



## *Race and the suburbs in American film*, edited by Merrill Schleier

*Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2021*

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The book includes profiles of 14 well-established public gardens. These are geographically located throughout the U.S. and include such well-known gardens as: the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Queens Botanical Garden, New York Botanical Garden, Missouri Botanical Garden, Franklin Park Conservatory, Cleveland Botanical Garden, Denver Botanical Garden, and Chicago Botanic Garden.

Appendix A includes 13 pages of detailed information about public gardens that are featured in the case studies, including the garden location, year established, size, mission statement, and organization type (such as 501[c]3). The list of provided information would have been more useful if it also included website information and an e-mail contact.

There are two main applications where *Public Gardens and Livable Cities* would be useful. First, as a supplemental resource in multidisciplinary fields such as urban planning, landscape architecture, urban studies, or political science. Second, as an applied resource for developing underused public property or vacant lots or for a public or nonprofit agency that promotes community gardening or park use. This recommendation as supplemental reading or as reference material reflects its narrow emphasis—its focus is not broad enough to stand alone as a course textbook. However, the book is written using clear, crisp language and can be read in a relatively short amount of time. The case studies present a mix of modern, relevant, creative, focused initiatives that can clearly be used to develop policies and strategic partnerships for entire communities and are not just limited to community or public gardens.

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***Race and the suburbs in American film***, edited by Merrill Schleier, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2021

This anthology explores the interactions of race and suburbia in American films after World War II as an outgrowth of the editor's interest in cinema and the built environment—especially urban spaces—and their relationship to gender, class, and race. This is a significant, if underappreciated, aspect of urban studies. However, the collection is more likely to find an audience among cinema, media, and culture scholars than among urban planners or city administrators. The chapters are richly documented academic papers, which generate thoughtful consideration when read, although the language of academia can sometimes be a bit much for a general audience, limiting its appeal. Many nonwhite voices are heard, and the issues faced by African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, Arab Americans, and inter-racial couples are considered in the anthology. The increasing diversity of the suburbs in spatial structure (close-in older, dense suburbs vs. sprawling spacious newer communities), race (white, people of color, or both), income, family type, etc., is a recurrent theme in the book. The white middle-class suburbs of the movies of the 1950s are from another time, which is evident when watching a film of that era and one of today. Suburbs have changed in almost every way from the post-World War II Levittowns composed almost entirely of veterans and their families. Even a complacent television news viewer could not help but notice that in the wake of the post-Hurricane Ida devastation in New York and New Jersey, the close-in suburbs (e.g., Queens in New York City) were greatly impacted, and that their inhabitants were often relatively successful immigrants of color.

The volume includes 11 chapters arranged in no particular order, although some structure to their placement would have been helpful. In the first submission, John David Rhodes writes about the Black female domestic servant as a spatial agent, one who makes visible certain regimes of spatial inhabitation, thereby indicating who can occupy various forms of private space. He analyzes *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dreamhouse* (Potter, 1948) and *The Reckless Moment* (Ophuls, 1949).

The book's editor, Merrill Schleier, contributes the second chapter, focusing on the problems faced by the Scotts, the first Black family to move into an all-white northeastern suburb in *Take a Giant Step* (Leacock, 1959). She makes the case that the Scotts experience the racial divisions between institutional, social, and private domestic space for middle-class African Americans in the white suburbs.

Ellen C. Scott then examines the understudied Black cinematic suburbs through the independent horror film *Ganja and Hess* (Gunn, 1973) as a place of lush landscapes and gothic homes full of the traumas of colonialism and migration.

In the fourth chapter, Josh Glick considers *To Sleep with Anger* (Burnett, 1990) as a film that breaks with Hollywood's stereotypical, largely urban and criminalized portrayals of Black family life. Timotheus Vermuelen discusses in the fifth chapter the appearance of an interracial couple, rarely treated in films on suburbs, in the comedy *Guess Who* (Sullivan, 2005), based on the earlier successful social melodrama *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967).

In the sixth and seventh submissions, Helen Heran Jun and Amy Lynn Corbin each examine the immigrant experience in the suburbs. Focusing on two Asian American stories, the films *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin, 2002) and *Children of Invention* (Chun, 2009), Jun uncovers the contradictions in assimilation and socioeconomic mobility suggested by suburbanization, but which are treated in completely different ways in the two films. Corbin examines the Arab American immigrant experience in *Towelhead* (Ball, 2007) and *Amreeka* (Dabis, 2009) from the perspective of several suburban cinematic tropes including conformity, isolation, and teenage alienation. These two contributions were particularly interesting in that the subject groups received much less attention in American films and film criticism than African Americans and Hispanics.

