

## INTO THE STACKS

# The Urgency of Suburban History

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### Abstract

*Current trends in suburban history incorporate questions about racial violence and exploitation formerly reserved for cities. They emphasize inequality but attribute its persistence to unequal terms of accessing suburbia rather than exclusion. Scholars should build on this insight to better historicize suburbs that do not fit existing frameworks. Specifically, they should bridge histories of climate change, capitalism, and gentrification. Doing so will ensure suburban history remains at the forefront for understanding present-day crises.*

Recent histories of the suburbs have begun to draw conclusions about suburbs previously reserved for cities. Suburbs, they show, could be places of predation and violence too. Current events likely informed this new expansion of topics. As Colin Gordon points out: when Darren Wilson murdered Michael Brown in 2014 on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, it was not because he seemed out of place as a young Black man in the suburbs, but because he was a typical resident of a suburb where, the Department of Justice found, the police spent more effort extracting revenue from its majority-Black citizens than protecting public safety.<sup>1</sup> Just as Michael Brown was a suburbanite, so too are the residents of the apartment complexes on the edges of cities working shifts in Amazon warehouses and driving Ubers, under threat of eviction by politically-connected private equity firms that own thousands of similar units across the country.<sup>2</sup> For historians currently writing about suburbs, it is difficult to ignore that politicians with a stake in private equity share complicity in both a neoliberal crisis of capital and an ascendant white nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

This pattern of engagement with present-day concerns has enabled a broadening of suburban history beyond its key framework of exclusion. Previous generations of suburban historians largely identified exclusion as the prime explanatory factor of enduring metropolitan inequality. These historians, whose studies ranged from the Bay Area to Atlanta and from Flint to Miami, trailblazed a new approach to the suburbs that emphasized the deployment of racialized property-owner politics and local land-use regulations by ever-shifting coalitions. Though they nuanced the terms of exclusion in numerous ways—such as by debunking simplistic models of white flight from inner cities, or by identifying suburbs developed by and for people of different

<sup>1</sup>Colin Gordon, *Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy, and Inequality in the St. Louis Suburbs* (Chicago, 2019). Also see, Andrew Kahrl, *The Black Tax: 150 Years of Theft, Exploitation, and Dispossession in America* (Chicago, 2024), 311–315.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Alec MacGillis, “The Beleaguered Tenants of ‘Kushnerville,’” May 23, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-beleaguered-tenants-of-kushnerville> (accessed May 16, 2025).

<sup>3</sup>Christopher C. Sellers, *Race and the Greening of Atlanta: Inequality, Democracy, and Environmental Politics in an Ascendant Metropolis* (Athens, GA, 2023), 301; Kahrl, *The Black Tax*, 342–350.

racess and ethnicities—they nonetheless converged around a view of suburban power and political economy that focused on the erection of barriers to suburban living for large swaths of Americans.<sup>4</sup> The authors of the latest suburban history no longer use exclusion as an all-encompassing shorthand for discrimination. To them, exclusion proves insufficient, as have attempts to redress inequality focused solely on reducing barriers to the suburbs. Rather than exclusion, newer histories of the suburbs focus on how unequal terms of access hindered fights for social and economic justice.

Tim Keogh identifies the limits of exclusion by boldly choosing Levittown, New York for a case study. Not only is Levittown one of the most well-covered sites in suburban scholarship, but also it is perhaps most synonymous with exclusion in both scholarly and popular understandings of suburban history. By contrast, in *In Levittown's Shadow: Poverty in America's Wealthiest Postwar Suburb* Keogh locates low-wage workers, including area residents who preceded Levittown's development, in the suburb's converted attics and nearby neighborhoods. However, policymakers assumed the absence of these residents from the area, enabling them to assume suburbs comprised of exceptional places in the United States in their total lack of poverty. They therefore focused on integrating suburbs as a means of eradicating poverty and, by extension, nationwide inequality.<sup>5</sup> Keogh argues these efforts were based on a faulty assumption of suburban exceptionalism that obscured how Levittown's prosperity stemmed from exploiting the poor people already there. Suburban poverty may have been erased from understandings of Levittown, but its immense profitability limited possibilities for economic justice. It still does. What makes Keogh's suburban exceptionalism novel is that it doubles as both an assertion of the presence of working-class Black suburbanites in the segregated Levittown and an affirmation of the material consequences of the narrative of exclusion constructed by historical actors. In other words, though it belied demographic reality, the story told by white suburbanites, policymakers, and organizers that Levittown's exclusionary policies made it homogenous was in and of itself significant for the political possibilities of redressing inequality.

