

Book Review: Death of a Suburban Dream: race and schools in Compton, California by Emily E Straus

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Death of a Suburban Dream explores the history of Compton from its founding in the late nineteenth century to the present, taking on three critical issues which have shaped the Los Angeles suburb: the history of race and educational equity, the relationship between schools and place, and the complicated intersection of schooling and municipal economies. An interesting historical portrait, finds **Kerwin Datu**.



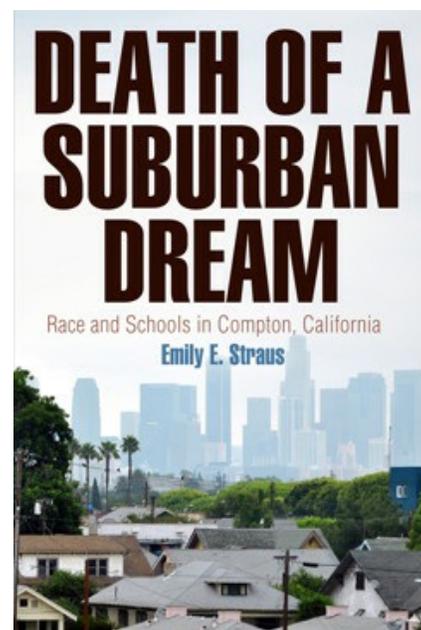
Death of a Suburban Dream: race and schools in Compton, California. Emily E. Straus. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014.

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Compton, Los Angeles: a suburb brought to the world's attention by the landmark album *Straight Outta Compton* by NWA, and ever since synonymous with gangs, racialised poverty and, like many inner suburbs of large American cities, failing schools. From afar (say, from the safety of the LSE), the reasons for the collapse of such areas are easy to imagine: the nature of American racism, white flight, the disappearance of working-class employment, falling real incomes, the confluence of drugs and guns. Urbanists closer to Los Angeles will know that Compton has never been defined strictly by black poverty as outsiders may assume, but has been the site of struggles between a few racial groups: first lower middle class whites fighting vainly to exclude blacks from their imperfect idyll, then those same blacks a generation later tightening their grip on the suburb's governing bodies as Latinos followed after them.

Yet in *Death of a Suburban Dream: race and schools in Compton, California* by historian **Emily E. Straus**, we hear a lot about schools, but not really very much about race, and almost nothing about gangs or drugs or guns. They are heard often enough in the background, but only as bass notes undergirding the livelier themes that compose this book's upper registers. By neglecting to dwell on these topics, Straus effectively shows that they are not unilateral forces but merely part of a much more complex threading of narratives produced through the workings of very local institutions. She focuses on the Compton Unified School District, whose history she traces over an eighty-year period from the Great Depression and the 1933 Long Beach earthquake to today.

For unfamiliar readers, it may be necessary to explain what a US school district actually is. More than a simple catchment area defining which kids go to which neighbourhood schools, US school districts constitute an additional layer of local government distinct from county and city governments, with the special purpose of ensuring the provision of primary and secondary education. School districts are led by elected representatives and have the power to raise taxes on those living within their borders to finance the district's schools, though unlike county and city governments they cannot necessarily do much to attract businesses and industry to an area – that is to say they cannot do much to improve the tax base itself. Like the act of incorporating a new city, a school district is drawn up not by some state government cartographer but as determined by the residents themselves, who come together to voluntarily produce these additional layers of government, a reminder of the frontier spirit and culture of bottom-up democratic governance in the US.



These peculiarities have a lot of relevance for the nature of the problem facing Compton Unified. Compton's early residents are depicted here as insular and insecure, less wealthy than other parts of greater Los Angeles in the 1930s, yet greatly reluctant to subsume their suburb, its identity and its institutions, into any other larger administrative amalgam, despite the added difficulty of going it alone. They were also reluctant to allow heavy industry or large commercial development into what they hoped was becoming an increasingly valuable white-picket idyll. The city was already suffering through the Great Depression when the earthquake destroyed all ten of its schools and much other infrastructure. Since the city's small tax base could not carry the burden of rebuilding, Compton Unified resorted to debt financing, a decision that appears to have plagued it unto today.

Already Compton proves to be an interesting case study in the deficiencies of special-purpose government. There is the mismatch in scale, the inappropriate size of many school districts, the carving up of a territory into small taxation districts with presumably similar tax bases compared to the reality of a regional economy that shifts like quicksand across all of them. There is also the mismatch between their revenue-raising and spending mandates, with the provision of education to residents' children tied to the prospects for commerce and industry in the same suburbs.

Yet this history offers more. There is decade after decade of mismanagement of the school district, its sinking deeper and deeper into debt. There are the headwinds of state politics, successive California governments that demand the lowering of taxes across the state, regardless of its impacts in individual districts. What is pleasing is just how far this is from the narrative one might have anticipated – of race, gangs, and poverty and of schools caught in the crossfire – and thus how much of an original contribution it makes to these discourses. On the other hand it is occasionally hard to judge whether these broader narratives should have been brought in for closer inspection more often – surely they must have a little bit more of a place in the history of Compton Unified than Straus gives them, but it is a very worthy exercise to have revealed so many of the other layers.

Kerwin Datu originally trained in architecture, in which he worked in Sydney, Paris and London, before completing the MSc in Urbanisation and Development at LSE. He is now pursuing a PhD on the role of the global city network in international economic development, focused on African cities. As Editor-in-chief of [The Global Urbanist](#), he receives and publishes essays and magazine articles on issues affecting urban development in cities around the world, and is always open to submissions from new contributors. [Read reviews by Kerwin](#).

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