I went to grammar school in the USC area, an area that was struck by the 1992 riots and heavy with gang activity. In the mostly Latino populated Catholic school that I attended, I remember police officers coming to classes and emphasizing that gang members were “losers.” Nothing was mentioned that many of these gang members came from our very own community. Nothing was mentioned of the influences, such as poverty, immigration, and anti-Latino sentiments that create an opportunity for the growth of gangs. Needless to say, there was no afterthought of what happened to gang members after their tenure. The aftermath of leaving a gang and understanding gang recovery drove the author to investigate these individuals after they were no longer “losers.”

In Edward Orozco Flores’ *God’s Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery*, the question is: what happens after gang life? This is the context of Flores’ book. Flores’ thesis is that the “book demonstrates how recovery from gang life is centrally organized by religion and gender, arguing that religious practices shape the discursive and embodied negotiations that reformulate Chicano gang masculinity and socially reintegrate men away from the street and into the household” (25). Essentially, former gang members use religious organizations to regain a sense of their lost masculinity and rearticulate their identities as responsible adults. The individuals in the ethnographic piece of Flores’ work are associated with Victory Outreach and Homeboy Industries. However, before Flores presents the individuals who partake in Victory Outreach and Homeboy Industries, he takes the reader through a rich and meticulous history of Latinos in Los Angeles.

In the first two chapters, Flores wonderfully explains how the Latino threat (as argued by Leo Chavez) is not only structural through racist and paternal policies in Los Angeles, but is also grounded in the continual emasculation of young Latino men. He goes on to explain that Los Angeles’ historical disdain for Latinos becomes most prominent in the last decade as policies to combat gangs, terrorism, and drugs became interwoven policies that simultaneously targeted minorities. Without an outlet to recover from such policies when individuals knowingly leave gang life, Flores moves on to explain that many individuals find themselves attracted to religious rebirth and routine.

In the concluding chapters, Flores focuses on individual cases that express the models by which gang recovery is made possible through Victory Outreach and Homeboy Industries. Victory Outreach gives the perspective of reborn evangelical Protestants where individuals attempt to reenter society through
their religious transformation. Through Victory Outreach, “recovering gang members use new expressions of manhood, shaped through images as the ‘family man’ or the ‘man of God,’ to craft reformed identities” (193). While, Homeboy Industries, led by Father Gregory Boyle is not driven to reignite the religious vigor of individuals, it seeks another purpose. The goal for Homeboy Industries is to instill routine and responsibility. These two organizations work towards the same goal but take different approaches, functioning to help individuals when individuals seek recovery. And because these two organizations work in different approaches, Flores argues that “faith-based gang recovering operates in the context of America’s free religious marketplace, in which urban ministries such as Victory Outreach and Homeboy Industries offer contrasting models based on different theological foundations and religious practices” (196). While technically true, I question the actual availability of former gang members to partake and be taken seriously if the desired recovery religion is not a Judeo-Christian faith. Flores discusses how meditation is sometimes used at Homeboy Industries, but what events would take place if former gang members whole heartily decided to become Buddhist or Muslim? This, of course, is not the purpose of the book, but I wonder the potential for former gang members to break from the shell of Latinos as automatic Christians.

Unfortunately, however wonderful the book may be, an initial concern of mine is the organizations themselves. A reader might read the back of the book and perhaps mistakenly think that these organizations have been discussed in previous publications. For example, in Luis Leon’s La Llorona’s Children, he touches on Victory Outreach’s religious transformation of members and Fr. Greg Boyle has written Tattoos of the Heart. But upon closer inspection, and an important step in order to enter the conversation, one will find a more articulate history of Latino gang life. By giving an incredibly rich history of Los Angeles race relations, the reader is forced to realize that former gang members who attempt to redirect their life away from a life of crime and marginalization have little alternatives but to enter a religious recovery program. It appears that religious affiliation is quite possibly the only avenue accepting of the truly repentant.

One must also be sure to properly locate God’s Gangs within the already existing canon of religions and gangs. It is not to say that God’s Gangs cannot stand alone, but it should be placed in the greater context of transnational gangs in order to give the reader a fuller perspective on this epidemic problem within the Latino community. I would suggest accompanying God’s Gangs with Robert Brenneman’s Homies and Hermanos in order to evaluate the connection between immigration, marginalization and religious rebirth and how they all function within the religious marketplace.