Note that Keogh is not simply trying to argue that American suburbs had more socioeconomic and racial diversity than previously thought. The same generation of scholars that tackled the politics of metropolitan exclusion also worked to more accurately render suburban demography. Andrew Weise had to rigorously argue that Black suburbanites in fact existed, while Jerry González went "in search of" Latino suburbanization. Others documented working-class suburbs amidst affluence.<sup>6</sup> They did this to counter the previous scholarship that pegged all U.S. suburbs as affluent and white. However, these works still assumed discrete suburbs of different types or varieties existing separately from one another. Under this approach, Levittown would still be the ultimate example of a segregated, planned suburb. While recent suburban history can, thus, assume diverse suburbia shaped by exclusion, there is clearly still significance to questions about who is present in the suburbs. If we expand the scope of "presence" to those whose lives are deeply entangled with the processes that create and sustain suburbs, it is even easier to see the urgency of suburban history in the present moment.

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago, 2014); Andrew Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis* (Chicago, 2015).

<sup>5</sup>Tim Keogh, *In Levittown's Shadow: Poverty in America's Wealthiest Postwar Suburbs* (Chicago, 2023), 11–12.

<sup>6</sup>Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2017); Richard Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900–1950* (Baltimore, 2000); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago, 2002); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2004).

For example, to further consider the contemporary suburbs, it helps to situate those Amazon warehouses or tech startups within larger questions about the history of highly mobile international capital in creating suburban forms. In my own book, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960*, I show how it was in the interest of a transnational capital network to market a Baltimore suburb as a homogenous white space, seemingly distinct from the city whose boundary actually ran through it. That suburbs and cities were opposites was a narrative—in this case a marketing strategy—calculated to pay dividends to investors on different continents. When reevaluating the relationship between city and suburb as an imperative of capital, I could also see what and who was in the space that did not fit the story, including a longstanding Black community that developers tried, with some success, to control and displace.

Other historians are identifying the under-examined presence of people to revise the mechanisms of suburban inequality. Take one of the most infamous and well-known subjects associated with U.S. suburbs: redlining. Though applied widely today to a variety of types of spatialized segregation such as digital redlining, the term originated with the maps of the New Deal agency, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), which based its evaluation of neighborhood property values on the race and class of residents. Redlining has been one of the key subjects of suburban history since Kenneth Jackson brought widespread attention to the color-coded government maps of over 200 metropolitan areas in the 1980s. Though Jackson himself never made the claim, scholars assumed that redlining maps indicated the federal government did not extend mortgage relief to African Americans during the Great Depression by virtue of redlining Black neighborhoods. Therefore, historians Todd Michney and LaDale Winling knew it would surprise readers of their recent articles on HOLC and redlining to learn that “the first HOLC loan ever paid back was one made to a Black woman, Mrs. Susie Mae Rakestraw of Macon, Georgia.”<sup>7</sup> Rakestraw's story stands in for the argument that, despite its importance, the mechanics of redlining are far from settled.<sup>8</sup> They used untapped portions of HOLC records to revisit the mixed public and private economic origins of the agency and to reconsider how the federal government used the maps. Rakestraw's loan does not absolve HOLC of establishing discriminatory lending patterns, nor is it a celebration of individual thrift. These new insights in fact sharpen understandings of racist redlining practices. Rakestraw's inclusion in the nascent federal welfare state makes it untenable to describe the deleterious impact of redlining in terms of exclusion alone.

Where does suburban history go from here? Remaining in the generative mode of engaging with present-day concerns, it is urgent that historians look to places like Altadena, California for an answer. In January 2025 the Eaton Fire destroyed over 9,000 buildings and killed at least fifteen people, largely in the suburban Los Angeles neighborhood of Altadena. Resembling neither the Malibu nor the South Central of Mike Davis's “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn,” Altadena was a leafy enclave with rates of Black homeownership double the national average.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Todd Michney and LaDale Winling, “New Perspectives on New Deal Housing Policy: Explicating and Mapping HOLC Loans to African Americans,” *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 1 (2019): 151.

<sup>8</sup>Michney and Winling, “New Perspectives on New Deal Housing Policy”; LaDale Winling and Todd Michney, “The Roots of Redlining: Academic, Governmental, and Professional Networks in the Making of the New Deal Lending Regime,” *The Journal of American History* 108, no. 1 (June 2021): 42–69; Todd Michney, “How the City Survey's Redlining Maps Were Made: A Closer Look at HOLC's Mortgagee Rehabilitation Division,” *Journal of Planning History* 21, no. 4 (2022): 316–344.

