

BOOK REVIEWS

Of Lives and Landscapes

Moga, Steven T. *Urban Lowlands: A History of Neighborhoods, Poverty, and Planning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 240 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780226710532; \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780226833330.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781424000161

Bottoms, flats, and hollows are the kinds of urban neighborhoods that fascinate Steven Moga, a professor of landscape studies at Smith College. Such spaces emerged over the course of the nineteenth century in low-lying, wet, and undeveloped parts of cities and quickly gained reputations as “slums” for their allegedly unsanitary conditions. Moga’s book, *Urban Lowlands*, newly released in paperback, looks at middle- and upper-class reform efforts in four such neighborhoods from the East Coast to the West Coast of the United States: Harlem Flats in New York City, Black Bottom in Nashville, Swede Hollow in St. Paul, and the Flats in Los Angeles. Despite important differences unique to each locality, patterns of reform emerged across all four locations: various stakeholders—from progressive social reformers and urban planners to city politicians and real estate developers—routinely coalesced around the goal of either rehabilitating the area or, if that failed, demolishing lowland slums to protect the health and reputation of their cities.

Urban Lowlands begins in New York. During the nineteenth century, as Manhattan’s street grid expanded uptown, working-class New Yorkers who could not afford a proper place on the grid moved to its edges. One estimate asserted that twenty thousand people—Irish and Italian immigrants, as well as African Americans—lived in the city’s hinterlands in “self-built housing,” otherwise known as shanties (35). Harlem Flats was one such community that took shape after midcentury. It consisted of three hundred modest wood homes spread throughout what was then the city’s largest wetland area, located in today’s East Harlem. Shanties were connected by winding pathways that, according to Moga, “presented a striking contrast to the orderly geometric pattern” of the grid (35). Journalists, city planners, and legislators studied the flats with a mixture of curiosity and disgust (mostly the latter) and wrote a great deal about the marshland’s unpleasant odors and poor sanitation. They understood Harlem Flats as an embarrassing problem that a modernizing city had to solve.

Landfilling emerged as the solution. In the early 1870s, the city began dumping a mixture of manure, ash, and garbage into the flats, hoping to solidify the ground. The fill, however, caused such a revolting stench (even worse than before) that the entire project had to be nearly abandoned owing to the complaints of residents and reformers alike. Nonetheless, filling continued and, combined with a massive new sewer system, transformed the wetlands into a grid-ready part of the city suitable for new tenements and factories by the 1880s.

The residents of Swede Hollow in St. Paul, Minnesota, were less at the mercy of outside forces than those who lived in Harlem Flats. This was in part because they were immigrants from Scandinavia and, according to the logic of the late nineteenth century, of more desirable racial stock than immigrants from Ireland or Southern Europe. Landscape was at play here, too. The Hollow was undoubtedly a lowland neighborhood, but it was not a soggy marshland: its homes were nestled within a picturesque ravine on either side of a large creek. Journalists and others praised this location and noted its inhabitants' easy access to water and fresh air. Artists, such as the Minneapolis-born painter Dewey Albinson, flocked to the area in the early twentieth century, attempting to capture its "fairylane" quality on canvas (106). Swede Hollow still had its vocal critics (public health crusaders and newspaper editors who considered the neighborhood a "plague spot"), but it was able to hang on as an informal, relatively independent part of St. Paul longer than Harlem Flats did in New York, only giving way to a public park in 1973 (95).

Nashville's Black Bottom and Los Angeles's the Flats had sizable non-white populations of African Americans and Mexican Americans, respectively. Through a combination of aggressive public health initiatives, resident removal projects, and vigilante violence, whites in Nashville slowly chipped away at the post-Civil War gains of the Black community. In Los Angeles, housing reformers during the Progressive Era focused on so-called "cholo courts." The dwellings featured small wooden houses arranged around a central open space that was used in common. The homes were often castigated as "nests of humanity" for their dirt floors, lack of sunlight, and overcrowded conditions (130). At first, reformers targeted landlord neglect in the Flats and urged Mexican families to practice better housekeeping, but when little changed, they settled on slum clearance.

Moga occasionally rushes through his coverage of the twentieth century, leaving potential leads underexplored. Harlem Flats' Gilded Age tenements, for example, were torn down between 1940 and 1965 to make way for large-scale public housing. This is presented as another top-down blow to neighborhood cohesion. Yet the author alludes to "political organizing by residents" for "improved living conditions and better city services" as a factor that led to the demolition and rebuilding (52). This point about tenant agency, if probed further, might complicate Moga's largely dismissive portrayal of public housing. Housing projects also displaced the "cholo courts" in Los Angeles. A photograph of the new complex shows two- and three-story garden apartments organized around courtyards; they appear quite human in scale and not all that different from the original "cholo courts." If public housing in the Flats proved to be a disappointment, it was perhaps due more to the freeway that severed the community from the city's Eastside than the architecture itself.

Urban Lowlands is at its best when it stays in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era and especially effective when it spotlights sensory history. Moga writes that "the medically trained sanitary surveyors [in Harlem Flats] categorized smells as natural or unnatural,

speculating about their causes and sources as they articulated in colorful language the intensity of odors and their potential danger” (42). One of the book’s central insights is that whenever the senses set off “alarms,” whether in the flats of Harlem or Los Angeles, they triggered emotions of disgust and fear, that provoked a host of interventions. Such actions might improve lowland residents’ lives, but as Moga shows, were, tragically, even more likely to disturb them.

Beyond Narratives of “Failure”: Reconstruction from the Black Grassroots

Williams, Kidada E. *I Saw Death Coming: A History of Terror and Survival in the War against Reconstruction*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. 384 pp. \$30.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781635576634.

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doi:10.1017/S153778142400015X

Kidada Williams’s *I Saw Death Coming* is a meticulously researched and emotionally charged contribution to the historiography of Reconstruction. Arguably, no other period in American history has undergone such an extensive shift in historical interpretation as the Reconstruction Era. Williams masterfully enters into this dynamic revisionist conversation, adding yet another nail into the coffin of the Dunning School’s narrow interpretation of the era. Williams, like many historians before her, is focused on understanding how and why the Reconstruction Era ended and gave way to the racial apartheid of Jim Crow. Deviating from older predecessors, such as Allen Trelease, who focused on the political circumstances surrounding the Ku Klux Klan, or contemporaries, such as Elaine Frantz Parsons, who emphasize its cultural roots, Williams adopts a social historian’s method to understand the grassroots oppositional forces confronting post-bellum Black freedom. Williams’s historical analysis is uniquely forceful because she uses testimony from survivors of Klan terrorism to define the organization and provide on-the-ground insights into the destruction of Reconstruction. “Survivors’ searing recollections of the war after the Civil War,” Williams argues, “bring to light the ways that Reconstruction did not fail but was violently overthrown” (xiii). If, as Eric Foner has argued, Reconstruction was America’s unfinished revolution, Kidada Williams draws needed attention to the counterrevolutionary movement that ensured the goals of Reconstruction remained unrealized.

Chapter by chapter, Williams takes readers on a heart-wrenching journey through the American South, demonstrating how formerly enslaved families fought not only for