Historiographic Essay: Suburbanization and Post-War American Life

Zada Law
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Professor Louis Woods
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This provides an overview of how historians have analyzed and interpreted America’s post-World War II suburban trend. During the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, America experienced massive amounts of home construction on the outskirts of cities and a large-scale demographic shift in residential patterns. The scholarly literature on the phenomenon of the suburbs -- the low-density, predominantly residential districts that lie on the outskirts of cities -- is considerable and cross-disciplinary. Urban historians, geographers, sociologists, biologists, and planners are among those who have studied the political, physical, economic, environmental, and social aspects of American suburbia. Studies have examined the roles the automobile and transportation networks, real estate industry, and the federal government in the development and reinforcement of this residential pattern. While this essay focuses primarily on the historic literature concerning postwar suburbs, it also includes sociological studies that have influenced historians and a brief review of the seminal studies of pre-World War II suburbs.

Residential areas had developed on the fringes of American’s urban centers by the late nineteenth century, and several important studies of these earlier suburbs put the residential developments of the post-World War II era in context. By the end of the nineteenth century, scholars were describing, analyzing, and generally seeking to understand seeking why residential areas were developing at the fringes of urban centers. Historiographers consider Adna Weber’s *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century a Study in Statistics* (1899) to be one of the first scholarly discussions of the phenomena suburbs.1 Weber was interested in understanding how

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urban population centers developed and expanded. “City building,” according to Weber, was a process in which the city grows to the point that the original settlement becomes the center of business. At that point, commercial and government buildings begin to push residential spaces from the city center to its perimeter and beyond its municipal limits. Once established, the municipality would annex these new residential areas. Weber used census statistics from the nineteenth century to show that populations in cities were decreasing while suburban areas were experiencing population increases. Citing examples from America as well as Europe, Weber maintained that this “new distribution of population combines at once the open air and spaciousness of the country with the sanitary improvements, comforts and associated life of the city.” For Weber, the congestion and intensity of population in the cores of growing cities was not conducive to residential life, but the suburbs, especially once annexed, benefited from city amenities along with more space and better air quality.

Weber did not attribute the development of suburbs to the proliferation of electric trolleys and railway networks. Rather, Weber said that the development of the electric streetcar resulted from the American desire for living in “cottage homes instead of business blocks.” Cottage homes are not in city centers. Thus, streetcars were a necessary development because standard horse-car lines were “too slow to carry the majority of workingmen to and from their work each

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day.” However, Weber did not feel that suburbs had to remain solely residential “bedroom communities” for commuters working in the city. Rather, Weber reasoned that manufacturing businesses should move to the suburbs because the overhead costs for space were less expensive outside the city center, more space was available for the money, and the good air and green spaces outside the city center attracted a better class of employee.

Another early work that explored residential relocation from the city to its outer fringes is Harlan Paul Douglass’ *The Suburban Trend* (1925). Douglass reasoned that suburbs grew because cities became more congested and the population “overflowed” into open areas where there was more room to build. Douglass used Federal Census data to show that suburban populations were increasing in the early twentieth century, and his study provided a cross sectional view of the status of America’s suburbanization including standards of living in the suburbs. Weber’s data suggested that suburbanites were primarily nuclear families who owned their own homes and commuted to employment in the city. The absence of community loyalty and a sense of isolation from neighbors were deficiencies that Douglass noted as problems endemic to suburbs.

Like Adna Weber, urban historian Sam Bass Warner was interested in the process of city development. In his 1962 classic, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*, Warner examined how suburbs developed by studying the transformation of self-contained

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towns and villages on the outskirts of metropolitan areas to middle-class residential commuter areas. Like Weber, Warner believed that as city grew, the core settlement transformed from that of a multiuse area to a district oriented primarily to commerce and industry. However, Warner’s conclusions about the sociocultural dimensions of suburbanization differed with Weber’s conclusions. Weber maintained that streetcars developed because of suburbs, whereas Warner argued that the middle and upper income classes moved out of the city center to the metropolitan outskirts due to the expansion of the streetcar railway system and city sanitary services.

Using census records, legal records, land records, and land use patterns as his sources, Warner concluded that three villages outside of Boston – Roxbury, West Roxbury, and Dorchester – developed large residential areas during the last three decades of the nineteenth century because of streetcar and trolley access to these areas. Warner connected the development of transportation networks to wealth, arguing that the location of the transit lines served the needs of the upper class rather than the transportation needs of middle class commuters. According to Warner, wealthy capitalists who wanted to move out of the congestion of the cities and owners built the transit lines for their own commuting requirements. The wealthy and upper classes had purchased land as far from the city center as they could reasonably commute into the city commercial district by streetcar -- approximately

