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What are the most important policies, politics, and actors (private and public, at all levels of government) that created the divided metropolis of the second half of the twentieth century? Because this is a sweeping question, address it 1) by first briefly defining the historiographical framework that emerged from the era of Kenneth Jackson *Crabgrass Frontier*/Robert Fishman *Bourgeois Utopias* and Thomas Sugrue/*Origins of the Urban Crisis*. 2) Then choose three themes/key books/historical interpretations that have mainly emerged since these works to evaluate newer directions in the scholarship.

There's a lot of Chocolate Cities, around  
We've got Newark, we've got Gary  
Somebody told me we got L.A  
And we're working on Atlanta  
But you're the capital, Chocolate City

[...]

Hey, uh, we didn't get our forty acres and a mule  
But we did get you, Chocolate City, heh, yeah  
Gainin' on ya  
Movin' in and around ya  
God bless Chocolate City and its vanilla suburbs

– Lyrics by the funk band Parliament from their 1975 song *Chocolate City*

From mid-century representations on television, to advertising, to music, and popular culture, the American suburb is represented as a space that is 1) middle-class bourgeois, 2) majority white, 3) prejudiced against blacks, and 4) defensive of the rights and privileges their residents feel they are due on account of where they live. But from the traditional view of the American suburb, this space is changing in generative and productive ways that complicate our understanding of who lives in the suburb and the consequences of the suburb for American life. New directions for future research on the suburb examine the legacies of redlining, the interplay of public vs. private actors that enforce the suburb's spatial division, and the effect of new immigration on suburban politics in the Rust Belt and Sun Belt.

## 1. Traditional View

The phrase “crabgrass frontier” encapsulates in two words the spirit of the classic mid-century American suburb. “Crabgrass” grows on construction sites, empty lots, poorly maintained lawns, and areas in transition from rural to urban. The culturally produced image of the cowboy “frontier” symbolizes the spirit of American growth, the image of conquest and manifest destiny, when millions migrated from coastal cities and urban areas to “unclaimed” lands on the American interior. The “crabgrass frontier,” as Kenneth Jackson describes, is a new frontier: not 19<sup>th</sup>-century western cowboy but 20<sup>th</sup>-century American suburb and edge city.

This popular image of the American suburb is very specific, imagined as accurate down to the level of who lives there (middle-class white families), the cars they drive

(SUVs), where they shop (the strip mall and glass-enclosed shopping center), what they eat (processed foods from the big-box chain grocery store), how they spend their money (20-30 year fixed-rate mortgage), where they work (office cubicles), and their backgrounds (college-educated professionals). In this “crabgrass frontier” of Levittown-type prefabricated structures, McMansions, and single-family homes set on ornamental front lawns, the American suburb developed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a space where few Americans lived to a space where most Americans now live. These suburban spaces are specific and rich enough in their imagery as to be ripe for parody, as in the song *Little Boxes on the Hillside*, the film *The Truman Show*, the animated TV show *The Simpsons*, or the parody website McMansion Hell.

By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas for the first time in U.S. history. The Jacksonian democracy’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of the Yeoman farmer, the frontier settler, and the independent rural landowner was no more (assuming he ever existed). By 2020, this fact is still true; most Americans do not live in the rural frontier. But one thing has changed: In 1920, the majority of Americans lived within commuting distance of jobs downtown. The American cities and suburbs were largely accessible to each other by railroads and public mass transit. In 2020, the majority of Americans now live in suburbs, both spatially unmoored from downtowns (by the absence of public transit) and economically unmoored (by office and industrial jobs that are no longer concentrated in downtowns).

With this migration from an urban nation in 1920 into a suburban one in 2020, the role of the suburb has changed. The word itself – as descended from Latin – implies the suburb has a certain relationship with the city. *Sub* the Latin preposition for under, plus *Urb* the Latin word for city. The suburb, as historically represented, is “under the city,” separate from the city but dependent on the city for life, energy, culture, and economic potential. But if the majority of people now live in suburbs and no longer rely on the city, then the suburb is not beneath the city but independent and self sustaining as its own spatial economic unit.

The traditional patterns of urban growth common among European cities and older northeastern American cities reveal a spatial relationship of center vs. periphery. It is a historical image of the urban spider web, residential rings radiating from a central urban core. In distant corners from the city lived wealthy people in rural surroundings: the only group able to afford the daily cost of commuting to jobs in the city. But commuting patterns within modern-day Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, and Detroit – for instance – follow new patterns that do not depend on the urban core for economic power. Factories, businesses, shopping centers, and institutions of the public realm are distributed across the metro region along the linear bands of interstate highways. Someone may live in one suburb, work in another, send children to school in yet another, and be married to someone who works in yet some other suburb. (Robert Fishman calls this the technoburb, when the functions of cultural life historically once found only in the city are now found distributed across the suburb.)

