community is a residential development whose houses, streets, sidewalks, and other amenities are entirely enclosed by walls, fences, or earth banks covered with bushes and shrubs. Access to the community is regulated via a secured entrance, usually a gate operated by a guard, key, or electronic card, though in some cases protection is provided by inaccessible land, such as a nature reserve, or even by a guarded bridge. Often a neighborhood watch organization or professional security personnel patrol on foot and by automobile inside the development.

Gated residential communities in the United States originated for year-round living on family estates and in wealthy communities, such as Llewellyn Park in Eagle Ridge, New Jersey, built during the 1850s, and in resorts, such as New York's Tuxedo Park, which was developed in 1886 as a hunting and fishing retreat and was enclosed by a barbed-wire fence eight feet high and twenty-four miles long. Another early resort was Sea Gate in Brooklyn, established with its own private police force in 1899. Between 1867 and 1905 the architect and real estate developer Julius Pitman designed the majority of St. Louis's private streets, borrowing from the English private square to create exclusive residential enclaves for the business elite.<sup>5</sup>

But planned retirement communities such as Leisure World in Seal Beach, Southern California, built in the late 1950s and 1960s, were the first places where middle-class Americans walled themselves off. Gates then spread to resort and

country club developments and finally to suburban developments. In the 1980s, real estate speculation accelerated the building of gated communities around golf courses designed for exclusivity, prestige, and leisure.

Gated communities first appeared in California, Texas, and Arizona, drawing retirees attracted to the weather. One-third of all new communities in Southern California are gated, and the percentage is similar around Phoenix, Arizona, the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and parts of Florida. In areas such as Tampa, Florida, gated communities account for four out of five home sales of \$300,000 or more. Since the late 1980s gates have become ubiquitous, and by the 1990s they were common even in the northeastern United States. Gated communities on Long Island, New York, were rare in the 1980s, but by the early 1990s almost every condominium development of more than fifty units had a guardhouse.<sup>6</sup> The number of people estimated to be living in gated communities in the United States rapidly increased from four million in 1995 to eight million in 1997. Two new questions on gating and controlled access were added to the 2001 American Housing Survey,<sup>7</sup> establishing that seven million or 5.9 percent of all households currently live in secured residential developments.

#### PRIVATIZATION AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION

Urban and suburban spatial separation based on race has a long history in the United States. Cities continue to experience high levels of residential segregation based on discriminatory real estate practices and mortgage structures designed to insulate whites from blacks.<sup>8</sup> Middle-class and upper-middle-class suburban neighborhoods also exhibit a pattern of class segregation as people build fences, cut off relationships with neighbors, and move out in response to internal problems and conflicts. Meanwhile governments have expanded their regulatory role through zoning laws, local police departments, ordinances about dogs, quiet laws, and laws against domestic and interpersonal violence that facilitate a new kind of segregation of family and neighborhood life.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of common interest developments (CIDs) provided a legal framework for consolidating these forms of residential segregation. A CID is “a community in which the residents own or control common areas or shared amenities” and one that “carries with it reciprocal rights and obligations enforced by a private governing body.”<sup>10</sup> Specialized covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions that extend forms of collective private land tenure while privatizing government were adapted by the lawyer and planner Charles Stern Ascher to create the modern institution of the home owners’ association (HOA).<sup>11</sup>

Robert Nelson points out that “[in] 1970 only one percent of American housing units were located in a homeowner association, condominium or cooperative—the three main instruments of collective private ownership of housing. By 1998,

this figure had risen to 15 percent. In major metropolitan areas, 50 percent of new housing units are being built and sold as part of a collective housing regime,” with the number of HOAs being more than 250,000 in 2005.<sup>12</sup> This increase is a revolution in governance, with private organizations responsible for collecting trash, providing security, and maintaining common property.

#### THE CONSEQUENCES OF GATING

People decide to move to a gated community for various reasons. At a societal level, people say they move because of their fear of crime and others. They move to find a neighborhood that is stable, to ensure that their home will retain its resale value, and to have control over their environment and the environment of those who live nearby. Residents in rapidly growing areas want to live in a private community for the services. Retirees and residents who travel a lot particularly want the low maintenance and lack of responsibility that comes with living in a well-maintained and easy-to-care-for environment.