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six miles -- and developed the streetcar lines from the city center to their new homes.\textsuperscript{21} Within the six-mile radius, residential areas developed along the streetcar lines and transformed small, outlying communities to residential suburbs.\textsuperscript{22} Since land was more expensive closer to the city center, the houses within the six-mile radius were smaller closer together, and attracted middle-class occupants who wanted to live away from the congestion of the city.\textsuperscript{23} As these villages became “bedroom towns” for commuters, they were eventually annexed into the city but remained residential even after annexation.\textsuperscript{24} The exodus of the middle class and upper classes from the city center left the residential structures in the city to those in the lower classes who could not afford to move.\textsuperscript{25}

Like Harlan Paul Douglass, Warner found that the layout of the suburbs and the need to commute to the city for employment and shopping opportunities tended to increase isolation and decrease commitment to local community function.\textsuperscript{26} Common to all three studies of early suburbanization is a characterization of the suburbs as a respite from the city and a belief that the residents of the suburbs liked the separation of homes from working area. As Warner notes, captains of industry as well as middle class mortgagers shared the enthusiasm for this “two-part city.”\textsuperscript{27}

The streetcar may have been the transportation staple of early twentieth century suburbs, but the automobile was the hallmark of the post-World War II housing boom. The terms

\textsuperscript{26} Warner, \textit{Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900}, 158.
“suburbia” and “suburbanization” generally refer to the large residential developments that mushroomed in fields on the outskirts of cities in the years following World War II, helped along by improvements in the highway infrastructure and the affordability of automobiles. Every house in these “subdivisions,” so-named because of how large land tracts were “subdivided” into a series of smaller residential lots, had an automobile so the owners could commute to employment, usually in the city or urban area. One of the best descriptions of the factors that contributed to postwar suburbanization is in Adam Ward Rome’s study of the development of the environmentalist ethic in America, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (2001).28 Rome identified the key factors in postwar suburbanization as the G.I. Bill, Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance, the availability of automobiles, developments in the homebuilding industry, and residual New Deal philosophies of buying durable goods to support the economy and improve living standards.29

Even before the Depression, the federal government promoted home ownership as necessary for social order because it led to saving, preserving property, and taking part in local government.30 During World War II, urban populations grew as workers moved to the cities to engage in wartime production efforts. During this time, contractors filling the need for defense housing developed ways to speed up the housing construction process and make housing more affordable by using prefabricated components.31 After the war, an increase in marriage and birth rates (the “baby boom”) contributed to a housing shortage in America and the need for quickly constructed and affordable housing. Homeownership was important to national, social, and

economic security, and the homebuilding industry helped to keep the postwar economy moving forward and America strong. Some families moved to the suburbs in search of affordable shelter since the postwar housing shortage meant that the cost of a tract home in the suburbs was less than renting in the city. For others, the allure of suburbs was the chance to participate in the “American Dream” of owning a home. And, as in previous decades, suburbs offered a respite from the pollution and congestion of the city and the chance to be closer to nature, an impulse that is revealed in streets and subdivisions named for natural features, even if they were destroyed to build the housing development.

Rome’s use of sources in The Bulldozer in the Countryside illustrates the difficulty of doing scholarly research on postwar topics due to the sheer amount of evidence both in print media and in audio-visual sources. For example, Rome used source materials from Redbook to congressional reports. However, the academy did not wait for mountains of evidence to accumulate before beginning to analyze the process of postwar suburbanization. Soon after the end of the war, critiques began of America’s housing apartheid experienced by minority groups who had fought on behalf of America to eradicate injustice elsewhere in the world. The racial composition of suburbs emerged as a theme in the 1950s in tandem with Civil Rights advocacy. In 1955, Charles Abrams’ Forbidden Neighbors; a Study of Prejudice in Housing exposed the complicity of realtors, banks, home owners associations, and government agencies in limiting access to housing for minorities. This work has been described as “the most comprehensive

treatment of housing segregation and discrimination as practiced against Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Negro descent.”

Abrams, an expert in national housing issues, believed that government and industry were to blame for residential segregation and that government policies and program could mitigate this social injustice. Abrams used the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan to illustrate the systemic use of government power and quasi-governmental organizations such as the Detroit Real Estate board use of fear and restrictive covenants to keep African Americas out of the suburbs. Abrams argued that the motives behind housing discrimination were rooted in prejudice making the main commodity in postwar America – scarce housing – unavailable on the same basis to whites and blacks. This disparity, Abrams argued, led to school segregation, social separation, and violence in competition for housing. Forbidden Neighbors exposed the racial prejudice in the actions of the Federal Housing Administration, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and the National Association of Real Estate Boards. Abrams’ study set the stage for future examination of housing segregation and housing-related violence against African Americans and for viewing suburbs as a racialized landscape.

A broader view of suburbia was presented in The Suburban Community, a collection of essays edited by William Dobriner and published in 1958. The Suburban Community is considered a standard treatise on the status of scholarly thought about suburbia in the late 1950s. The studies in this book synthesized the available data on social structure, lifestyles,


38 Marsh, "Reconsidering the Suburbs: An Exploration of Suburban Historiography," 583.
problems, values, growth, and demographic character of suburbs and included literature reviews
on the demography, urban ecology, social organization, and ideological perspectives in suburbs.
The concern for the environmental changes arising from the conversion of vast areas of rural
land to residential uses revealed in The Suburban Community is a telltale sign of ecological
worries that were beginning to rise in scientific thought about suburbia.