The American suburb is now central to the demographic, cultural, and political fabric of American life. If the majority of Americans live *in suburbs*, then elections are lost and won *in suburbs* as a result of how suburban residents vote. If the majority of Americans are homeowners, then there are implicit and powerful special interests and financial interests to encourage homeownership and ensure these homes maintain their investment value as a way to store and grow wealth. If the majority of Americans commute to work by car, then there are further special interests to encourage car ownership and related infrastructures like roads and highways at public expense. (These auto investments come at cost of robust public

transit networks and transportation alternatives for the American suburb.) If the majority of Americans live in suburbs that have significant political autonomy (mostly by way of regulating land use law and tax fundraising for local public schools), then they have a vested interest in maintaining their political power and voting for candidates who promise policies to protect the American suburb.

As a result, America now has a fractured political landscape between suburb and city: On one side of the line, a store of wealth in historically white suburban spaces of homeowners. On the other side of the line, an absence of wealth in historically non-white spaces of renters. Histories of restrictive covenants, redlining, blockbusting, predatory lending, land use law, and employment discrimination have held down this artificial boundary between – so to speak – chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs. Left behind is the American city: as a concentration of poverty, income inequality, failing schools, and material evidence for the legacy of systemic racism. St. Louis, Detroit, and Gary are probably the three prime examples of failed urbanism, deindustrialization, and parabolic suburban growth that has left the city behind.

Suburbs, and specifically homeownership, need to be read as political tools. From the 1930s policies of the New Deal that refinanced mortgages to prevent a foreclosure crisis (i.e. HOLC), to state intervention in highway construction (e.g. 1956 Interstate Highway Act), to federal tax policies (e.g. the mortgage interest deduction), the state has actively intervened in markets to promote homeownership. As Henry Ford described on the pages of company newsletter *The Dearborn Independent* or as Herbert Hoover articulated on the campaign trail, homeownership was a political tool. Homeownership assimilated the working classes into capitalist prosperity, to give them a material investment in the social structure of how things were. A nation of homeowners with a “chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage” could not possibly become a nation of revolutionaries in an age of both anti-communism, the 1920s Red Scare, and later 1950s McCarthyism. The priorities of a family would change the moment they became homeowners, invested for the first time in the upkeep of their property, distracted in lawnmowing, gutter cleaning, and weekend “kaffee klatches” after church. As Herbert Gans described in *The Levittowners*, the suburb was a site of broad-based immigrant assimilation into the American mainstream (although a pathway to social mobility restricted to various skin tones of ethnic white). For the first time, Italians, Poles, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants lived – on a broad-based nationwide level – in the same suburbs and as neighbors, no longer ethnic but now white. As much as race is socially constructed, then so is the American suburb, both *materially* from prefabricated building blocks and *culturally* as site for immigrant Americans to become citizen Americans.

## 2. Emerging View

This image of the American suburb is also changing. Perhaps the most important change: The large majority of new immigrants to America now choose the American suburb, instead of the American city, as their first home, as the place where they will assimilate into the dominant culture. Historically, most new immigrants arrived, worked, and lived in cities – usually coastal cities – before moving to the suburb as they acquired language skills, wealth, and cultural acceptance from the white majority of Americans. But now new immigrants increasingly first settle in the suburb. This shift unsettles the traditional view of the suburb in productive new ways: The suburb is no longer the exclusive preserve of the middle class and wealthy. It is home to a diversity of peoples, incomes, and spaces: as diverse and varied in number as the suburbs of New Jersey that range from ethnic white

enclaves (Jewish Lakewood), to immigrant communities in diaspora (Indian Edison), to traditional streetcar suburbs (Montclair), to majority-minority black townships (black Willingboro near Camden which was formerly – and ironically – the whites-only suburb of Levittown). Historically, the city was the site of assimilation into American culture and the suburb the point of assimilation once an urban family had – so to speak – made it in the American dream. But today, the suburb is both the site of assimilation and immediate destination for most new immigrants.