<sup>9</sup>Hannah Fry and Brittney Mejia, “Altadena's Black residents disproportionately hit by Eaton fire, UCLA study says,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 28, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-28/eaton-fire-disproportionately-hit-altadenas-black-residents-ucla-study-says> (accessed May 16, 2025).

In the aftermath of the fire, residents knew that “the vultures [were] circling” to buy up land.<sup>10</sup> The homeownership rate that made Altadena exceptional was, ironically, due to its western half receiving a low grade from the HOLC. That half was most directly in the path of the fire.<sup>11</sup> Fire victims now rebuild their lives with the dread that thanks to their exceptional status as Black suburban property owners, their losses make an exceptionally ripe investment opportunity. Prior to the fire, Altadena’s Black population was already decreasing due to gentrification. A University of California, Los Angeles study reports that Black homeowners face more difficult financial conditions for rebuilding than the population as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Fire victims now rebuild their lives with the dread that thanks to their exceptional status as Black suburban property owners, their losses make an exceptionally ripe opportunity for investors.

Recent scholarship can lend valuable insight to Altadena’s predicament, but it does not sufficiently contend with places like it. I will point out three strands of scholarship that could be instructive in tandem but fall short in and of themselves. First is the history of capital that contextualizes anxieties about investment and exploitation. Bench Ansfield’s history of the “racially stratified property insurance market” and the destruction of the Bronx contextualizes the “vultures” who profit from fire—albeit via arson rather than wildfire.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to regulatory capture in the 1940s, property insurance companies began to offer more “comprehensive forms of indemnification in the suburbs while curbing the supply of insurance in central cities.”<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, following the racist logic of lending and mortgage banking that contributed to redlining, those same firms scaled back the supply of insurance in redlined urban cores. This form of post-war “insurance redlining” contributed to the urban uprisings of the 1960s, which, as historians like Louis Hyman have shown, stemmed, in part, from participants’ knowledge of how they were shut out of all but the most predatory access to credit.<sup>15</sup> Attempts to legislatively eliminate insurance redlining to prevent future uprisings inadvertently created lucrative opportunities for certain property owners with the most access to capital in redlined areas: absentee landlords.

Echoing the findings of Winling and Michney, Ansfield argues that redlining did not create an absence of investment. Rather, it transformed the way select property owners accrued wealth in redlined areas. As Ansfield put it, “buildings had become most valuable to their owners after they had gone up in flames.”<sup>16</sup> Bronx residents, like Altadena residents, understood the implications of a racist financial system, even if they may not have possessed full knowledge of its intricacies. In the Bronx, the wave of arson was a starting point for grassroots organizing to counter the nightly terror of fire brought about by their landlords. In Altadena, it remains to be seen how residents will address predatory investors capitalizing on destruction. Ansfield is part of a cohort of historians who demystify urban financial instruments to examine state-backed racial violence.<sup>17</sup> Just as historians write about finance and the development of suburbs or, in this case, about the violence created by the transition of the New Deal Order to neoliberal

<sup>10</sup>Dani Anguiano, “‘I Want to Preserve Our Legacy’: Black Families in Altadena Fear Displacement After Fire,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 19, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/19/altadena-displacement-black-families> (accessed May 16, 2025).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Bench Ansfield, “Born in Flames: Arson, Racial Capitalism, and the Reinsuring of the Bronx in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Enterprise & Society* 23, no. 4 (2022): 903.

<sup>14</sup>Ansfield, “Born in Flames: Arson, Racial Capitalism, and the Reinsuring of the Bronx in the Late Twentieth Century,” 901.

<sup>15</sup>Louis Hyman, “Ending Discrimination, Legitimizing Debt: The Political Economy of Race, Gender, and Credit Access in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Enterprise & Society* 12, no. 1 (2011): 200–232.

<sup>16</sup>Ansfield, “Born in Flames,” 920.

<sup>17</sup>Examples include Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City* (Chicago, 2021) and Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill, 2019).

financialization, to make sense of Altadena, historians must treat the relationships between capital and climate change as another expression of racialized violence in suburbs.

