

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gail Sylvia Lowe. *East of the River: Continuity and Change*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, 2010. Illustrations, maps. 242 pp. \$25.00 (paper), No ISBN listed.

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Published on H-DC (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Mary Beth Corrigan

## East toward the Rising Sun: A New Look at Southeast Washington DC

The local and national media do not regard all Washington DC neighborhoods equally. Often skewed news coverage hones in on the underbelly in some and celebrity of others. Many of those maligned neighborhoods in Washington are explored in *East of the River*, edited by Gail S. Lowe, historian at the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Community Museum (ACM).

When I first moved to Washington twenty years ago, I held the stereotypical view that most of the city's crime and vice were spawned in East of the River communities. My experiences as an employee of the ACM in the early 1990s, however, dispelled those prejudices. The twelve essays in *East of the River* attest to the rich history, community pride, and scenic views found in this area. The authors' extensive knowledge of Washington's social history demystifies East of the River neighborhoods. Moreover, anyone interested in urban, social, and political studies will find well-documented accounts that give a balanced voice to people embroiled in community problems and that offer a thorough discussion of real and contrived violence and misunderstanding.

The book is divided into three parts, each weighed equally with historical, cultural, and sociological essays pertaining to over a millennia of history. The foreword, by Emanuel Tersh Boasberg, chair of the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board, openly engages the stark reality race and class have played and plagued people and neighborhoods in East of the River. Boasberg, a Washington resident of over fifty years, recalls reading about East of the River people and communities with fear and

disinterest. His prejudice was dismissed when he traveled to the southeast corner of the city and discovered Victorian houses, Civil War forts, and a flowering African American culture. The brief but engaging foreword invites the reader to consider acknowledging their own prejudices and ignorance of southeast Washington by reading the essays that demonstrate that the story of these neighborhoods is not rootless but multilayered, beginning with early proto-American life and ending with economic flux and a rising African American community.

Lowe indicates that this book seeks to correct the misnomer of southeast Washington as solely Anacostia. The Seventh and Eighth Wards comprise the majority of neighborhoods in south and far southeast Washington. There are actually over thirty-five distinct neighborhoods in the area. The vision of *East of the River* illuminates the settlement patterns, ecological developments, transportation, and zoning matters that have influenced and are influencing this community. Lowe indicates that this work is a testament to heritage, survival, courage, and pride in being a uniquely located community, a community that has been self-defined and self-aware.

Most of the entries are illustrated with photographs, maps, and charts to give depth to the human needs shaping the highlighted communities. The opening section, "Yesterday: The History and Beginnings of the Built Environment," propels the reader into the colonial period when native peoples, such as the Nacothanks, met explorer John Smith. Portia James's opening essay, "The Most Pleasant and Healthful Place in All the

Country: The History of Settlement and Land Use along the Eastern Branch,” explains how early American settlers carved settlements into areas called Barry Farms, Good Hope, and Congress Heights. Settling alongside native peoples were blacks, whites, the enslaved, and freeborn men and women. By the late 1800s, the federal city grew through expansion, wars, and a steady increase in residency. Prosperity fluctuated for blacks and working-class whites, and modernization and urban renewal sought to ameliorate poor conditions; however, they did not. By the 1960s, city planners and developers had not considered the unique needs of far southeast Washington, such as concentrated apartment housing and playgrounds. The twentieth century closed with budding optimism for the area. Despite rising levels of crime, neglected properties, and increased gentrification, the neighborhoods have improved.

In the second section, “Today: Transformation from Small Town to Urban Disharmony,” the book continues to explain the imposition of business interest versus community development. Aubrey Thagard’s entry, “Urban Planning, Policy and Development in Far Southeast Washington, 1950-Present: Shaping a Community,” examines “the unique position” of this community. “A geographically isolated area attempting to shake off the contrasting images of neglect and prosperity,” with “renewed interest in urban living,” East of the River has become “a desirable address with slight disregard for existing residents” (p. 137). Thagard’s intention is to inform the reader of the larger political issue affecting all Washingtonians because of limited self-governance due to its political status as neither a state nor a territory. The combination of poverty, bad media coverage, no lo-

cal governmental authority, and a history of indifference has proven to be a pivotal moment for far southern residents. This moment could rectify past injustices through equality and inclusion or further distance a population of Washingtonians familiar with indifference.

In the final section, “Tomorrow: Future Visions,” community activists give voice to the importance of telling the story and remaining vigilant in the face of indifference. This section provides successful examples of collaborative efforts between institutions, such as the ACM, the various Advisory Neighborhood Commission collectives that work closely with ward councilmen on pertinent matters, and the Neighborhood Heritage Trails Program sponsored by Cultural Tourism DC to promote positive and valuable aspects of life in far southeast Washington. Through collaboration, the larger city of Washington is learning to appreciate all areas while tourists to the city are beginning to learn about the community surrounding the federal government.

The ACM through *East of the River* continues its tradition of being an innovative voice for the far southeast community. The contributors represent a broad array of disciplines, including academics, researchers, long-time residents, museum specialists, architects, and urban planners, yet their voices combine into a melodious praise song about the predominantly working-class and black neighborhood. The desire to bring together the past, the present, and visions for the future is admirable; however, history has proven different. Regardless of the outcome pending in far southeast Washington, *East of the River* informs us that, when challenged, people proclaim their value both near and far and provide a lesson to other challenged communities.

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**Citation:** Ida E. Jones. Review of Lowe, Gail Sylvia, *East of the River: Continuity and Change*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

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