As a matter of definition, if everyone and all income groups live in the suburb, then the suburb is not a distinct or separate entity from the city. The suburb is the city, or more accurately written, a space that has assumed all the responsibilities of the city. If everywhere is the suburb, then nowhere is the suburb and a study of the suburb as its own typology becomes inseparable and interchangeable with a study of the built environment writ large. Perhaps the better term is not suburban history – as is presented in the traditional literature – but instead metropolitan history: that is, the study of metro areas and the diversity of peoples, incomes, politics, and land uses they contain spread across thousands of square miles and knit together with bands of asphalt.

The increasing diversity of suburbs also has political consequences. The War on Drugs and the War on Crime can be read as a backlash led and initiated by college-educated middle-class and upper-income whites against fears of urban unrest, perceived ghetto drug pushers, and immigrant communities perceived as gangmembers. More than a strictly Southern Strategy that appealed to the racial animosities of rural peoples in the American south to win national elections, we might describe a Suburban Strategy that appealed to the fears and desires of suburban residents as a voting bloc to win elections, within the south and beyond. This claim that suburban interests created the War on Drugs and War on Crime might have held up in the 1970s and 1980s when suburbs were exclusively and majority white. But this claim might not hold up today when suburbs include a greater diversity of income groups and sizeable numbers of blacks.

In some ways, the suburbs as a demographic group still have certain shared interests and vote as a bipartisan group on certain key specific issues: mostly as they relate to homeownership policies and local land use laws. Democrat or Republican, black or white, suburban homeowners are all invested in preserving the value of their home investment against perceived dangers: multi-family housing, low-income neighbors, bussing of lower-income urban children to their suburban schools. But in other ways, the suburbs have become more diverse since the 1970s image of chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs. For instance, Biden's 2020 election victory in Georgia largely reflected the growing ethnic diversity of this largely suburban state, changing demographics in Atlanta suburbs, and the Sun Belt more broadly as point of arrival for new immigrants.

### **3. New Directions**

#### **3.1 What are the patterns and tools of **exclusion vs. inclusion** in American suburbs?**

Much of the existing literature from Kenneth Jackson's initial publication to Richard Rothstein's *Color of Law* examines racial redlining as tool to exclude blacks from homeownership and suburban living from the 1930s to 1960s. More recent literature like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *Race for Profit* examines the period after the 1960s of "predatory inclusion" when blacks and non-whites were given mortgages for the first time

but on challenging terms that made repayment difficult and foreclosure inevitable. Other public articles like “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates brought to mass public attention for the first time the histories of redlining (as initially documented for Coates by Beryl Satter in *Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America*).

Emerging literature complicates our understanding of the range of actors that made possible the spatial segregation of suburbs, from local block defense groups and real estate broker associations to local, municipal, county, state, and – in turn – federal laws. Are we to understand the spatial segregation of suburbs as bottom-up or top-down policies, descended from local actors and individual choices or federal actors and national choices? The policies of segregation really worked both ways. On the one hand, there were local policies of individual realtors cemented as national HOLC policies of real estate risk assessment. On the other hand, there were national policies of housing finance (from the 1949 Housing Act) to highway construction (from the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act) that created and implemented national standards down to the local level and the design of individual roads, medians, and suburban curb cuts in millions of suburban roads. Local standards were made national and national standards made local.

By this telling, to understand suburban spatial segregation as the product of top-down or bottom-up policies has consequences for how we understand history. “Traditional” literature, interpretations, and histories of the presidency understand this history as top-down: local consequences as the product of national trends. Other literatures, particularly the literature that charts the frequency of restrictive covenants, sees segregation more as a bottom-up policy, the collective and national result of millions of individual homeowners adding to the text of their house deed legal language to exclude non-whites. There was no national law specifically requiring or allowing restrictive covenants, but there was a multitude of individual actors and market forces that collaborated in parallel.

Equally important is to consider if spatial segregation was the product of state actors or market actors. In a capitalist system, state power often intervenes in the economy on behalf of market forces. In effect, the 1949 Housing Act, 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act, as well as the HOLC and FHA were state subsidies to real estate, construction, and auto lobbies to ensure guaranteed returns on investment: roads on which to drive the cars we bought, financial instruments to pay for the homes we bought, tax policies to subsidize builders to create the homes we live in, and zoning laws to make possible the sprawl of subdivisions on the “crabgrass frontier.”

In its very subtitle, Richard Rothstein’s book indicts the federal government, the state, and top-down policies for segregation in the suburb: *The Color of Law [is] A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. The unwritten implication is that, if federal policies were responsible for segregation, then federal policies alone cannot desegregate the suburb. Absent from Rothstein’s analysis is a study of individual actors as independent from the state, particularly the actions of white vigilantes whose actions deepened the effects of FHA sponsored segregation, even if these vigilantes never in fact worked directly with the FHA.