At a personal level, though, residents are also searching for the sense of security and safety that they associate with their childhood. The gates are used symbolically to ward off many of life’s unknowns, including unemployment, loss of loved ones, and downward mobility; but of course gates cannot deliver all that is promised.

##### *Psychological Consequences: Insecurity and Social Splitting*

Most gated community residents say that they moved there because of their fear of crime, but they also express a more pervasive sense of insecurity regarding life in America. As one resident explained, “I think with the gate thing, there is an increasing sense of insecurity all over the place. I think people are beginning to realize they are not really safe anywhere, in middle America. We have had so much violence occurring, the school shootings, you know. That could be part of it.” But this is a psychological fear for which there is no physical or technological solution. Policing, video surveillance, gating, walls, and guards do not work because they do not address what is an emotional reaction. The psychological allure of defended space becomes even more enticing when the news media chronicle daily murders, rapes, drive-by shootings, drug busts, and kidnappings—often with excessive coverage. Not surprisingly, then, fear of crime has increased since the mid-1960s, even though there has been a decline in all violent crime since 1990.<sup>13</sup> As Michael Moore points out in his film *Bowling for Columbine*, this sense of insecurity is not entirely new, but it has intensified with increasing globalization, declining economic conditions, and the insecurity of capitalism. 9/11 and Homeland Security warnings have exacerbated it, and the gates and guards, rather than banishing it, perpetuate it by continually reminding residents of their vulnerability.

The gated lifestyle can also have a negative impact on children. All children have

fears, but in the United States younger children are experiencing more fear about being harmed by other people than ever before. Living behind gates reinforces the perception that people who live outside are dangerous or bad. This social splitting has always existed, but the walls and gates exacerbate social distinctions.

The dualistic thinking that social splitting exemplifies is used by individuals to cope with anxiety and fear and with contradictory and conflicting feelings. It fuses cultural definitions and social expectations that differentiate self from other, “us” from “them,” regardless of whether the contrast is between Anglo and “Mexican,” native born and immigrant, or white and black.<sup>14</sup> For example, Donna implicitly contrasts community residents, with whom her child is safe, to “people out there,” who might hurt her child, and specifically mentions “Mexicans” (ironically, those who come into the gated community as hired workers) as a source of threat:

*Donna:* You know, he’s always so scared. . . . It has made a world of difference in him since we’ve been out here.

*Setha:* Really?

*Donna:* A world of difference. And it is that sense of security that they don’t think people are roaming the neighborhoods and the streets and that there’s people out there that can hurt him.

*Setha:* Ah . . . that’s incredible.

*Donna:* . . . That’s what’s been most important to my husband, to get the children out here where they can feel safe, and we feel safe if they could go out in the streets and not worry that someone is going to grab them. . . . We feel so secure and maybe that’s wrong too.

*Setha:* In what sense?

*Donna:* You know, we’ve got [Mexican] workers out here, and we still think, “Oh, they’re safe out here.” . . . In the other neighborhood I never let him get out of my sight for a minute. Of course they were a little bit younger too, but I just, would never, you know, think of letting them go to the next street over. It would have scared me to death, because you didn’t know. There was so much traffic coming in and out, you never knew who was cruising the street and how fast they can grab a child. And I don’t feel that way in our area at all . . . ever.

While the architectural features of gated communities, reinforced by guards and video cameras, are perceived as comforting symbols of protection by residents, they are also producing a landscape of fear by reinforcing perceptions, among both residents and outsiders, that only life inside a “fortress” and physical separation from people of other racial, cultural, and economic groups can keep one safe. This truly new type of residential development, which uses walls and gates rather than simply distance and street patterns to physically separate residents from populations of other races and classes, sends the architectural message that people need to protect and differentiate themselves from others.

Residents, however, are aware of the limitations of this protection and often become even more focused on security issues. Linda, a young, divorced mother of two boys, ten and twelve years old, spoke to me about the security of the gated landscape for her and her mother. She had been living in her mother's house since her mother's recent death. Her mother had moved to Pine Hills because she wanted to be in a setting where there would be neighbors close by and to have the safety of the gate.

*Linda (laughing):* The security of the gate. Five dollars an hour, when they're asleep. I don't know how much security the gate is worth. Some of the guards just let you fly right in. The others have to strip-search you. It really depends. I guess that has been my experience with coming in. Some of them are okay, others want your fingerprints.