The political structure of the postwar suburbs differed from the streetcar suburbs of
Boston described by Sam Bass Warner. In Boston, the streetcar suburbs were municipalities that
transformed into residential areas and later annexed into the larger metropolitan area. The
postwar suburbs were new municipal political entities separate from the cities they surrounded.
This observation led Dobriner to argue that that the suburb was a generic type of community that
could lead to more nuanced theory of community types and organization than the prevailing
notion that “folk” (rural) and “urban” were the major types of community organization.39

The nature of the suburban community’s organization was the subject of Herbert J. Gans’
The Levittowners; Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community (1967). Gans, a
sociologist, conducted a study of the third Levittown planned suburban community built by the
firm of Levitt and Sons, Inc., the largest builder of planned communities in the eastern United
States.40 Gans wrote The Levittowners to examine the validity of critics who claimed that
suburban life was somehow different from earlier residential forms due to changes in American
social and ethics values caused by these new residential suburbs.41 Gans was building on earlier
work by Bennett Berger who was examining the “suburban myth” that suburbs were breeding a
new set of Americans characterized by loneliness and boredom, conformity to social and ethical

39 Dobriner, ed. The Suburban Community, vii, xiv.
41 Gans, The Levittowners; Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community, xxvii.
standards, and ruled by women due to absent husbands commuting to jobs in the cities. Although Berger had challenged this myth, Gans felt that the inaccuracies of the myth still dominated characterizations of suburban life. Gans wanted to understand the planning concepts behind suburban communities and how planning affected the lives, thinking, and behavior of their residents. Through examination of the question of conformity and the concept of community, Gans was looking at the larger question of how leaders, planners, and citizens participated in shaping public policy.

Gans studied the phenomenon of postwar suburbs using the participant-observation method of living in a suburban community of Levittown, New Jersey outside of Philadelphia. He purchased a home in the community in 1958 and used personal interviews with his neighbors and community leaders, participation in public meetings, newspaper articles to document important events, and systematic sampling over time using questionnaires to gauge what intended and unintended changes had occurred in the lives of the Levittown residents. His work suggested that suburbs did not contribute to feelings of alienation and anomie in their residents; rather, suburban life produced more cohesion in families. Gans found Levittown residents were generally satisfied with the quality of their lives and concluded that suburbia was a residential model that more Americans should embrace.

Gans was interested in the social policy and planning aspects of this new residential type that was developing outside of the city boundaries, services, and regulations; however, he did not

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find suburbs’ environmental impacts worrisome. For example, Gans maintained that the loss of farmland to suburbs was fine because industrialized farming was taking up much of the slack in the loss of the small farmers.\(^48\) Although the scientists in Dobriner’s work were expressing concern over the deleterious environmental effects of residential areas that were outside the reach of municipal sanitary systems and water supplies, the implications of the suburbs for social policy and their contribution to race and class violence were more in the minds of researchers than environmental impacts.

The growing concern about the differentiation of suburbs as political entities and its implications for planning is evident books such as Frederick M. Wirt’s *On the City's Rim: Politics and Policy in Suburbia*, published in 1972.\(^49\) Wirt’s focus was the relationship of suburbs as political entities that existed near larger metropolitan areas but were not subject to their regulatory authority. Suburbs did not contribute to the tax base of the metropolitan area and pulled local manufacturing away from the cities as the industries moved to the suburbs to be closer to labor sources.\(^50\) Wirt also considered the political influence of the suburbs on presidential elections, particularly the strong Republican presence in the suburbs in the 1964 election.

While Wirt’s concern was the political effects of suburbs on local and national levels, the contribution of the suburbanization trend to the racial violence that was erupting in many northern cities was also of concern to writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, B. J. Widick’s *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence* (1972) is a case study of labor and race

\(^48\) Gans, *The Levittowners; Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*, 423.


relations in Detroit that includes a chapter on the post-World War II reconstruction in Detroit. A longtime resident of Detroit and professor at Wayne State University, Widick was also a United Auto Workers (UAW) steward in 1948 and an activist for racial equality in trade unions. His scholarly treatment of postwar suburbanization in the Detroit area as well as his personal recollections makes this account a powerful primary source as well as an analytical work about the importance of race as a factor in suburbanization.

Widick argued that while the fortunes of the automotive industry were improving throughout the 1950s, the city of Detroit was deteriorating. Widick attributed Detroit’s deterioration to defense jobs drying up and the relation of the automotive industry to suburban areas. However, these suburbs were not bedroom communities where the residents commuted to the city for jobs. Rather, the suburbs grew due to the roles of the labor unions and industry in relocating automotive plants and jobs to these outlying areas. Moreover, labor and industry contributed to racial segregation in Detroit’s suburbs. Warren, Michigan was home to the Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors automobile plants and remained 100 percent white until 1970. Testimony before the Civil Rights Commission by black trade unionists clearly showed an enormous gap between the numbers of skilled black versus skilled white workers that translated into an income gap. This income gap meant that black workers could not afford to move to new houses in the suburbs such as Warren, and management positions in the automotive

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52 The Foreward by Horace L. Sheffield, Jr. contains details of Widick's career. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence*, ix-x.

