

Book Review

The Right to Suburbia: Combating Gentrification on the Urban Edge, by Willow S. Lung-Amam.
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What does gentrification in the suburbs look like and who is affected by this process? In *The Right to Suburbia*, Willow Lung-Amam answers both questions by examining gentrification in recent decades in three Maryland suburbs outside of Washington, D.C. Lung-Amam focuses on the efforts of local grassroots organizations to advocate for residents of color and small business owners as they contested redevelopment that would push them out of suburban communities in which they have been engaged residents and business owners for years. As the title of the book suggests, who has the right to live in, shape, and benefit from suburban life?

Lung-Amam presents her argument in the Introduction and first chapter. She writes, “I view gentrification as a violent process of cultural and community displacement rooted in racial capitalism. This definition centers on the racialization of neighborhoods and the displacement of people as well as culture and community” (p. 2). This gentrification threatens residents “who were once largely excluded from suburbs and have since fought to keep them aloft in good times and in bad” (p. xxi).

As the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area grew and the city experienced gentrification, suburbs outside the city also encountered

gentrification. In Chapter 2 Lung-Amam describes the uneven development and demographic changes in the metropolitan region in recent decades. In the postwar era, the three suburbs examined in the subsequent chapters became home to people of color and working-class residents.

The next three chapters examine gentrification in three Maryland suburbs just outside city limits. Chapter 3 details downtown gentrification in Silver Spring, Chapter 4 considers gentrification that followed the Metro line to Wheaton, and Chapter 5 analyzes gentrification in Langley Park connected to the proposal of a new suburban light-rail line. The three case studies proceed in chronological order—gentrification occurs first in Silver Spring and then arises in other communities—and those resisting gentrification learn lessons from each battle along the way. Several themes emerge across the case studies: suburban populations can be dynamic over time; residents of color and those of more limited economic means struggle for recognition and involvement in planning processes and political debates about redevelopment; residents and small business owners are affected by gentrification; redevelopment involves very local involvement and action as well as larger-scale county government and regional government actors; and white, middle-class and above residents as well as those who stand to profit from gentrification have a different vision of their suburban community compared to the residents and organizations Lung-Amam focuses on.

In the final chapter, Lung-Amam discusses lessons for suburban communities, organizations, and residents facing gentrification.

These include developing the local organizations and tools needed to work for the visions residents have for their own communities and against the forces of gentrification. She warns that suburban gentrification might be called “retrofitting or renaissance” but “their processes are no less brutal nor disruptive” than gentrification (p. 233). Even if the particular contexts and processes of suburban gentrification may differ in Maryland from other metropolitan regions in the United States, Lung-Amam asks readers to “listen to marginalized communities and invest in their visions” and “invest in and fight for the just futures that all communities—urban and suburban—deserve” (p. 247).

Two features of this book stand out. First, the book highlights important changes in suburbs. Numerous suburbs in the United States became home to working-class people and people of color. Across metropolitan regions, many suburban communities have limited land for sprawling development and redevelopment/gentrification will be a key factor in local change. What are the similarities and differences found in local politics, placemaking, and processes between these three cases outside Washington, D.C., and other suburbs? Who benefits from these changes? How common is suburban gentrification? Can suburban

Black and Brown communities pursue their own visions?

Second, Lung-Amam’s research, personal experiences, and work with community groups contribute to the analysis. The Appendix explains the qualitative research carried out. Lung-Amam’s findings are based on a “connected case-study” that involved: a snowball sample of 74 semi-structured interviews, starting with community activists, across the three suburbs between 2014 and 2020; work with local groups, including writing reports; examining archival and secondary sources; and studying planning documents (pp. 249–52). This approach helps bring the struggles in Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Langley Park to life with implications for researchers and community members.

The Right to Suburbia is an invitation for researchers to study suburban gentrification and its effects. The case studies here highlight important processes at work and who can be harmed. More research will help determine whether gentrification in different suburban communities follows logics similar to gentrification in cities or whether it differs in significant ways. The fate of the American suburbs and metropolitan regions in the twenty-first century may just depend on these answers.