

Out of the Urban Shadows: Uneven Development and Spatial Politics in Immigrant Suburbs

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INTRODUCTION

It is now well established that the concentric zone model, developed by Ernest Burgess and elaborated by others in the Chicago School of Sociology to explain the distribution of social groups in metropolitan areas, was wrong. In the past several decades, immigrants have not only moved out of the centers of U.S. metropolitan areas, many have bypassed central cities altogether and settled directly in suburbs. Increasingly, they have done so in nontraditional gateway cities, such as those in the American South and Rustbelt, and in smaller metropolitan or nonmetropolitan areas (Singer et al. 2008).

Suburban settlement has also not clearly been associated with immigrants' "move up" or integration into the so-called American mainstream, as Chicago school authors argued. In many rapidly growing metropolitan areas, rising housing prices have pushed many immigrants out of their historic urban neighborhoods. While post-World War II visions of the American Dream may still pull immigrants to suburbia, the communities into which many have settled hardly reflect that dream. While Asian immigrants have high rates of settlement in middle-class, affluent, and white suburban neighborhoods, other immigrants more commonly settle into suburbs with relatively high rates of foreclosure, poverty, segregation, and other measures of disadvantage (Farrell 2016; Logan 2014). These are not the touted "opportunity neighborhoods" that provide pathways to economic mobility. In fact, compared to central city ethnic enclaves, many provide less of the social, cultural and institutional supports that have traditionally promoted the economic advancement of immigrants and their children.

Chicago School scholars also failed to account for the politics within suburbs that challenge not only immigrants' ability to settle within particular communities, but also to achieve their own purposes and pursuits within them. My research on immigrants in suburbia has sought to fill some of these gaps. It has investigated the struggles of educated, professional Asian immigrants to establish a place for themselves within largely white, middle-class suburbs in Silicon Valley. In the Washington, DC suburbs, I have examined how lower-income, primarily Latino and African immigrants have fought to maintain a presence within redeveloping neighborhoods with rising gentrification and displacement pressures.

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My comments pull on these cases as well as other scholarship on immigrants in the U.S. suburbs to underscore the importance of scholarly attention to immigrants' shifting metropolitan geographies and their spatial politics. As the dominant geography of immigrants has shifted from the central city to the suburbs of major U.S. metropolitan areas (Frey 2011), scholarship on the politics of immigrant neighborhoods has not kept pace. Scholars have a stubborn tendency either to ignore the geographical context in which the politics of immigrant settlement and placemaking occurs or to transpose ideas about immigrant economic development, political incorporation and other issues from urban ethnic enclaves to diverse ethnoburbs. I argue, however, that suburbs have particular social, economic, political and spatial conditions that need to be accounted for in order to understand and confront the challenges of establishing and sustaining thriving immigrant communities.

At a time of widespread anti-immigrant backlash, many immigrants—documented and undocumented—are already living in the suburban shadows and not actively engaged in public life. A lack of scholarly attention to their neighborhood conditions and challenges, threaten to push immigrants even further to the metropolitan margins—geographically and socially. Through such elisions, urban scholars participate in rendering immigrants even less visible and more vulnerable to the shifting political winds.

IMMIGRANT SPATIAL POLITICS IN SUBURBIA

Immigrants' neighborhood politics vary greatly by geography and across lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other dimensions of inequality. In my research, central arenas of neighborhood politics have surrounded immigrants' access to quality, affordable housing; small business space; reliable, public transit; and community institutions and resources.

MAINTAINING QUALITY, AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Suburban communities have distinct housing issues and politics. In many suburbs, single-family homes and homeowners associations dominate. In these neighborhoods, design and development regulations, such as covenants, codes and restrictions, can create barriers to immigrant integration. They raise housing costs and can reinforce principles of spatial homogeneity, conformity and stability that undermine changes to accommodate immigrants' needs and preferences (Lung-Amam 2013). For instance, compared to native-born Americans, immigrants are far more likely to live in multigenerational households (Keene and Batson 2010). Yet they often face backlash from established residents and city agencies when changing their homes accordingly. Home design and development policies mitigate such conflicts and are common mechanisms through which established, white residents reassert their power, privilege and normativity in suburban neighborhoods (Lung-Amam 2013).