We also need new histories of gentrification. Nichole Nelson presents a fascinating opportunity in her discussion of the Fair Housing movement in which Black organizers in the 1960s articulated a vision of economic justice that placed suburban homeownership conceptually at odds with reinvestment in Black neighborhoods. Due to suburban segregation, pragmatic coalitions within the movement prioritized the passage of fair housing laws intended to integrate historically segregated suburbs. However, the most prominent faction of organizers treated Black neighborhoods as urban ghettos to escape from rather than culturally rich sites for reinvestment and racial pride. Fighting exclusion through integration, Nelson argues, limited Black neighborhoods to one form of reinvestment inherently incompatible with economic justice: gentrification.<sup>18</sup> As escape and integration provided the only route for Black success, and exclusion the obstacle to defeat, Black neighborhoods supposedly offered nothing worth investing in by those who wanted economic justice for residents. The investment could only signal further exploitation of Black residents or signal the intent to create value in a place by displacing long-standing people and businesses in favor of affluent white newcomers. This legacy of the dominant faction in the fight for fair housing thus foreclosed upon creative and equitable possibilities for reinvestment in Black neighborhoods.

By contrast, the National Fair Housing Association (NFHA) offered African Americans “a choice” between remaining where they were and moving to white neighborhoods because it recognized that Black material success was possible in either cities or suburbs so long as it created “comparable conditions” through targeted assistance.<sup>19</sup> It developed what Nelson calls “race-specific” plans that prevented almost 800 foreclosures through training homeowners and nonprofit workers, filing complaints with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and rehabilitating 685 properties. As a result, Nelson concludes the relatively obscure NFHA could stand as a successful example of housing justice.

Though readers could indeed learn much from a rare success story within the scholarship, neither Nelson nor the NFHA consider suburbs as potential sites of gentrification. Perhaps it is an echo of what Keogh writes about in that fair housing advocates assumed that the pre-conditions of gentrification, such as a long history of racist disinvestment or exploitation, did not exist in suburbs. Perhaps suburbs cannot be envisioned as sites for exploitation because early critics of integrationist fair housing advocates were too successful warning that Black material success in the suburbs required assimilation into economic and cultural whiteness. However, Altadena is but one of a growing cadre of examples of how suburban homeownership does not safeguard Black Americans from the exploitation, displacement, and extraction of community wealth more often identified with urban communities at risk of gentrification. If anything, the qualities of suburbs that historically created wealth for white people make Black Altadena fire victims even more vulnerable to investors because of its easily legible appeal. Historians must account for the existence of suburban gentrification and its connections to the predatory forms of racial capitalism more typically identified with urban neighborhoods.

Finally, if suburban history will rise to the urgency of climate change and the more destructive and frequent events of which the Eaton fire is an example, looking to environmental history can help. Josiah Rector’s *Toxic Debt: An Environmental History of Detroit* offers a sweeping account of metropolitan development that begins with the “human-engineered” crises of Detroit residents’ lack of access to clean water and COVID.<sup>20</sup> Rector historicizes both with a longer history of how capital and real estate shaped metropolitan segregation.

<sup>18</sup>Nichole Nelson, “Fractures within Fair Housing: The Battle for the Memory and Legacy of the Long Fair Housing Movement,” *Journal of Urban History* 50, no. 6 (2023): 1358.

<sup>19</sup>Nelson, “Fractures within Fair Housing,” 1369–1370.

<sup>20</sup>Josiah Rector, *Toxic Debt: An Environmental History of Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2022), 4.



The geography of environmental hazards begins with fights over the unequal provision of water and sewage infrastructure in the nineteenth century, laying the literal groundwork for class and racial inequality compounded by residential segregation, industrial pollution, and labor struggles. By the mid-twentieth century, factory workers breathed the same toxic dust that disproportionately blanketed working-class communities and communities of color, all of whom resisted bearing the brunt of this environmental load that was offloaded onto them for the sake of economic growth. As Detroit's industrial base later crumbled, its own financial austerity drove the city to the brink of crisis, providing an opening in the 2000s for Detroit's white business elite to advance a "redevelopment agenda, which drove accumulation in the whitening urban core and dispossession in the majority-Black urban periphery."<sup>21</sup> Detroit's growing municipal debt accelerated its endorsement of this agenda, which linked the city's future to white gentrifiers while working class and poor people found every day costs of living increasingly impossible. With the attendant privatization of services and the erosion of democratic accountability—both also justified by Detroit's debts—Detroit's water utility initiated mass water shut offs to those who could not pay their bills.