53 Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence*, 137-139.

54 Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence*, 141.
industry for blacks did not exist.\textsuperscript{55} Detroit’s deterioration, Widick argued, was ultimately due to the white autoworkers who had received good wages courtesy of United Auto Workers bargaining relocating to the suburbs and businesses moving out of the inner city to follow their customers.\textsuperscript{56}

Widick approached the development of segregated suburban areas through a case study of a large metropolitan area. Others scholars in the 1970s considered the effect of race on the composition of suburbs at a national scales. In \textit{Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective} (1979), Thomas A. Clark examined black migration to the suburbs during the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{57} Although Clark’s study begins over a decade after the end of World War II, \textit{Blacks in Suburbs} documents the national trend of racial discrimination in the form of restrictive covenants and other zoning regulations experienced by blacks who moved or attempted to move to the suburbs throughout the postwar period. Clark described the experience of African American families who sought to participate in the promise of America’s “good life” that included better housing and jobs prospects in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{58} Through statistical analyses, Clark demonstrated the disparities in housing availability, income, financing, and job opportunities that African Americans faced in suburban areas. Clark argued that blacks who moved to the suburbs did not necessarily experience the “good life” of better housing or jobs because many factors that contribute to overall quality of life were not present in the suburbs for African American due to discriminatory practices.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Widick, \textit{Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence}, 144.
\textsuperscript{56} Widick, \textit{Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence}, 141.
\textsuperscript{58} Clark, \textit{Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective}, 8.
\textsuperscript{59} Clark, \textit{Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective}, 3.
By highlighting the racial disparities that existed in the suburbs, *Blacks in Suburbs* adds to the literature about the African American experience of postwar suburbanization. Clark’s study also adds to the case for federal complicity in limiting access to suburban housing opportunities in the suburbs, especially the discriminatory policies of the Federal Housing Administration. Like Gans’ examination of whether popular notions of the suburban experience were the reality in Levittown, *Blacks in Suburbs* is also part of a trend in the 1960s and 1970s of unpacking the myths and ideas that had grown up about the nature of the postwar suburban experience. In this case, Clark took a cross-regional approach to one demographic to look at deeper factors that make up suburbanization. Clark used income, jobs, and housing pattern data from several regions to critique the claim that improvement in the quality of life was equally accessible for whites and blacks in the suburbs, finding that moving to the suburbs did not guarantee an improvement in conditions for African Americans.60

The trend of dissecting the American suburban experience continued in the historical literature of the 1980s. An example of this trend is *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality* (1986) by Jon Teaford.61 Teaford maintained that suburbanization contributed to the racial fragmentation of cities because the discriminatory politics that discouraged blacks from moving to the suburbs relegated African American populations to reside in the cities.62 Teaford also considered the roles of transportation networks and automobiles in suburban development, suggesting that traffic congestion in the cities pushed suburbanites to shop in the suburbs while better transportation networks improved the offerings.

60 Clark, *Blacks in Suburbs*, a National Perspective, 11.
in suburban marketplaces.\textsuperscript{63} During this same period, historic preservationists began connecting the rise of suburban commerce to the demise of the central city business districts and the loss of the historic urban architectural fabric.\textsuperscript{64}

The effects of public policy and planning on suburban life were also addressed by Robert Fishman in \textit{Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia} (1987).\textsuperscript{65} Fishman argued that while the postwar suburbs had promised respite from the urban congestion of city life and a chance to live closer to nature, they had not delivered.\textsuperscript{66} Instead, suburbs had become a new type of city that Fishman called “technoburbs” because they functioned as cities on their own with employment opportunities and commercial services and did not depend on the urban center for these services. Technoburbs differed from suburbs because suburbs, according to Fishman’s strict definition, were strictly residential communities that did not have manufacturing or commercial developments.\textsuperscript{67} The suburbs built after World War II, Fishman argued, actually signaled the end of the suburban lifestyle rather that its fluorescence because they were transforming into something more than bedroom communities for the middle class.\textsuperscript{68} Fishman was endeavoring to find a rigorous definition of suburbs that could be applied across space and time, but the definition was not widely applicable. Neither the term nor concept of “technoburbs” ever caught on. Although the various types of communities on the outskirts of

\textsuperscript{63} Teaford, \textit{The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality}, 112.

\textsuperscript{64} I was one of the professionals in the preservation community making this argument during the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{65} Robert Fishman, \textit{Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia} (New York: Basic Books, 1987). This book examines the history of suburbs beginning with residential areas on the outskirts of London in the eighteenth century through the twentieth century modern suburbs. The notion that suburbs existed in the eighteenth century pushes this concept further back in time than other scholars prior to Fishman had done. However, the present essay concentrates on the contribution that Fishman makes to the understanding of post-World War II suburban development.

