

# Book Review

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Willow Lung-Amam, *The Right to Suburbia: Combating Gentrification on the Urban Edge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), 384 pp.

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Urban scholars overwhelmingly tend to study major cities. Given their economic and political importance as well as their social and cultural influences, cities have long been the crucible of inquiry and analysis. However, the “urban” here is a bit misleading as it not only relates to cities, but broader processes of urbanization. This conceptual distinction reminds us that processes like gentrification are not only localized features of neighborhood change, but signals of urban restructuring within and beyond the urban core (Dantzer 2024). For instance, gentrifying suburbs typically have more diverse residents spread out across larger areas as compared to their urban correlates. Willow S. Lung-Amam’s new book, *The Right to Suburbia*, focuses on the role of suburbs in our understandings of gentrification processes and politics.

The book focuses on two central questions: To what extent have the processes and products of suburban redevelopment disadvantaged marginalized groups? And how have these groups mobilized to assert a more equitable stake and place in their suburban futures? Drawing insights from three cases (Silver Spring, Wheaton, and the International Corridor) in the suburbs of Washington D.C., *The Right to Suburbia* examines the pros and cons of redevelopment – a racialized process of uneven metropolitan development in which the state plays a pivotal role. Lung-Amam argues that embodied logics of neoliberalism are thus reflected in the politics and processes of gentrification with suburbs operating as the defining expression “... as cities more often grow out than up” (7). As such, suburbs are not just specific geographies beyond city limits, but an alternative way of life (i.e., *suburbanism*). As historic sites of racial exclusion, today’s suburbs are increasingly more diverse. The Back to the City Movement of the earlier 2000s has resulted

in young White professionals and aging baby boomers relocating back into urban neighborhoods while more and more Black and Brown, and lower income, households seek the suburbs for a place to call home. The book illustrates how racialized policies and practices followed Black people from the city and how they assumed new dimensions in suburban life. But marginalized communities have never remained silent in the wake of state violence. *The Right to Suburbia* helps us understand suburbs not as docile communities but “as sites of social and political struggle” (16).

Lung-Amam resists a deficit-oriented approach by illuminating the “beautiful struggle” of suburban politics and metropolitan development. Drawing from a vast range of methods (over 70 interviews with activists, community members and political leaders, document analysis, and participant observation) the three “connected cases” provide unique but complementary tales of wins and losses. Each place faced similar challenges, although at different times and to different degrees (26). Resting upon a long history of urban scholarship understanding the role of the suburbs, the book highlights the processes of what she coins a *new suburban renewal* – the interplay of old school and new school suburban activists’ engagement with local politics, regional governance and metropolitan development. The diverse context of Silver Springs offers an exemplary case of downtown development. “As Silver Spring transformed from the downtown of DC’s northern suburbs through what many associate with its decline and rebirth, it probes the battles won and lost in more than four decades of debate over its future” (81). The deleterious conditions of the downtown infused ideologies of anti-Blackness with residential and commercial patterns. For many developers and county officials, Lung-Amam notes “race was often the subtext, not the pretext” of evaluation procedures regarding officials’ concerns about various revitalization projects. Minority-owned and immigrant businesses’ occupancy of valuable real estate with fragmented land ownership resulted in the embrace of urban renewal efforts to develop downtown through private action. The question over what constituted good suburban development resulted in some grassroots organizing. However, Lung-Amam argues that given the lack of power among local institutions, it did little to address concerns and concessions for an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse group of newcomers seeking the suburban dream where many small businesses were not a part of its creation. Moreover, they lacked progressive leadership to advance their respective goals.

Wheaton provides a different context in which local institutions were more organized and open to development. Organizations such as Coalition for the Fair Redevelopment of Wheaton (Coalition) and the Latino Economic Development Center (LECD) served as fertile ground for the contestation with new suburban activists more attuned to the needs of residential and

commercial displacement, but with limited capacity to combat it. The decline of the Coalition and the lack of sustained engagement may have been in part due to internal politics and the lack of trust between the county and community members. Issues like this plague all cases (and possibly all resistance efforts): preventing sustained engagement among an increasingly diverse set of stakeholders. More established organizations like CASA de Maryland stepped in to fill this void, given their legacy status and longstanding organizing efforts across places, expanding anti-displacement coalitions across the region into areas like the International Corridor. Metropolitan development as proposed by the development of what was commonly known as the “Purple Line”, was designed to connect historically segregated communities. However, its planned development routes across the region posed a challenge to various stakeholders.

Langley Park is a neighborhood with its own challenges but home to a diverse, culturally rich community with high forms of place attachment and social cohesion. As such, community members and activists quickly mobilized to create the Fair Development Coalition and the Purple Line Corridor Coalition. Given the Purple Line’s planned route, collective organizing efforts drew from longstanding engagement by old and new suburban activists across local neighborhoods. Narrative construction and control proved salient here as local residents sought to reclaim and redefine their neighborhood reputations through effective and timely engagement with county officials and developers. Altogether, these cases reveal the increasingly salient role of community organizations in sustaining resistance efforts.

*The Right to Suburbia* is a not only a compelling look about suburban politics and regional governance, it’s also a bold form of storytelling. Given her own attachment to the area and previous research, Lung-Amam weaves in personal narratives serving, at times, as both a researcher and faculty member at the University of Maryland, while at others as an engaged community member and neighbor. She maintained active roles in various local and national collaborative organizations (e.g., Small-Business Anti-Displacement Network and National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education) arguably providing a conflicting account. Yet unsurprisingly so given her prominent and admirable role as a community-engaged planning scholar. In the appendix, she invokes the concept of “critical distance” and its reflective nature in interpreting such events. Although connected, these cases may not serve as strong cautionary tales; rather, exemplary vignettes into D.C.’s suburban anti-displacement efforts.

The recommendations in the last chapter recontextualize the suburbs and their increasingly important role in the changing morphology of metropolitan areas and its accompanying politics. Yet, one arguable limitation is the book’s lack of critical engagement with national discourses and federal priorities.

That is, to what extent do local anti-displacement efforts reflect considerations of, and sensibilities to, broader economic conditions? How do national discourses surrounding the political significance of the suburbs drive ideologies surrounding local power and equitable development? As we see today, national politics reshapes the everyday practices of denizens through various forms of “infrastructural disruptions” by increasingly placing community members in precarious positions (Graham 2010). However, just like the book shows, crises provide potential opportunities to enact meaningful changes.

With undoubtedly wide appeal to urbanists of all disciplinary and political orientations, and lovers of the DMV area, *The Right to Suburbia* reminds us again that place matters. By expanding our focus on gentrification into the suburbs, this book reifies the desperate need for a more relational form of spatial politics to combat its effects.

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