[For my mother,] it was just basically being less isolated on a big piece of property, and a couple of years before that we had something [happen]. There were helicopters flying over this area. I mean, this may be going back ten years, I don't remember specifically when, but some inmate, they were looking for someone who had escaped who had a murder record. That was quite freaky. You would look out in the backyard and there would be woods out there, and you'd wonder who is out there. . . . Because, you know . . . people can come in here on foot. There's a golf course right behind us, and anyone could be wandering around on there and decide to traipse through here.

*Setha:* So what do you think?

*Linda:* Honestly, I don't know how useful the gate is. The gate is useful in preventing vehicles from getting in, that is, if the person at the gate is alert and competent. . . . Most of the time I do get a call if somebody's coming. What can I say about the gate? We did have some robberies here some years ago. . . . I'll try to summarize this, [it's] good in preventing robberies whereby, you know, somebody would need a vehicle to load a whole lot of loot into a car or a van or whatever. But as far as preventing people on foot, it's ridiculous. You know, if anyone would have an interest in coming in to this community and causing some kind of havoc or whatever, I think there are many ways they could get in.

Linda told the following story to illustrate her point:

One time, one of my neighbor's boys, the little one, was missing. And this woman, I mean, she was white as a sheet, and she was really going to have a nervous breakdown. And we couldn't find him. He was actually in another neighbor's house with his friend, playing. I had called that house to find out, not realizing they were away, and there was a workman in the house. And these boys didn't know the workman. The workman just walked in there, went into the kid's room and started working. So she wasn't

at ease [because it was so easy for the workman to walk in without any adults being home, and that her boy was there with a strange workman].

You know, we are not living in very secure times now. . . . I can tell you that after a couple of robberies some of the older residents here felt comfortable with hiring a security car that was patrolling the grounds. So they did try to do that.

In this story, a workman walks into a house, without anyone even noticing, at a time when a mother is frantically searching for her youngest child. The mother and apparently Linda herself make the workman, an outsider, the focus of fear, even though he had nothing to do with the incident. Just his presence evokes comment and fear in this purified landscape.

In the past, overt racial categorization provided the ideological context for discriminatory deed restrictions and mortgage programs. More recently, racial attributes have been used to justify social prejudice and unfounded fears. Helen highlights how race still plays a dominant role in defining “others” onto whom unfounded fears are projected. She explained to me why she had chosen a gated community: “after seeing that there are so many beautiful neighborhoods that are not [in] a secure area, [and] that’s where burglaries and murders take place. It’s an open door [saying] to people, come on in. Why should they try anything here when they can go somewhere else first. It’s a strong deterrent, needless to say.” She went on to illustrate her point by telling me what had happened to a friend who lived “in a lovely community” outside Washington, D.C.:

*Helen:* She said this fellow came to the door, and she was very intimidated because she was white, and he was black, and you didn’t get many blacks in her neighborhood. 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.

*Setha:* Are you concerned about crime in Sun Meadow?

*Helen:* Not here, but in San Antonio. There are gangs. People are overworked, they have families, they are underpaid, the stress is out of control, and they abuse their children. The children go out because they don’t like their home life. There’s too much violence everywhere. It starts in the city, but then the kids get smart enough and say, “Oh, gee, I need money for x, y, or z, but it’s really hot in the city, let’s go out and get it some place else.” We’re the natural target for it. So being in a secure area, I don’t have to worry as much as another neighborhood that doesn’t have security.

Ironically, Helen’s concern with crime developed after she moved into Sun Meadow; living there reinforced her sense of the importance of having gates and guards for personal security. “Crime,” in this context, though, is a coded reference to race. Residents were more comfortable talking about crime and “others” than confronting their own racial fears and their desire to separate themselves from people of color.

In this sense, gating is part of a transformation of American class relations through spatial separation and a reworking of the urban and suburban landscape.

Racist fears about the “threat” of a visible minority, whether it is blacks, Mexicans, or Korean Americans, are remarkably similar. This is because many neighborhoods in the United States are racially homogeneous: the physical space of the neighborhood and its racial composition are synonymous. A “racialized” spatial ordering and the identification of a space with a group of people are fundamental to how suburban landscapes reinforce racial prejudice and discrimination, and gating is just the latest phenomenon to maintain and reinforce this ordering.