\textsuperscript{66} Fishman, \textit{Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia}, xi.

\textsuperscript{67} Fishman, \textit{Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia}, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{68} Fishman, \textit{Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia}, 183.
cities differed in political structure, the presence of commerce and industry, and annexation status, they would continue to be labeled “suburbs.”

Two years before Fishman coined the term “technoburbs” and attempted to develop a strict definition of suburbia, Kenneth Jackson had acknowledged that the definition of suburbs was vague and that areas labeled “suburban” were diverse in character. Nonetheless, in Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (1985), Jackson argued that suburbs had certain characteristics in common including “conspicuous consumption, reliance on the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.”

Jackson described suburbs as non-agricultural low-density residential areas of single-family dwellings owned by middle and upper middle class residents who commuted to their workplaces. Although Jackson did not include a racial dimension in his definition, his description of suburbia included demographics. Like Charles Abrams and others before him, Jackson noted the Federal Home Administration’s policy of “redlining” areas and refusing to guarantee loans in redlined areas to whites. Jackson also observed that mortgage loans were not available to blacks in areas populated predominantly by whites.

Jackson’s definition of suburbs was more multidimensional than Fishman’s and allowed him to include more areas on the outskirts of cities into his scope of study. Jackson used a variety of sources in his analysis drawing from intellectual and architectural history, public policy analysis, and urban and transportation history. Jackson also placed American suburban

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70 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, 4.

71 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, 11.

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development within an international framework in order to understand why Americans wanted to own homes on the outskirts of cities far from their workplaces. Based on this international context, Jackson argued that “suburbanization is a common human aspiration and that its achievement is dependent upon technology and affluence.” In other words, Jackson characterized suburbanization as part of a general urban growth developmental model rather than a uniquely American phenomenon.

Jackson described suburbia as “both a planning type and a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism.” He portrayed suburbia as a concept that could be perceived as either an ideal American lifestyle or the embodiment of national problems such as conformity and environmental damage. Jackson’s characterization was echoed in Margaret Marsh’s essay on suburban historiography that described historians and others who write about post war suburbia as either “traditionalists” or “cosmopolitans.” Traditionalists never truly accepted females in the work force during wartime and viewed the development of suburbs as a welcome solution for a return to the pre-war patriarchal family life. Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, viewed suburbs as featureless bastions of conformity. Of the studies examined thus far, Herbert Gans’ depiction of Levittown comes closest to claiming that suburbia was a way of life to aspire to and recommended the public policy provide for wider participation across socioeconomic classes in this lifestyle. Others such as Charles Abrams and Thomas Clark focused less on the aspect of

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73 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 4-5.
75 Marsh, "Reconsidering the Suburbs: An Exploration of Suburban Historiography."
76 Gans, *The Levittowners; Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*, 186.
suburban conformity and more on the racial discrimination and civil rights issues attendant to America’s suburban development.\textsuperscript{77}

The theme of racial discrimination in suburban development and access to housing continued in the literature of the 1990s. In \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta} (1996), Ronald H. Bayor argued that racism drove the public policies that ultimately affected municipal schools, politics, and residential patterns in Atlanta.\textsuperscript{78} When highway development and urban renewal destroyed Atlanta’s traditionally black residential areas, blacks could not move into the suburbs areas because of the discriminatory mortgage insurance policies of the Federal Homeowners Administration. However, when displaced blacks tried to move into urban residential areas traditionally considered white, they confronted violence and other forms of resistance.\textsuperscript{79} The growth of suburbs around Atlanta, Bayor argued, resulted from “white flight,”-the phenomenon of white urban residents moving to the suburbs to escape integration and racial tension. His data even showed how city officials redrew Atlanta’s corporate boundaries to allow whites to move away from the inner city but retain municipal services.\textsuperscript{80}

Bayor’s examination of how racially discriminatory policies factored into the development of Atlanta’s residential patterns continued the work that Charles Abrams began in 1955 on the role of public policies in racializing the post-World War II suburbs. Abrams’ findings continue to be examined and expanded upon in the twenty-first century, with some

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{77}{Abrams, \textit{Forbidden Neighbors; a Study of Prejudice in Housing}; Clark, \textit{Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective}.}
\footnotetext{78}{Ronald H. Bayor, \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta}, The Fred W Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xiv. Bayor’s study begins in the late nineteenth century and ends in the 1980s. This essay concentrates on the contributions this work makes to the understanding of the development and character of post-World War II suburbs.}
\footnotetext{79}{Bayor, \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta}, 59.}
\footnotetext{80}{Bayor, \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta}, 85.}
\end{footnotes}
studies challenging earlier findings. In particular, two recent books have taken issue with the Charles Abrams’ conclusions in *Forbidden Neighbors; a Study of Prejudice in Housing* (1955).  