Inner-ring suburban housing also presents unique challenges for immigrants. In many metropolitan areas, the housing in suburbs closest to central cities are dense and old (Hanlon 2009). Popular among young, white families in the post-WWII period, this housing has become attractive to immigrants in recent decades, largely due to its "natural" affordability and proximity to transportation and other "urban" amenities (Singer et al. 2001). However, its affordability often goes hand-in-hand with disinvestment that has left

the housing stock with multiple health and safety issues—from overcrowding and rodent infestations to lead-based paint and mold exposure (Lung-Amam et al. 2019b). Addressing such hazards within communities with declining tax bases and increasing needs can be challenging for any struggling suburb, but particularly those with large low-income immigrant populations. Immigrant tenants, particularly those who are undocumented, are vulnerable to predatory leasing practices and landlord intimidation. They also often lack trust of and clear communication with municipal agencies, such as code enforcement, that can hold landlords responsible for maintaining higher standards (Lung-Amam et al. 2019b).

A lack of tenant protections and affordable housing resources can exacerbate already poor housing conditions. Many suburbs fail to provide their fair share of regional subsidized housing or sufficient resources to increase their affordable housing supplies, such as housing trust funds or inclusionary zoning. The recent COVID-19 outbreak has underscored the importance of local anti-eviction and other tenant protections that are also often lacking in suburbs. Established suburban tenant associations and advocacy organizations that can educate immigrants about their rights and fight for greater protections are needed to fill critical gaps, but are few and far between (Lung-Amam et al. 2019b).

SUSTAINING AND GROWING IMMIGRANT-OWNED BUSINESSES

Immigrants tend to locate in suburbs with not only affordable housing, but also affordable commercial space to launch businesses (Singer et al. 2001). Immigrant-owned businesses support the economic, social and physical health of immigrant communities (Portes and Manning 2018). They foster entrepreneurship, create local job opportunities, serve unmet market needs, and promote social capital and a sense of community (Liu et al. 2014; Lung-Amam 2015). Immigrants have revitalized struggling strip malls and kept suburban downtowns afloat during hard times (Loukaitou-Sideris 2002; Lung-Amam 2019).

As the COVID-19 outbreak has shown, however, immigrant-owned businesses are also highly vulnerable to displacement and closure. They tend to be independent, family-owned businesses that run on slim profit margins (Liu et al. 2014). As in housing, owners' immigrant status can make them vulnerable to landlord intimidation and predatory real estate practices, such as triple-net leases that can raise their rent burden. In suburban commercial centers owned by corporations or large business conglomerates, direct landlord-tenant communication can be difficult. Owners' language and educational barriers can further strain already poor communication (Lung-Amam et al. 2019a). Many immigrant-owned businesses also struggle to compete with national chains or large businesses that tend to dominate suburban retail. Owners also often lack the time to attend technical assistance programs and awareness of resources that can help them compete or improve their businesses (Lung-Amam 2019). As in housing, many suburbs lack small business associations or other organizations that can represent the interests of immigrant workers and business owners (Lung-Amam et al. 2019a).

The politics that surround suburban ethnic enterprises makes them even more vulnerable. Immigrant-serving stores and shopping centers may be subject to complaints by non-immigrant residents and city agencies that charge that they are unwelcoming, segregated, and unattractive or simply do not fit with other suburban retail (Lung-Amam 2017). Development and design regulations often limit non-English commercial language signage

and unique ethnic commercial configurations and forms of ownership, such as condominium retail. At the same time, suburban municipalities like their urban counterparts (Zukin 2008) sometimes leverage ethnic enterprises to market themselves as diverse and appeal to more “mainstream” consumers and businesses, while simultaneously undermining immigrant businesses’ long-term viability (Lung-Amam 2017).

ACCESSING RELIABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

A key distinguishing feature of many suburban neighborhoods is a lack of public transportation. Many lack fixed-route transit, such as metro or light rail, as well as public bus service. However, even in suburbs with public transit, immigrants still often face barriers to affordability and reliable connections to their desired destinations (Lo et al. 2011).

Many low-income immigrants lack access to a vehicle and are dependent on public transit. The time and expense of navigating suburbia’s segregated land uses tears away at already fragile budgets and resources. In the inner-ring suburb of Langley Park, Maryland, for instance, Latinx immigrants often work in construction in far-flung suburbs that require them to spend hours on multiple buses or carpool with friends and neighbors. Like many suburbs, the neighborhood is hostile to walking and biking. Bordered by state highways, it has one of the highest pedestrian fatality rates in the state of Maryland (Lung-Amam et al. 2019a).

