

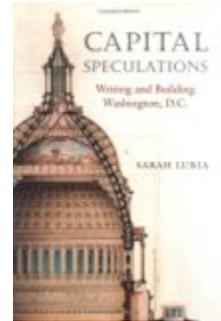
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sarah Luria. *Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C. Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies Series*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006. 228 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-502-2.

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Remembering D.C.'s Futures

Though most of this memorable book concerns nineteenth-century Washington, D.C., halfway through it some readers will think of a twenty-first-century work: the film *Minority Report* (2002), based on a story by Philip K. Dick, about young mutants who can see the future and about secret police who act on their reports. Given Sarah Luria's thesis, it seems appropriate, even inevitable, that this film about possible and impossible futures, gambles, racial categories, uncertain authorities, and failed plans takes place in Washington, D.C., and its suburbs, amid future federal corridors, unbuilt metro stops, and other parts of a future that may never come. Such futures, Luria argues, have always defined D.C. Mixing literary analysis of written texts with examinations of buildings, maps, and photographs, Luria argues that the constitutionally mandated seat of government (which cannot exceed ten square miles) has long been a place of both imaginative and financial "speculation." Selected writings, buildings, and planning documents, viewed together, reveal the history of this speculation, depicting a city full of "ambitious failure" (p. xxi). More so than other cities, Luria's "Washington remains a speculative space, the projection of a grand vision that is never quite realized" (p. xxiv).

Wide in chronological range but selective in what she discusses, Luria makes no claim to be comprehensive. Like many scholars trained first in literary studies, Luria wants very much to do interdisciplinary work. She finds "speculation" in George Washington's, Thomas Jefferson's, and Peter L'Enfant's writings and plans for the then unbuilt city; in Abraham Lincoln's inaugural addresses; in Walt Whitman's Civil War journals; in the

last two homes of Frederick Douglass; and, finally, in the prose of Henry Adams, photographs of Clover Adams, and the house built on H Street Northwest for Henry, Clover (who died before she could move in), and Henry's friend John Hay. Read as four separate essays, rather than as evidence for one argument, each chapter supports its claims well.

The speculations began in the 1790s, when "L'Enfant and Washington designed a city that looked like the Constitution," not only a federal city, but also a Federalist one, whose layout suggests a strong centralized government with a national economy and national perspective on trade (p. 6). Against Jeffersonian extremes of regularity and decentralization, the "republican grid" and the "federalist avenues" together represented the ideal of mixed government (p. 18). Commercial speculation (the sale of land and the city's expected expansion) would fill in the space created by political ideals. This space, Luria argues, included roads (built and unbuilt), as well as the interiors of houses. She indicates that a "national political culture of manners," superintended in part by such women as Margaret Bayard Smith, "was crucial to the city's and the national government's success" (p. 33).

Both Luria's title and her argument place a great deal of weight on a pun: when is speculation in the sense of "imagining the future" the same thing as speculation in the sense of "buying things because you think that they will appreciate so that you can resell them later," that is, of playing a market? During the early Republic and the planning of the federal city, these senses of speculation had obvious links, because the same people (Washington, for example) engaged in both, and because the former

(imagining a future city) depended on the latter (people to sell, buy, and improve the land). But speculation did not always lead to improvement: the City of Magnificent Distances acquired that antebellum nickname thanks to the empty lots where buildings might have stood.

As Luria moves away from the city's founding, her senses of "speculation" start to skate apart. In Whitman's journals, "the wounded and dead soldiers, even [the] muddy streets" in the district, show "the Union's sublimity and depth" (p. 43). As Whitman put it, we "determined to express ourselves greatly in a capital, but no fit capital yet here" (p. 61). He found a fitter symbol for the war effort in the military hospitals where he tended the wounded. But the analogy between Whitman's speculations on the meaning of democratic brotherhood and the speculations of market capitalism (taking notes on dying veterans, Whitman is "like a speculator opening up a new territory for investment") belongs to Luria, not to the Whitman I know (p. 65). Luria also attempts to interpret Lincoln's inaugural addresses in this fashion. Lincoln delivered his first inaugural address in front of the unfinished Capitol dome, a symbol both for the Union as a work in progress (as his commentators have noted) and for the unfinished city. According to Luria, the second inaugural address, delivered in front of the just-completed dome, would have "convey[ed] the victory of the federal government over regional identifications" through that backdrop (p. 54). The presumed triumphalist symbology, however, seems remote from Lincoln's words.