Perhaps, in its own orientation, Thomas Sugrue’s *Origins of the Urban Crisis* does more to implicate individual actors and neighborhood block associations in producing segregation and holding down the racial color lines between neighborhoods, and between

city and suburb. His chapters document ethnic white resistance and vigilante actions in response to black neighbors, all within the suburbs of Detroit's single-family homes. He touches more briefly on redlining, national policies, and in particular military-industrial policies that encouraged the decentralization of factories beyond the city limits of Detroit, but he does not at all examine urban renewal, slum clearance, and highway construction from state and federal actors. Between Rothstein's top-down analysis and Sugrue's bottom-up analysis, we see the range of actors responsible for segregation.

In some ways, this question of bottom-up vs. top-down is a "chicken and egg" tautology. The tools to produce the divided mid-century metropolis worked both ways and both directions, in ways that implicate *both* national government forces and local market forces. It is more a question of reading the grain and the specific type of segregation in suburbs one is examining: redlining (top-down), restrictive covenants (bottom-up), highways (top-down), land use zoning law (bottom-up), public housing finance from HUD (top-down), etc.

### 3.2 How do **white** suburbs differ from **black** suburbs and **immigrant** suburbs?

Mid-century literature and older literature examines the suburb as space specifically for black and white people. Perhaps this largely reflects the racial demographics of the American nation before 1965 changes to immigration law. Between the Immigration Act of 1924 and changes to immigration law in 1965, the racial demographics of city and suburb were largely black vs. white, with statistically insignificant numbers of Hispanics in the city. With the exception of large numbers of Spanish speakers in the American southwest border areas near Mexico, the nation was largely split between black, whites, and a small number of ethnic whites (Jews, Italians, Catholics) in the process of assimilating themselves into full-tone whites. However, 1965 changes to immigration law allowed, for the first time, large numbers of Chinese, East and South Asians, Africans, Arabs, and others to migrate to America and produce new immigrant enclaves of their own. These groups did migrate to America in smaller numbers before the 1960s, but these communities only really grew in size after the 1960s.

Changing demographics have consequences for how we understand American suburbs and emergent suburban typologies that are no longer exclusively white. For instance, how does race and class segregation operate in wealthy *black* suburbs like Prince George and Charles County in metro D.C.? Traditional literature examines suburban white resistance to multi-family housing and school bussing as the product of anti-black racial antagonism. But newer literature from Karyn Lacy and others examine similar patterns of resistance in wealthy and majority black suburbs, which leads us to interpret the antagonism as interethnic and as the product of racial divisions within a single social class. Prince George and Charles County do not want poor black neighbors either.

Do suburbs resist the movement into their neighborhoods of black people specifically or poor people in general? Or in a nation where race maps very neatly onto social class (favored race = wealthy class vs. unfavorable race = poor class), does this difference between racial discrimination and economic discrimination even matter?

In a similar way, we might also examine patterns of segregation within suburban immigrant communities. Traditional interpretations of city and suburb locate immigrant groups in the city and assimilated Americans in the suburb. But ethnically and

homogeneously Jewish suburbs like Lakewood, New Jersey and Skokie, Illinois complicate our understanding of suburbs as spaces for assimilated “Americans.” In some ways, these suburbs still operate like immigrant communities in diaspora: maintaining their own and independent religious, cultural, and political institutions, as would have been normally found in dense urban communities like the Lower East Side, except now comfortably located in the American suburb.

### 3.3 Is the nation seeing a **back to the city** movement driven by “the creative class”?

Traditional interpretations describe an urban rental market vs. a suburban homeowner market. The decades after WWII represented a brief height of the American Empire, a period of economic growth, strong labor unions, the GI Bill, Marshall Plan, and unprecedented social mobility for an entire generation of (white) Americans. Millions graduated from the urban rental market of the working class into the suburban homeowner market, such that by 1970 for the first time, a majority of Americans were homeowners.

The period since then has seen continued suburban growth, but also stagnating wages, a shrinking middle class, declining union participation, rising income inequality, and growing home prices that make middle-class homeownership more difficult now than in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, small numbers of Richard Florida’s so-called “creative class” have returned to formerly depressed urban areas, promoting gentrification and economic development in formerly immigrant and non-white neighborhoods. Jane Jacobs offers a preview of this shift in the opening pages of *Life and Death*, as well as her praise for artists, young professionals, and West Village creatives as drivers of human scale urban change and economic growth.