Looking to more mainstream films, Paul J. Massood analyzes the Oscar-winning *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) in Chapter 8 from the perspective of its suburban setting, Liberty City outside of Miami, as a way to help "reimagine both the definitions and the representations of suburbia, of ghettos, and of real and imagined spaces (p. 190)." In the ninth submission, Elizabeth A. Patton uses the concept of the palimpsest to demonstrate that white suburbs are full of memories and remnants of slavery and racial terror in the Black horror film *Get Out* (Peele, 2016). Using the palimpsest as the foundation for film criticism regarding racism is an especially appealing notion; Patton explores how the film challenges neoliberal racism and color blindness that obscure the continuing impact of structural racism. In his detailed discussion of *Suburbicon* (Clooney, 2016) and *99 Homes* (Bahrani, 2014) in the 10th chapter, Nathan Holmes considers suburbs as social rather than predominantly racialized spaces, discarding the idea that suburban whiteness is transhistorical. Finally, Angel Daniel Matos confronts whiteness by considering the ways suburban spatiality and modernity influence its connection to queerness in *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018). This is a rarely considered topic and is noteworthy for its inclusion in a volume on suburban racism. Further contributions to film and film criticism on the interactions of racism, sexuality, and gender identity would be welcome.

Several themes dominate the collection, which the editor notes "represents the first sustained effort to interrogate race in the suburbs in American film, although it is not meant to be all-inclusive or comprehensive, but rather to open the subject up to further examination" (p. 19). The intention is to spur further scholarship in the complexity of suburban environments in contemporary American films; the interactions of race, ethnicity, and identity formation among suburban inhabitants; suburban inclusion and visibility versus exclusion and invisibility, and similar themes. Thus, the suburbs have become in cinema, especially recent Black movies according to Joshua Glick, "a central battleground where the struggle for racial and economic justice is imagined and waged" (p. 116). In this regard, the volume is a successful contribution to American film criticism.

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***The creative underclass: Youth, race, and the gentrifying city***, by Tyler Denmead, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2019

The recognition that he unwittingly played a role in the transformation of “talented” disadvantaged youth to a well-behaved supply of cheap labor for the city of Providence, Rhode Island, is a major form of angst for Tyler Denmead, the author of *The Creative Underclass*. In the 1990s, Providence re-envisioned its future to one of attracting/retaining young “creatives” from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design who could jumpstart revitalization efforts in downtown after decades of disinvestment brought on by deindustrialization. To protect the city’s investment, it was necessary to ensure that Providence’s disadvantaged youth become, at the same time, transformed into productive members of society. These “disadvantaged youth” are what Denmead refers to as the “underclass”; an economically and supposedly culturally deprived group (p. 12). Thus, Denmead, a 1997 graduate of Brown University, was charged with providing an outlet for disadvantaged youth of color by opening an after-school creative center known as New Urban Arts. This book is an ethnographic account of how disadvantaged youth in Providence negotiate the hardships of living in a city that has provided them with few options for a middle-class lifestyle. Denmead defines the “creative underclass” as marginalized young people who have been summoned to provide “cultural performances” that showcase their artistic ability but also ultimately subsidize urban revitalization. He argues that these individuals receive little or no remuneration for their creative works and that this contributes to intergenerational poverty rather than alleviating it.

The book is well organized and easy to follow. Denmead’s introduction includes a historical overview of racial inequality in Providence since the 1600s and illustrates that not much has changed in 400 years. In the 1600s, Providence’s White capitalists increased their wealth through the institution of slavery. In the 2000s, the capitalist system continues to extract value from the plethora of low-wage service jobs that are the only means for livelihood for the disenfranchised. What is missing from the introduction is a detailed literature review that discusses the “creative class,” the counterpart to the “creative *underclass*.” Richard Florida, a well-recognized scholar on the “creative class,” defines the creative class as predominantly White well-educated artists, scientists, and other professionals who not only lend a certain chic to cities but who have also stimulated economic and population growth in the post-industrial era. While Denmead references Florida’s work numerous times, a more detailed discussion of Florida’s argument would have been helpful. For instance, a working definition of “creative” is needed as Denmead’s and Florida’s definitions are not synonymous.

In Part I of the book, Denmead interviews young adults who attended New Urban Arts during their high school years. He found that while at the center, these participants learned to negotiate Providence’s unequal social structure through “troublemaking,” “creating a hot mess,” and “chillaxing.” Troublemaking occurs when members of the “creative underclass” adopt certain forms of dress or behavior that conflict with societal norms but allow the underclass members to make a social statement. Creating a hot mess is a way to engage in artistic activities that seem chaotic to mainstream society but allows members of the “creative underclass” to remove themselves from a society that expects order from its citizens and stifles creativity. In fact, it is this hot mess that contributes to the chic of the “creative city.” Chillaxing allows youths and young adults to step away from the racist/classist problems that they encounter in everyday life. Part I could have been shortened. The author