Yet ironically, gated community residents remain worried about the porous boundaries of their neighborhoods, especially given that racial “others” still enter the community as hired workers. Withdrawal behind gates may even exacerbate racial fears toward those whose presence can never, finally, be avoided in a globalized, multicultural society, and whose labor will always be indispensable to white middle-class families seeking nannies, housekeepers, and gardeners.

*Social Consequences: “Niceness,” Social Control, and Exclusion*

The word *niceness* captures the ways that residents talk about their desire for a socially controlled, middle-class, “white” environment and is central to what residents are searching for. Residents talk about their insecurity and fear, but they also are interested in finding a “nice” house in a “nice” community. *Niceness* is a way to talk about wanting to live in a neighborhood with people who have similar values and who keep their houses and gardens in a particular way. Residents say they are willing to trade personal freedom for rules and regulations to make sure that their neighborhood will not change in some unintended way.

In some cases, the use of the term *nice* reflects the micropolitics of distinguishing oneself from the family who used to live next door. Status anxiety about downward mobility due to declining male wages and family incomes, shrinking job markets, and periodic economic recessions has increased concern that one’s own children will not be able to sustain a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> Prospective buyers hear assurances that walls and gates will maintain home values and provide some kind of “class” or “distinction” as a partial solution to the problem of upholding their middle- or upper-middle-class position. As Linda, the Pine Hills resident quoted earlier, put it, “This is my theory: Long Island is very prestige minded. And I think the very fact of having a guard at the gate is akin to living in Manhattan in a doorman building versus a three-flight walk-up type of thing. There’s a certain ‘pass through the gate’ type of thing, this is a private community. That actually, sadly enough, may be part of it. You know, other than the safety issue, just a kind of separating ourselves from the great unwashed, shall we say.”

This separation from others and the maintenance of “niceness” can take the form of desiring a “stable” neighborhood with the “right” kind of stores and people. For

instance, Sharon said that increased neighborhood deterioration had left her feeling uncomfortable in the house where she had lived for over twenty-five years. Even though she had known everyone in her old neighborhood and had enjoyed walking to the corner store, “When Bloomingdale’s moved out and K-Mart moved in, it just brought in a different group of people.”

Ted and Carol similarly explained that Great Neck, where they had previously lived, had been a great community socially and that the children had attended a good school. “It’s almost like living in the city,” Carol said, “but better.”

*Ted:* But it’s changing, it’s undergoing internal transformations.

*Carol:* It’s ethnic changes.

*Ted:* It’s ethnic changes, that’s a very good way of putting it.

Carol added that the changes had started to happen “in the last, probably, seven to eight years.” The changing composition of the neighborhood had made them so uncomfortable they had decided to move. They hoped that their new “nice” community would keep those “changes” out.

#### *Economic Consequences: Subsidizing Inequality*

Home owners’ associations (HOAs), with and without gates, exist throughout the United States as a rapidly growing form of private government that is competing with public governance by municipalities, counties, and townships. In their substitution of private development and provision of services for public governance, HOAs are part of the neoliberal reformulation of economic responsibility. Cities and townships allow private gated communities to be built because they do not have to pay for the expanding infrastructure of new housing developments. For a while residents are able to support their own services, but eventually the gated community turns over its roads and lights to the city, or the city annexes the area<sup>16</sup>—often just as the infrastructure requires substantial reinvestment, the costs of which now fall on the public or get deferred.

Wayne, a resident of the Links, sees annexation as a bad bargain for gated community residents:

A lot of what’s happening in these gated communities is that local government continues to annex. As they annex, the level of service goes down, not only for the annexed areas, but also for the inner parts of the city. [The idea is that] we’ll get more money and everybody will benefit. [But in fact] they get more taxes and dilute the level or quality of services.

So developers say, “Well, I have got to have my own amenity package, I have to have my own gated community.” All that is, is a reflection of the inability of the municipality to deal properly with the problems at hand. They create another level of government: home owners’ associations in these gated communities. So the type of development we get is because the city is ambitious in terms of annexation.

I see problems with gated communities in the future . . . The reality is that when gated communities are annexed, the city does not take responsibility for repairs of streets [and infrastructure]. Home owners' associations will still have to provide that.