In *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (2000), Stephen Grant Meyer used the lens of race in the suburbs to consider how Americans on a national scale are dealing with race relations throughout all aspects of their lives. In addition to a national critique of the civil rights issues related to residential space, Meyers’ purpose was to write an alternate critique of the underlying causes of racial segregation in response to Charles Abrams’ *Forbidden Neighbors*. Meyer disagreed with Abrams’ premise that government and industry policies and programs were to blame for residential segregation. Meyer also maintained that Abrams’ belief that new policies could mitigate the social injustice of racial housing segregation was “fundamentally flawed” although it had become the “accepted truth” about housing discrimination. In response, Meyer argued that the root cause of unequal access to residential real estate for African Americans was deep-seated racial hatred. Moreover, Meyer argued, racism fueled the government and business practices that intensified housing discrimination, with the model of residential racial separation being accepted by African Americas and even viewed as appropriate.

An important contributions of *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door* is to highlight the persistence of hate crimes in the contested space of residential neighborhoods. Drawing from the


82 Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). Meyer considered the role of racial segregation and separation in American neighborhoods through from the early years of the twentieth century through the 1960s with an Afterward that covers the remainder of the twentieth century. This essay focuses on the role that racial segregation and separation plays in our understanding of the development of suburbs following World War II.


NAACP files to document housing-related crimes against blacks as well as efforts to confront this outrage across the country, Meyer detailed instance after instance of racial intimidation and terrorism against blacks in the years following World War II. Meyer argued that residential suburbs were the last bastion of racism and added this feature to his characterization of suburbs. He also emphasized how racism has factored into post war policies in mortgage lending, ultimately institutionalizing unequal access to housing opportunities and furthering residential racial separation and spatial segregation. *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door* also adds to the literature of black suburbanization by outlining the “push-pull” factors for blacks that both maintained segregated neighborhoods and spurred the fight for equal access to housing. The freedom that American lives had bought overseas directly challenged the apartheid that continued at home. Migration into northern cities had strained housing resources in urban neighborhoods, but segregation celebrated and maintained the uniqueness of African American culture. Segregation also meant that local businesses had a built in supply of customers, and it helped solidify political power for select black leaders.

Another book that spoke directly to Charles Abrams’ thesis in *Forbidden Neighbors* is Andrew Wiese’s *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (2004). 85 Wiese challenged the notion that suburbs have been refuges for white Americans and argued that African Americans have been living in suburbs in increasing numbers throughout the twentieth century. Wiese argued that books like Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier* portray the suburbs as places where only affluent and middle class whites are living.

“Historians have done a better job of excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even

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white suburbanites."  

While the focus of *Places of Their Own* was largely about the experience of African Americans moving to suburbs after 1960, Wiese provided substantive data on the black experience of suburbanization immediately after World War II. Before 1945, metropolitan suburban areas included factories and housing areas including ethnic areas and housing for blue-collar workers as well as the middle class. By 1940, one million African Americans lived in the suburbs, representing one-fifth of the black population in metropolitan areas, and some were living in more affluent commuter suburbs. In 1940s and 1950s, the number of African American suburbanites doubled, and their socioeconomic position was now of the growing black middle class. For African Americans, moving to the suburbs in the postwar years reaffirmed their emergence into the equality of middle class, but the racial discrimination they encountered set them apart from the American middle class and made it difficult to relocate to the suburbs. By 1960, 2.5 million African Americans lived in the suburbs. Their struggles to obtain a “piece of the American pie” were a continuance of “a cumulative process linked through time and space by contested racial struggle and the desire of black families to create places of their own.”

88 Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*.
own." The difference between the pre-World War II suburbs and the postwar suburbs was that the postwar suburbs had a different “regime of land use, backed by the power of the local, state, and federal governments and rooted in a vision of metropolitan space in which white communities were seen as normative and African American places were aberrant, threatening, and negatively valued." While African Americans had been living in the suburbs since before World War II, public policies of the postwar period reinforced the perception that suburbs were white refuges, and by the mid-1950s, the word “suburbia” had become a metaphor for whiteness.

Exclusivity in the suburbs grew during the postwar period as extra legal means and local governments policed the developing rims of metropolitan areas. During the 1950s, the class composition of black suburbanites changed to middle class from working class. Municipalities demolished existing black neighborhoods on the metropolitan fringes because of “sanitary regulations” or through use of “urban renewal” authority. Whites also conflated their psychological fears and racism with economic fears that integration would reduce property values in suburban neighborhoods. These fears were reinforced by realtors, homebuilders, appraisers, and lenders. At the heart of these fears was the American ideal that the home was the principal vehicle for building wealth in a family. Thus, racial segregation for the middle class became entrenched in the suburbs during the postwar years, and blacks who tried to move

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93 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 3.
95 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 97.
96 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 98.
97 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 98.
98 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 103.
into the suburbs encountered racism exercised through exclusionary tactics of zoning, restrictive covenants, discrimination in building code enforcement, and terrorist tactics such as arson.99

Wiese used newspaper accounts, court cases, and transcripts from the U.S. Civil Rights Commission hearings to make the larger argument that the history of the United States in the twentieth century was largely a struggle between blacks and whites over residential space.100 Wiese considered African American suburbanization as a “discrete historical process bound up with the wider history of both African Americans and the nation’s urban areas.”101 Places of Their Own added more data to the documentation of government complicity in supporting racism in housing market around Cleveland, Ohio to exemplify what was happening nationwide, and especially in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest.102 This book also filled a gap in the literature on African American residential patterns and suburbanization.103 Black suburbanization is “one of the most important demographic movements in the twentieth-century United States, and it had established the suburbs as an indispensable context for the study of African American life.”104 Of equal importance, Places of Their Own documents the agency of African Americans in seeking upward mobility and a better life in the suburbs.

