

Book review

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Emily E Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, PA, 2014; 328 pp.: ISBN 978-0-8122-4598-1, £36.00/US\$55.00 (hbk)

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In the late 1980s, Compton emerged into American culture and consciousness as a symbol of urban gang conflicts: an African American community isolated by segregation, and scarred by high rates of poverty and joblessness, and, as a consequence, high rates of violence. However, as Emily Straus emphasises in this local history, Compton was never truly ‘urban’ – and any understanding of the community’s fate has to begin with the logic and dynamics of suburban development in a broader metropolitan context. *Death of a Suburban Dream* chronicles the history of the community from its starting point in suburban hopes to the current situation of perpetual (quasi-)urban crisis. In doing so, Straus engages several thematic concerns: it is at once a history of suburban transformation; of demographic change and racial conflict; of local political initiatives designed to promote development; and, most centrally, of the failures both of educational institutions and of efforts to reform those institutions.

The launching point of Straus’s history is a devastating earthquake in 1933 that

occurred as agricultural fields surrounding the small town were giving way to residential areas attracted by its proximity to Los Angeles. The earthquake serves not only as a bad omen for the future, but the first of many crises that Comptonites must confront without adequate resources. In subsequent decades (each addressed in a chapter), as the metropolitan region engulfed the community, its character as a struggling inner-ring suburb solidified. Compton initially emerged as a white suburb – and whites resisted demographic change as the South Los Angeles corridor experienced African American immigration during the war and post-war eras. During the 1960s, Compton transitioned to majority African American status. Initially, it was a middle class community that defined itself in contrast to the poorer communities to the north (principally Watts). That middle class character would soon erode, spiralling toward its emergence as the ‘notorious cultural icon’ (p. 11) of the 1990s. By that time, the community (along with much of the south LA corridor) had already begun a new demographic shift toward Latino dominance – a shift occasioned by racial and institutional conflicts that paralleled (imperfectly) the earlier white-to-black transition. All of this history is told with a good balance of attention to the proverbial ‘trees’ and ‘forest’.

Throughout the book, Straus emphasises the *cyclical* nature of Compton’s challenges. From the start, the community suffered from a lack of adequate resources to support

essential community services, such as strong schools. The key to generating those resources was to attract commercial investment. However, poor services and underdeveloped infrastructure marked the community as undesirable for investment – without which, services suffered further. And so the cycle deepens, playing out via a series of precipitating crises (of both external and internal origin) and ineffective responses: the 1933 earthquake; the Watts Riots of 1965; Proposition 13 in 1978; the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992; and a string of acute crises in the schools and political institutions. One constant dynamic is the tension between a desire to maintain local control over the community and the dire need for external assistance. Unfortunately, external help generally comes in ways that do not break the cycle – or, worse still, deepen it.

Straus does not let residents off the hook in her explanation of how the cycle is initiated and maintained – although this is certainly no exercise in victim-blaming. She points out that many of their own collective decisions and responses compounded the problems. The metaphorical ‘original sin’ was the effort to keep their community strictly residential, which neglected the need for a commercial tax base. Of course, that was simply an effort to realise the quintessential suburban dream as their community was swamped by the encroaching metropolis. Unfortunately, by the time they recognised the need to attract commercial investment, Compton was already playing at a disadvantage in the unforgiving competition of metropolitan development. The die, so to speak, was cast. Straus notes the sequence of subsequent attempts to generate the necessary tax base, and other initiatives to extricate themselves from the cycle – all to no avail. The sad irony here is that the initial pursuit of the suburban dream set the community on a trajectory which actually

prevented its realisation. At some point, a majority-minority inner-ring suburb takes on all of the essential *social* characteristics of an ‘urban’ setting – even if the housing stock is less dense, and the absence of industry is the product of initial design rather than the result of deindustrialisation.

Straus’s main purpose is to contextualise the failure of Compton’s schools. (Her introduction to the community came through involvement in the Teach for America program, which provided her the opportunity to teach in Compton and nearby communities for half a decade in the 1990s.) Compton serves as a strategic site to study contemporary reform initiatives and other interventions to address the failure of educational institutions, as the community has been the site of many such initiatives in recent decades – many of which were subsequently applied nationally. Among them have been early bussing plans, the use of emergency-credentialed teachers, state takeover, standardised testing and the creation of charter schools. All of them largely failed; Straus wants reformers to understand why.

Context is everything; educational reforms that do not contextualise the failures they seek to remedy are themselves doomed to failure. As Straus explains, educational reform ‘had become all about changing the classroom and the school, not the larger social forces that influenced students’ ability to learn’ (pp. 172–173). Or, more specifically: ‘The focus of reform remains too narrowly on schools, teachers, administration, and testing, which means that it fails to account for the many other disruptions present in the lives of Compton Unified’s students’ (p. 224). This is an essential message for those interested in educational reform, even if it does not lend itself to identifying easy solutions.

But contextualisation goes beyond just accounting for the effects of endemic poverty and violence. Straus makes an

important link between the role of the schools and the failed suburban dream. Specifically, because of the lack of economic viability, the Compton Unified School District would become the largest employer in the city. That meant that schools not only served the immediate purpose of educating the next generation, but a latent purpose as a source of scarce middle class employment. Of course, the tensions between those purposes play out in the practices of the school district. As one critical report in the early 1990s noted, the district focused 'on the needs of adults, not on the needs of students' (p. 194). Bureaucratic incompetence and corruption are, from another perspective, manifestations of an implicit jobs program in the tradition of urban machine politics and patronage. This is not to explain away or excuse the practices – only to trace their roots far below the surface.

I noted above that the book is about suburbs, race, politics and education – and it has something valuable to offer readers interested in each of those subjects. Those interested in learning narrowly about any one of them are likely to find the book too diffuse, and will want more attention to, say, the details of educational reform initiatives, or the specifics of interracial conflicts. Other readers (and I include myself in this group) would agree with Straus's implicit argument that a holistic perspective is essential for understanding any of them. Overall, *Death of a Suburban Dream* is an engaging history of a significant community that is well worth careful attention on the part of anyone interested in the vexing and intertwined challenges associated with education, race, politics, and American metropolitan systems.