Outsiders to the gated community, however, may well see annexation more as a bad bargain for them. Important public space inequalities are created by the expansion of gated developments. Each time the city takes over a privately constructed community, they are spending money maintaining property and houses that are solely in the private domain. Thus gated communities benefit from public subsidies when they are built and then are bailed out by the taxpayers when they cannot keep up their local services. But their public spaces—streets, parks, pools, and jogging paths—remain private, gated off from the public that supports them. Gated communities, in this sense, are residential mini-prototypes for the neoliberal city and suburb, organized by the private sector and governed by a limited membership of home owners.

*Legal Consequences: Loss of Rights*

Residents of common interest developments also give up their legal rights to freedom of speech and to court adjudication of their personal civil and property rights.<sup>17</sup> They have signed a private contract with a corporation; therefore, any disputes with that corporation or with their neighbors are handled by contractual law.

Residents are often unaware that in such matters their choice of residence has left them with little to no legal recourse. Yusef, for example, had neighbors who persisted in making excessive noise, but when he went to the board about it he was upset to discover that they would not consider his case: they showed no interest, he said, and merely gave him the address of the local mediation center. "We decided to take them there [to mediation] after it had been proven that they didn't comply with the rules. They knew that they didn't have to go. It's not obligated for you to go to mediation, you can refuse to go. But if they took you to court it would count against you. It seems that you are the aggressor really because you didn't want to make peace when it was offered."

In mediation the neighbor made concessions about the noise but then didn't follow through on them. Yusef, returning to the HOA board, found that even at this point the board would not do anything. I asked Yusef if he would recommend this community to others. He responded, "I would recommend [it only to] those that I know very well. Those that I think are not going to find the rules and regulations very unacceptable. Those people who want a quiet life, who understand that they have to pay a price somehow, to live a quiet life, will enjoy being in a gated community. If you are going to have a place that is secure, then you have to have people who are controlling entry. But some people may not like that they are controlled, and [yet] the same people are asking for security."

*Political Consequences: Moral Minimalism*

At least half the people I spoke to said they were looking for an old-fashioned neighborhood where they knew and saw their neighbors. But gated communities do not necessarily create community. In fact, the corporate nature of governance in some cases creates more “moral minimalism” than community spirit. As described by M. P. Baumgartner in his *Moral Order of the Suburb*, this ethic, based on an aversion to conflict and confrontation and a valuing of restraint and avoidance, would make the morally correct response to a grievance ignoring it or, if absolutely necessary, calling in a third party to handle the matter.<sup>18</sup> If there is conflict between neighbors, as in Yusef’s case, they want it handled by the HOA board, not by themselves.

Yet some residents complain about how HOAs are excessively controlled by a few people and how all decisions are displaced onto an independent body. They are upset about the numerous restrictions placed on their own actions, though at the same time they want restrictions to ensure that others in the community will not harm their property values. Laurel, for example, complained to me about how she couldn’t even garden without first getting the HOA to approve her planting choices: “I asked the manager of her development and he said, ‘Well, you know, we have a committee, and you have to tell them what you want to do.’”

Her husband, George, who had been to several committee meetings, said that not enough people attended them to give an adequate sense of the consensus of the community. “It’s totally ridiculous, especially if you want to make a rule. The committee that’s going to run the development, who decides things like whose house gets painted, or what color, you know [does not represent the community]. I think it should be whatever you do in your own backyard, it’s your business, but in front it has to meet certain requirements.” The couple told me that the committee had even given them trouble about putting up a television satellite dish and colorful curtains when they moved in. To my question of whether the community allowed pets, Laurel replied that they would not have moved in if pets were prohibited. But the committee has put in some rules about pets, since some people let their animals run everywhere and do not pick up after them. Some gated developments are more restrictive and do not allow pets even to visit.

The recent trend of building fake gated communities in Simi Valley, Southern California, for the upper middle and middle classes—communities whose gates are never closed or locked, or whose guard shacks are never staffed, or whose guards have no authority to keep anyone out—dramatizes the point that “gates” are about deeper psychological and social concerns. They do not reduce crime or keep “others” out; they merely offer an illusion of physical safety and security that does

not require the “hardware” of guards and real locks. Fake gating as much as real gating enables home owners to feel better about their social status and place in the world in a period of social and economic transition. This evolution of fake gating from the “real” thing substantiates how profoundly gating permeates American culture, replacing and reconstructing notions of “community” and “the American dream.”