A fascinating third chapter treats the meanings of Douglass's postwar homes, a set of townhouses on Capitol Hill (316-18 A Street Northeast) and then Cedar Hill, in Anacostia, at 18th and W streets Southeast, purchased respectively in 1871 and 1876. Douglass wanted the residences to be showpieces for his family, his exemplary material success, and his vision of integration: their "bay windows ... invite speculation in every sense of the word: one can look out, one can think and dream, and one can promote a vision that will tempt passersby" (p. 82). Douglass became at once a purchaser of real estate (if not a speculator) and—through his display of durable wealth—a commentator on Reconstruction-era hopes. His "properties" portray "a new social landscape, one that fully integrates public and private, law and custom, whites," such as Douglass's second wife, to whom he left Cedar Hill, "and blacks," such as Douglass's ancestors (p. 75). In ceremonially bringing soil from his grandmother's cabin to his Anacostia home, Douglass "elevates his maternal ancestry" and "presents Cedar Hill as an inherited family estate," rather than presenting himself as an exception or

"a self-made man" (p. 91).

If Douglass's residences and his writings spoke out for an integrated future, Adams's books and dwellings spoke of retreats inward on behalf of the past. For his 1883-85 double house on H Street Northwest (today the location of the Hay-Adams Hotel), Adams picked "an exclusive and withdrawn site, at the very center of the nation," turning away from democracy and from the city at large to create an "inner sanctum quality," just as the heroine of Adams's novel *Democracy* (1880) rejects a corrupt Midwestern senator in favor of a quiet Virginian aristocrat (pp. 107, 129). Clover Adams's photographs, Augustus Saint-Gaudens's monument to her, and a painted portrait of Henry strike similar notes of "passivity" and cultivated "seclusion" (p. 136). The Hay-Adams house, destroyed in 1927, counts as speculation because it represented an ideal, and "the destruction of his house" may have seemed to Adams, Luria writes, "a sign of his success" in keeping his aristocratic reserve within a corruptly democratic space (p. 141).

For such public figures as Douglass and for such self-mythologizing figures as Adams, decisions about where to live and in what sort of building become, as Luria demonstrates with facility, implicit statements about the United States. It is not always clear, though, what they say about Washington as a city, which for Luria's Adams, Douglass, and Whitman always stood for something else. The tendency to stand for too much, represent more than it can comfortably accommodate, give its limited space to competing and finally unfulfillable symbolic promises and plans may itself be Washington, D.C.'s, defining feature, as Luria's chapters suggest, and as she argues in an epilogue about the national mall. The only part of the book with a twentieth-century topic, it examines debates about that open space, whose detractors complain that it looks squared off, even walled off, a flat green confirmation of the divide between federal and municipal Washington. The mall's defenders counter that it serves well and democratically the nation for which it was built. Where else would you put "a million demonstrators," or "the entire AIDS quilt" (p. 151)? It represents—as does L'Enfant's document—"an unfulfilled big plan," modern proof that "the disconnect between city and plan, between national and civic space, is inherent in the plan for Washington itself, and this in turn suggests that Washington will always remain a city divided" (p. 154).

Although Luria's choice of documents and buildings is not (and never claims to be) comprehensive, her book generates a perspective on a whole city, a series of mean-

ings visible only in retrospect to a “reader” of many structures and works, almost as if Washington were itself one text. This approach has the merit of permitting many different sorts of analyses, and the occasional disadvantage of treating ten or twelve cultural productions, selected on no clear or representative basis, as if they comprised, together, a single work of art. Luria covers major events in the postbellum city’s municipal history as they impinge on Douglass or Adams—for example, the 1875-76 collapse of the Freedmen’s Bank (whose promise of mingled racial uplift and capital improvement was itself a failed speculation), and Lewis Douglass’s service on the short-lived House of Delegates in 1871-74. Key parts of municipal history, however, go uncovered, perhaps because they did not produce suitable literary or architectural works. Alexander “Boss” Shepherd is not even in the index, though his rise and fall, and the ensuing century of congressional control, was for many residents the most consequential of the district’s failed hopes.

Scholars of postbellum African American writing, modernism, and contemporary literature can and should

ask whether Luria’s sense of Washington, D.C., as a place of flawed plans, half-completed ideas, and a half-concealed, half-admitted link between market speculation and political ideals emerges in later depictions, especially in those that reach past the federal city. Are the failed life plans and frustrations in part 2 of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) versions of a long-term view of D.C.? What about the fertile, yet collapsing, Georgetown in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), derived in part from Washington and in part from another planned capital, Canberra? Do the living authors of African American Washington—Elizabeth Alexander, Edward P. Jones, and especially Thomas Sayers Ellis—show Washington as a space of unfinished plans, or of plans that have already gone wrong? What about the plans and the history of Union Station, a failed visitors’ center before it was a gaudy shopping mall? Has anyone managed to integrate, in a single work of art (of whatever kind), the national aspirations embodied by the Capitol dome with the meanings and hopes of Washington’s neighborhoods? Or, is that sort of integration yet another plan never wholly fulfilled?

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