That agenda culminated in the erosion of hard-won environmental, legal, and economic gains of working-class and Black Detroit residents thanks to the financial power of corporate elites. Because they "controlled investment decisions" they easily out-lobbied and out-fundraised their opponents, successfully pushed for deregulation, tax cuts, privatization, and austerity policies."<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, Rector's assessment of who shaped environmental conditions in Detroit is unsurprising, as is his history of its suburbs. Those with power got their way and profited enormously. Even when environmental justice advocates maintained a strong coalition, as Nelson's actors did, their successes were limited by the two-fold factors of the entrenched power of capital and the profitability of racial capitalism. As a result, Detroiters developed small-scale alternative means of water provision, ranging from water pickup points to purifying rainwater for free distribution. Rector raises the fascinating point that these grassroots efforts themselves were deeply connected to capital in the form of philanthropic funding. As Rector's actors envision alternative futures, even the most radical and liberatory of those possibilities thus enmesh cities and suburbs in webs of capital, making it difficult to dismantle political economies linked, albeit indirectly, to racial inequality and exploitation.

Rector is not trying to be fatalistic in his ambivalent assessment of environmental justice. On the contrary, like Nelson, he hopes his scholarship will contribute to the movement. However, to me, the best distillation of the book's importance for suburban history can be found in one of its least hopeful sections. To support his claim that "the crisis of unemployment and poverty in Detroit was as large-scale as the one of environmental contamination and dilapidated infrastructure," Rector takes the reader on a tour of the metropolitan area. Some suburbs have poverty rates of over 20 percent. In one wealthy suburban county, over 120,000 people live below the poverty line. In nearby Dearborn, almost a quarter of Arab American children have lead poisoning, while low-income Dearborn residents are "disproportionately burdened by industrial pollution and had high rates of asthma, emphysema, and lung cancer."<sup>23</sup> In Detroit, suburbanites scrape by on a periphery blanketed by lead dust, lacking access to clean water, unemployed or underemployed, susceptible to morbidity and death. It is necessary for suburban history to account for those conditions. Moreover, though they are not necessarily working in solidarity with their counterparts in city neighborhoods, their shared circumstances necessitate adopting a new metropolitan approach that accounts for those connections.

What could that new metropolitan approach foregrounding suburban issues look like narratively and spatially? Rector's narrative takes a traditional starting point as the old city

<sup>21</sup>Rector, *Toxic Debt*, 201.

<sup>22</sup>Rector, *Toxic Debt*, 227.

<sup>23</sup>Rector, *Toxic Debt*, 230–231.

center and expands outward with the formation of Greater Detroit in the twentieth century. However, historians are considering alternatives. Kara Murphy Schlichting, for example, revisits well-worn narratives of suburban localism to “recenter” the history of Greater New York from its coastline inwards. Histories of New York’s growth privilege Manhattan due to its political and financial power. Manhattan, therefore, formed an urban core from which development radiated outward. This myth of “unidirectional urbanization” obscures the many bottom-up stories of development from smaller-time or more local actors, whose concerns lay elsewhere in the region. Schlichting argues that the coastline caused these separate places and development stories to coalesce into Greater New York.<sup>24</sup>

Recentering is not a single method, but a way for Schlichting to give coherence to a variety of methods. However, the significance of “recentering” as the thru line of the book’s disparate chapters is to make the periphery’s growth in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries more than a prelude to post-war suburbanization. A history from the periphery inward breaks from what she sees as the implied inevitability inherent to the urban decline narratives of the Bronx or the rise of Long Island’s sprawl. Scholars will disagree over the extent to which they treat urban decline as inevitable—Michael B. Katz notably contended with the responsibility historians hold for repeatedly putting forward decline narratives in urban studies back in 2010. Nelson’s work also complicates it. However, Schlichting’s approach raises the possibility of alternate spatial frameworks for revealing relationships between suburbs, cities, the environment, and capital, which are indeed crucial in this current moment.

Returning to Altadena as an example of a place not yet adequately historicized, it could be fruitful to adopt Schlichting’s approach to write a history that begins with and links together fire-vulnerable hill neighborhoods. Her decision to recenter via the coastline was tailored to her case study of New York, a “city of islands.”<sup>25</sup> In Los Angeles, a place fragmented with many commercial centers, to recenter yields a suburban history of racial capitalism, fire, and housing development in which Altadena’s history, contrary to being peripheral, becomes the dominant part of the history of metropolitan Los Angeles.

Now in its fifth decade, suburban history remains a barometer of how historians contend with urgent issues of the present. They are reckoning with how access to suburbia failed to solve complex issues of racial inequality attributed to exclusion. Instead, they are finding new stories by applying older questions once reserved for central cities centered on labor, exploitation, poverty, and violence. Suburban history is thus helping to sustain new inquiries into global crises of capitalism and climate.

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<sup>24</sup>Kara Schlichting, *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (Chicago, 2019), 2.

<sup>25</sup>Schlichting, *New York Recentered*, 13.