What is wrong with gated communities is that while residents use gates to create the community they are searching for, their personal housing decisions have unintended negative consequences. Most importantly, they disrupt other people’s ability to experience “community”: community in the sense of mutual openness of suburb and city, community in terms of access to public open space, and even community within the American tradition of integration and social justice.

Architecture and the layout of towns and suburbs provide concrete anchoring points in people’s everyday lives. These anchoring points reinforce ideas about society at large. Gated communities and the social segregation and exclusion they represent are symptomatic of problems Americans have with race, class, and gender inequality and social discrimination. The gated community contributes to a geography of social relations that produces fear and anxiety simply by locating a person’s home and place identity in a secured enclave, gated, guarded, and locked.<sup>19</sup>

Some policies and planning and design interventions can ameliorate gated communities’ negative impact. For example, it is important to communicate to prospective residents that gated communities may not be safer or protect housing values—the two main reasons that most residents choose to live there. Also, efforts should be made both locally and statewide to increase public education and provide legal information about the limitations of CIDs, including contractual restrictions on residents’ right to legal remedy. Further, residents need to understand how an HOA functions, the HOA board’s decision-making process, and the covenants, rules, and regulations that will regulate their home and landscape.

Architects and planners as well as the builders and construction companies who design and build gated developments should be encouraged to search for alternatives that deliver the safety and security that residents desire without the enclosure of open space and the use of physical walls and gates to create a sense of community. Advertisers and real estate agents should also reconsider their emphasis on security and exclusivity as strategies for attracting home owners and renters or for selling community as a neighborhood within walls.

Finally, local and state government officials should be required to evaluate the financing of gated communities for the long term. They need to resist the lure of short-term gains that place a future burden on taxpayers to rescue private communities that are unable to support their own aging infrastructure. At the national level, we need debate about the impact of gating on the development of children, social segregation, and community integration. As a society, we must ask the hard

question of how we can provide a safe, clean, supportive environment for everyone so that families will not need gating to have the neighborhood and cohesive community that so many Americans only dream about.

## NOTES

This chapter includes material previously published in *Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (Routledge, 2003), and many of the sections on the consequences of gating are adapted from “The Politics of Fear,” which appeared in 2005 in a special issue of *Soziale Welt* (Baden-Baden) entitled “The Reality of Cities” (ed. Helmuth Berking and Martina Loew). I would like to thank Andrew Kirby and Elena Danila for their participation in this project.

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3. Setha M. Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
4. As part of the research, my research assistants and I conducted extensive interviews with fifty gated community residents.
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6. Low, *Behind the Gates*.
7. Sanchez and Lang, *Security versus Status*.
8. D.S. Massey and Nancy Denton, “Suburbanization and Segregation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 3 (1988): 592–626; Gabriella Modan, “The Struggle for Neighborhood Identity: Discursive Constructions of Community and Place in a U.S. Multi-ethnic Neighborhood” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2000); Constance Perin, *Everything in Its Place: Social Order and Land Use in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
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10. Dennis Judd, “The Rise of New Walled Cities,” in *Spatial Practices: Critical Explorations in Social/Spatial Theory*, ed. Helen Liggett and David C. Perry (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 144–65.
11. Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
12. Robert Nelson, *Private Neighborhoods and the Transformation of Local Government* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2005).
13. Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Christopher Stone, “Crime and the City,” In *Breaking Away: The Future of Cities*, ed. Julia Vitullo-Martin (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996), 98–103; Dean Brennan and Al Zelinka, “Safe and Sound,” *Planning* 64 (August 1997): 4–10; Karen Colvard, “Crime Is Down? Don’t Confuse Us with the Facts,” *HFG Review* 2, no. 1 (1997): 19–26.
14. Catherine Silver, “Construction et deconstruction des identités de genre,” *Cahier du Genre* 31 (2002): 185–201; Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1964–1963* (New York: Delta, 1975).
15. Katherine S. Newman, *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Sherry Ortner, “Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 414–40.

16. Annexation is a process by which a town, county, or other governmental unit becomes part of the city, in this case the metropolitan region of San Antonio.

17. However, a recent New Jersey court ruling found, on the basis of the state's reading of civil rights, which is more liberal than the federal constitution's, that CID regulations could not restrict freedom-of-speech rights.

18. M. P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of the Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

19. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Michelle Fine, "Whiting Out' Social Justice," in *Addressing Cultural Issues in Organizations: Beyond the Corporate Context*, ed. Robert T. Carter (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 35–50.