While new investments in public transit could provide Langley Park residents with better access to a host of employment, educational, and other opportunities, they may also displace residents, small businesses and community-based institutions. Popular efforts to “retrofit” suburbs and make them more walkable and transit-accessible can lead to much-needed investments in transit. However, such investments can also contribute to transit-induced displacement that disproportionately affects vulnerable residents, including low-income immigrants (Lung-Amam et al. 2019a).

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Beyond housing and small businesses, community-based institutions are key supports to thriving immigrant neighborhoods. Yet in many suburbs, social service providers and other nonprofit institutions, particularly those that serve low-income and immigrant residents, are lacking or severely capacity-strained (Allard 2017; Roth, Gonzales and Lesniewski 2015). Those that cater specifically to the needs of immigrants, including schools and faith-based institutions, also sometimes find themselves at the center of heated community debate.

Schools are one of the main drivers of immigrants’ suburban geographies. Immigrants commonly move to the U.S., and particular communities within it for educational opportunities, especially for their children. Yet immigrant youth face multiple challenges to accessing the fruits of suburbia’s “good” schools. Like all schools, suburban schools have experienced increasingly levels of racial segregation in recent years (Frankenberg and Orfield 2012). Those occupied primarily by Black and Brown immigrant and second-generation youth, tend to lack adequate resources, particularly English as a second language services (Eaton 2012). Higher income Asian immigrant families sometimes face conflicts with white parents and administrators over the school culture and curriculum

that can lead to increased school and neighborhood segregation (Lung-Amam 2017). With new immigration, suburban schools can become overcrowded and the subjects of intense redistricting debates that expose and exacerbate these fault lines and inequalities (Lung-Amam 2017).

Like schools, suburban faith-based institutions are vital community infrastructure for immigrants. Whether a church, mosque or temple, faith-based institutions are not only places of worship for immigrants, but also places to access and exchange resources, bond with those that share their faith and ethnic identities, and build bridges with other groups that support their integration within new places (Lung-Amam and Gade 2018). However, neighborhood complaints related to their religious services and events sometime erupt into a politics of difference that threaten their viability and functionality (Padoongpatt 2015). Strict suburban design and planning regulations can make it difficult to build new faith-based institutions or adapt existing ones in ways that facilitate immigrants' religious and cultural practices (Dwyer 2015).

FROM THE URBAN SHADOWS TO THE CENTER OF NEW METROPOLITAN IMAGINATIONS

The Chicago model was not only wrong; it was dangerous. For decades, it directed the lens of urban scholars and policy makers towards central cities and away from the vast changes taking place across a broader swath of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan places. As scholars begin to widen their gaze, they must more deeply invest in uncovering the ways in which geography affects the politics of immigrant integration and inclusion. While my comments have drawn largely on my research on Asian, Latino and African immigrant suburbs in Silicon Valley and Washington, DC, this is not a call for a focus on particularly spaces, places or groups. It is a call for deeper explorations of how place matters to the processes and politics that reproduce immigrant inequalities and vulnerabilities across diverse metropolitan and nonmetropolitan spaces.

While the numbers bear out that U.S. immigrants (as well as people of color and those living in poverty) are no longer primarily urban dwellers, far more scholarship on immigrants in noncentral city communities is needed to shift the policy and resources to meet the diverse challenges they face. Many of these challenges, I have argued, are directly related to the conditions of the places in which immigrants now live, but remain relatively invisible to the policy makers, planners and others charged with coming up with solutions to them. Given today's anti-immigrant climate and unprecedented global health and economic challenges, scholarship that brings the voices of those living on the urban margins and in its shadows to the center of public debate is direly needed.

This scholarship must be action-oriented. At stake is not only metropolitan theory, but also lives and livelihoods. Every day, government agencies and private companies exploit immigrants on the U.S. southern border as well as in their own back yards. They evict them from their homes and businesses, and from their right to shape their communities' futures. Immigrants are wasting precious time and money in long commutes and precious talents in schools ill equipped to bridge critical cultural gaps. These collective failures contribute to an increasing state of immigrant precarity (Lung-Amam and Sandoval 2018). As they move or are pushed further beyond the urban core, immigrants also move further beyond society's collective spatial imaginary. They move into places of greater economic

and social marginality, if only because the problems they face become harder to see and address with the typical tools of public policy (Kneebone and Berube 2013). Scholarship on such places can combat the threat of immigrant invisibility and raise the bar on efforts to find solutions attentive to their actually existing geographies.

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