Another theme that continues to be explored in the literature of the twenty-first century is the cultural dimension of suburbs. Sam Bass Warner engaged this theme in his work on the streetcar suburbs of Boston as did Kenneth Jackson in his exploration of the demographics of suburbs in Crabgrass Frontier. In Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism

100 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 103.
101 Wiese, Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century, 3.
103 Landry, "Review: [Untitled]," 619.
(2005), sociologist James Loewen addressed scholars who had downplayed the cultural dimensions of suburbs and instead focused on the environmental and policy aspects of suburban sprawl, annexation issues, land use, and how suburbs affect and relate to urban cores.\(^{105}\) Loewen argued that the history of racial discrimination and intimidation tactics in all white towns outside of the South factored into the cultural dimension of suburbanization.\(^{106}\) Loewen used demographic data, local historical records, and oral histories to show how small towns remained racially exclusive through a combination of mechanisms that included hate crimes and violence against blacks as well as other ethnic groups, restrictive covenants, and other zoning restrictions.

While Loewen did not downplay the role of government in helping to keep suburban towns racially segregated, this work is important for adding to the documentation of how the pattern of racially segregated suburbs was established through intimidation and terrorizing tactics against ethnic minorities. *Sundown Towns* brings Meyer’s national conversation about racially motivated hate crimes related to residential space to race at a regional level. An additional theme that arises in *Sundown Towns* is the role of personal and community agency in engaging in threatening and racist actions and allowing and promulgating discriminatory practices.

Loewen also turned his lens on the archetypal developer of suburbs, William Levitt, arguing that Levitt went along with segregation because other developers were doing so.\(^{107}\) Levitt’s contribution to racial segregation in the suburbs is more closely examined by David Kushner in *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's*


\(^{106}\) Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, 5. Loewen explores the history of sundown towns from 1890 to 1968. This essay focuses on how sundown towns can be used to understand the development of suburbs in the years immediately following World War II.

In this book, Kushner moved the discussion of the racialization of suburban landscapes to the level of family and personal experiences in Levittown, Pennsylvania in 1957. William Levitt’s mass-produced, affordable housing fit the postwar housing needs while also solidifying the American economy through homeownership. The model of Levittown allowed many Americans access to the American dream of home ownership outside of the congestion of the city. However, Levitt’s racist policies discouraged homeownership to African Americans and other minorities in his housing developments.

Kushner’s documentation of the intimidation and terrorism tactics that confronted the first family to integrate the community of Levittown brings race-related violence over residential space to a personal level while also showing the wide influence the Ku Klux Klan had outside of the South. Kushner’s use of personal interviews and newspapers sources adds to the documentation of the federal government’s complicity in making homeownership easier for white Americans than for blacks or other ethnic groups. Most important, Kushner’s close examinations of the experience of the African American family that integrated Levittown and the racism of William Levitt documents the role of individual agency in affecting the trajectories of communities and even the national patterns.

Connection with and access to nature was one component of the suburban appeal and embodied in the notion of living at the juncture of rural and urban land use. However,

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112 Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, 207.
suburban construction and nature were not necessarily compatible partners. In The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (2001), Adam Ward Rome explored the degradation that America’s postwar suburban construction caused to the environment, arguing that it had catastrophic effects.\(^{113}\) Drawing on a large array of popular periodicals, government documents, and professional publications, Rome documented the environmental damage caused by housing construction that was often unregulated because it was outside of city limits. The damage included erosion from large tracts of land bulldozed for developments and groundwater pollution from septic tanks, laundry detergents, and inadequate waste disposal.\(^{114}\)

Although The Bulldozer in the Countryside falls under the umbrella of environmental history, this book also adds considerably to the literature on suburbia. Like others, Rome credited improvements to the national transportation network as contributing to suburbanization, noting the influence of Federal highway programs, the road builders associations, and the building materials industry in promoting postwar suburban housing developments and transportation infrastructure. His documentation of the environmental effects of the home building industry is also an important contribution to suburban literature. Of equal importance, however, is how he connected the development of the environmental ethic to a suburban setting. Rome argued that as suburbs developed, Americans tried to resolve the contradiction between their impulse to be closer to nature in the suburbs and the destruction of the nature by construction of suburban developments. This tension eventually led to the rise of an environmental ethic in the suburb that was more concerned with local natural resources than


national environmental concerns over the loss of wilderness areas. Rome’s connection of the development of America’s environmental ethic to suburban thought adds to the literature on the social and political movements and thought that arise in the suburban milieu.

