

A Review of *Manufactured Insecurity: Mobile Home Parks and Americans' Tenuous Right to Place*, by Esther Sullivan, 2018. University of California Press.

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In *Manufactured Insecurity*, Esther Sullivan argues powerfully for sociologists to open their eyes to a devastating form of housing insecurity hidden in plain sight. She takes readers into the world of America's manufactured housing communities. Her ethnography exposes "mobile" home residents' long-term commitments to their homes and parks. Their sense of permanency, however, makes them vulnerable to trauma, she shows us, for the threat of displacement by the closing of mobile-home parks is all too common. Sullivan tracks the damaging economic, health, and emotional consequences of such closures. This book shows how economic inequalities are playing out in struggles over buildings and space for many Americans living on the urban fringe.

Sullivan demonstrates how employment insecurity, health-care needs, and social and family networks combine to leave Americans with few housing options, and manufactured housing and mobile home parks become attractive opportunities. When displacement from development of mobile-home parks looms, their economic insecurity makes them vulnerable to homelessness at worst, and severe housing insecurity at best. Like other sociologists of housing, Sullivan uncovers both emotional and material consequences of displacement. But her research suggests that manufactured-housing owners are particularly vulnerable because their significant material investments simply evaporate when their homes are rendered immovable, after a first or second relocation.

Sullivan thoroughly explodes what she argues is a myth that manufactured housing is experienced as temporary, or even "mobile" – despite the name "mobile homes." One of Sullivan's most important and unique interventions is to show how manufactured housing has become, for many, materially and experientially permanent and immobile. It is because of this permanent orientation that the emotional loss from the break-up of community is just as severe for mobile-home as for traditional-housing residents. When displaced, mobile-home park residents lose important established communities and connections to space, just like residents of more traditional housing. Sociologists have been documenting the emotional and material losses associated with housing displacement, and the development interests that force displacements at least since research on the country's "urban renewal" in the 1950s and 1960s. Sullivan contends that today, mobile-home parks are increasingly at risk of closure – and evicting their residents. She blames this on the encroachment of growth interests to cities' edges, as developers set their sights on these large plots of land, and as politicians pass zoning ordinances and variances.

By exposing the deleterious impacts of uncertainty about housing, Sullivan makes an important contribution to sociological studies of urban and rural change, and substantiates similar findings about more traditional housing residency. Sullivan's careful ethnographic observations from three different parks marked for closure emphasizes how the residents suffer almost more from the uncertainty than from the eventual eviction. Her detailed stories convincingly illustrate how the fear of displacement sends residents into lasting emotional turmoil, and how this insecurity and fear lead them to make detrimental economic decisions. One of Sullivan's most important arguments is about the deleterious and numerous impacts of the looming "specter of displacement" that overshadows these parks once there is rumor or reality of a sale to a developer.

Another significant contribution from this book is about ownership. The unique topic of manufactured housing – and its strange ownership configuration (when compared to traditional private or public housing) – exposes the importance of property arrangements. Ownership is always implicated in one’s claims to permanency or vulnerability to displacement. Sullivan’s study focuses sociologists on this important fact. The land in mobile-home parks is usually owned by a single party. That landowner rents space to individuals for the placement of their homes. Those individuals usually own the buildings, but rent the space. This ownership arrangement creates a unique vulnerability to displacement. At the same time, this same ownership arrangement also contributes to the affordability of the housing arrangement: the sharing of space and infrastructure means that these houses generally require less land and less utility and infrastructure investment than single-family housing. And the location on undeveloped land means that the land prices (a large part of housing costs in cities) are lower than they would be in nearby locations. With this unusual subject of study, Sullivan does an excellent job of exposing how property arrangements crucially construct particular interdependencies, vulnerabilities, and opportunities.

Although Sullivan’s main arguments about housing insecurity and property arrangements resonate for all kinds of housing, she also makes a call for the importance of studying her specific subject – because so many Americans live in these homes. Manufactured homes – largely sited in “mobile home parks” - are a massive source of American affordable housing, and they are unsubsidized. (She tells us that they shelter 18 million residents, p. 15). This prompts the question: Why have sociologists largely ignored manufactured housing? Sullivan provides some answers. One of the reasons, she implies, is the sociologists have stigmatized these residents along with much of the rest of the US population and its cultural and political institutions, at least in recent decades. Sullivan even historicizes this stigmatization as emerging many decades after the invention and proliferation of manufactured housing, which was originally praised as an opportunity and source of pride for middle-class families. Another reason that sociologists have overlooked manufactured housing is because of its typical location, outside of central cities. Sullivan admirably joins sociologists giving attention to small cities and towns, suburbs, urban-rural interfaces, and rural spaces.

*Manufactured Insecurity* is crucial reading for experts in the sociology of housing and community, but the book also has a much wider reach because of its illustrations of the lived consequences of economic and spatial inequalities, manifested in housing and property. The entire book or selected chapters would make a terrific assignment for undergraduate classes. It is well written and accessible. The book is also good for teaching because in each chapter, Sullivan adeptly weaves her own intriguing ethnographic observations, and archival and quantitative evidence with concise summaries of relevant sociological literature.

The book’s primary weakness stems from a tension in Sullivan’s main contributions. On the one hand, she marshals quantitative evidence (primarily in one chapter) that manufactured housing is an extremely common form of affordable housing. In her chapter on the history of American manufactured housing, she also seems to include the entire spectrum of manufactured housing. But in her ethnography -- her most unique evidence -- she focused only on communities under explicit threat of eviction. And her arguments about the sense of permanency and the “specter of displacement” emerge primarily from observations in those parks. Readers will need to be careful not to overgeneralize her findings until more research is done. We do not know how prevalent this threat of eviction is, nor do we know if the threat magnified residents’ sense of permanency.

This book not only sheds light on present problems, but on future possibilities. It helps us to imagine how we might structure alternatives to traditional, and increasingly inaccessible, housing arrangements.

Sullivan draws attention to smaller homes and to the sharing of space as an opportunity for the realistic attainment of more affordable housing and stable communities. In doing so, she calls for more research into manufactured housing, as well as other small-housing and communal arrangements, and the forms of ownership that make them possible. Indeed, the book ends with hope: that community ownership of mobile-home parks can largely avert the “specter of displacement.”