A recent work by Lisa McGirr that explored the rise of conservative politics in America’s post war suburbs also contributes to the literature on the social and political movements that have arisen in the suburbs. Although Frederick Wirt considered the politics of the suburbs in On the City's Rim: Politics and Policy in Suburbia 1972), McGirr more closely examined this subject in the suburbs of southern California’s Orange County (Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right, 2009). McGirr argued that conservatism was a grassroots development within a “thoroughly modern group of men and women” who were highly educated and working in technological industries, living in modern suburban neighborhoods, and not maladapted to societal change. Using Orange County as a model, McGirr argued that the area’s rapid growth, fueled in large part by entrepreneurs and the defense industry, an ethnically and economically homogeneous population, and the social and philosophical reinforcement found in conservative Protestant churches formed fertile ground for conservatism to flourish. Through this model, McGirr endeavored to show that modern conservatism developed a dual nature that combined traditionalism with modernity, making it an adaptable and resilient political force. Although Suburban Warriors focused mainly on the 1960s, this book can be included with other scholarship on the development of conservatism in post-World War II suburbs that seeks to challenge the characterization of conservatism as being mainly associated with rural, anti-

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modern orientations. McGirr’s discussion of Orange County conservatism gives insight into
how conservatism flourishes in areas such as Orange County or Scottsdale, Arizona whose
economic base depends on modern technology.

As evidenced from this literature review, the study of suburbia is multi-disciplinary, and
several prominent themes in suburban historical studies including racism, the cultural dimensions
of suburbia, and the influences on suburban development were initially identified in fields such
as sociology. The potential for cross-pollination between fields to yield themes for future
historical studies of suburbia is still high. For example, a historical study about the connection
between obesity and suburbia could bring perspective to the connections that the health care
community has made between suburban living and obesity in adults and juveniles.119

Epidemiological and public health care studies suggest that the lack of sidewalks in the suburbs
and the need for suburban residents to get into an automobile and drive to services have
contributed to Americans expanding waistlines. Studies such as Kerry Seagrave’s history of the
prevalence, treatment, and attitudes about obesity in America between 1850 and 1939 provide a
perspective through time on this problem, but a historical perspective on the factors contributing
to obesity since World War II may provide insight into dealing with the current American
epidemic.120

119 Studies such as the following suggest a correlation for suburand residents between obesity, vehicular accident
morbidity, and urban sprawl. R. Ewing, R. C. Brownson, and D. Berrigan, "Relationship between Urban Sprawl and
Weight of United States Youth," Am J Prev Med 31, no. 6 (2006); R. Ewing, R. A. Schieber, and C. V. Zegeer,
"Urban Sprawl as a Risk Factor in Motor Vehicle Occupant and Pedestrian Fatalities," Am J Public Health 93, no. 9
(2003); R. Ewing and others, "Relationship between Urban Sprawl and Physical Activity, Obesity, and Morbidity,"
Am J Health Promot 18, no. 1 (2003). Other studies suggest that simple classifications of landscapes as “urban,”
“suburban,” or “rural” mask complexities in the relationships between obesity and suburbs. See, for example: I. M.
Environment: Public Health Research Needs," Environ Health 5, no. (2006); M. C. Nelson and others, "Built and

120 Kerry Segrave, Obesity in America, 1850-1939 : A History of Social Attitudes and Treatment (Jefferson, N.C.:
Popular culture is also exploring themes in American suburban life that historians could access. For example, Michael Moore’s documentary film on the Columbine High School murders explores anomie, alienation, and violence in suburban teens. While violence has been addressed in the context of racial conflict over access to suburban housing, endemic violence resulting from suburban life has implications for social and educational policies. Another example of the popular media exploring suburban themes is the cable television series “Weeds” that depicts drug use in the affluent suburbs of California through the life of a suburban mother turned marijuana dealer. Drug use is difficult to assess through self-reporting techniques, but the historian’s lens may one assess the role of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine use in suburban life. Yet, no matter how future scholars study the suburban experience, they will doubtless contend with the earworm that accompanies virtually every essay on suburbia and sums up the popular and pervasive view of suburbs – Malvina Reynolds’ “Little Boxes.”

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\begin{align*}
\text{Little boxes on the hillside,} \\
\text{Little boxes made of ticky tacky,} \\
\text{Little boxes on the hillside,} \\
\text{Little boxes all the same.} \\
\text{There’s a green one and a pink one} \\
\text{And a blue one and a yellow one,} \\
\text{And they’re all made out of ticky tacky} \\
\text{And they all look just the same.} \\
\end{align*}
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122 Malvina Reynolds wrote the song “Little Boxes” about California suburbs and used the phrase “Little boxes made of ticky-tacky” to describe the cheap construction of many of suburban houses as little boxes that “all look just the same.” Malvina Reynolds, *The Malvina Reynolds Songbook*, 4th ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: Schroder Music Co., 1984), 44-45.

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