However, despite urban growth after decades of decline, is the homeowner suburb still the dominant living arrangement and dominant symbol of what it means to have “made it” in America? That is, does “back to the city” movement reveal the end of the suburb, or is merely a statistical exception that applies only to a limited number of coastal cities? (San Francisco, New York, Boston, and few places else) Outside of a few cities seeing gentrification, the suburban home remains the dominant building typology and ideal home for aspirational American families.

### 3.4 What does **reparations** look like?

(Or more broadly speaking, what does repair look like?)

Whenever three respectable negroes [sic], heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island, or a locality clearly defined within the limits above designated, the inspector of settlements and plantations will himself, or by such sub-ordinate officer as he may appoint, give them a license to settle such island or district, and afford them such assistance as he can to enable them to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement.

– General William Tecumseh Sherman, “Special Field Orders, No. 15,” 1865

What is the suburb? By the traditional view from the likes of historians Kenneth Jackson, Robert Fishman, John Reys, or Lewis Mumford and planners like Frank Lloyd Wright or Ebenezer Howard, the suburb is a specific space with specific building typologies

inhabited by a specific type and social class of people. The suburb brings to mind images of verdant lawns, open fields, and an absence of poverty.

As the American nation diversifies and changes, the suburb has evolved from an urban fringe to the front and center of American life, as a space with its own politics and political interests that contains within its prefabricated homes the entire diversity of American peoples. Perhaps, the suburb is no longer a specific building or building type per se. The suburb is instead the image of social mobility more broadly, the socially constructed image of the American dream, of what it means to have succeeded: to own a piece of this dream and a room of one's own.

The study of the suburb is inseparable from the study of who is excluded from the suburb. The two histories must be read in parallel for a, so to speak, "metropolitan history" of urban-suburban America. It is the story of the ethnic whites (soon to be whites) and other favored groups that were allowed to use ownership as tool of social mobility, both to acquire and build wealth. It is also the story of the non-whites and other disliked groups that were excluded from using the suburb as tool of wealth creation.

General Sherman's 1865 call for "40 acres and a mule" to be given to each freed slave recognizes, in its language, the importance of ownership – of land, buildings, or other human bodies – for wealth creation. In a nation that was majority rural in 1865 and has become majority urbanized since 1920, ownership of the "means of production" remains central to wealth in capitalist society. In 1865, land ownership was the tool to build wealth for the yeoman farmer image of the American ideal. Today, homeownership is the tool to build wealth for the legendary image of the middle class American nuclear family. Perhaps, the study of the suburb is inseparable from the study of social mobility more broadly, not just a metropolitan history but a social history.

Decades of activism from the 1950s to the present have called for blacks to be included in the social, political, and spatial institutions of social mobility. These include workplaces, ballot boxes, schools, and suburbs. But the racial wealth gap between median white family wealth vs. median black family wealth has not narrowed in the decades since the 1960s. In 1865, the median white family was some 40 times wealthier than the median black family freed from slavery just months before. In 1920, this gap had narrowed to a 15-fold difference. In 1960, this gap still left the median white family seven times wealthier than the black family. Today, this gap still leaves white families some five times wealthier, as well as more than twice as likely to own the space they live.

Reparations is usually framed and usually delivered as direct cash compensation to identified victims, or the direct descendants of victims. Reparations might also mean subsidized mortgages to black families (See the discussion of Section 235 from Taylor's *Race for Profit*). Reparations might mean mortgage awareness and financial literacy programs for black families. In other words, we usually frame reparations as including more people within the envelope of institutions for social mobility.

However, if we follow the logic of Afropessimism, the later philosophies of Malcolm X, the black liberation movement, and Black Power groups like MOVE in Philadelphia, the system itself that produces wealth in American society requires – in fact, demands – that there must be an underclass. Since the 1990s, black flight has replaced white flight as the leading driver of Detroit's continuing population loss. For the first time in some suburban



Detroit neighborhoods, blacks are included in places they were once excluded: in working-class suburbs like Ferndale, in middle-class suburbs like St. Clair Shores, and in wealthy suburbs like Bloomfield Hills. But, they leave behind a Detroit city with a failing school district, cratered property taxes, and a black underclass that remains a black underclass regardless of where the black community's "talented tenth" lives and works in the suburb. The assimilationist view attempts to include more people in the envelope of the American Dream. The Afropessimist view questions whether there should be an American dream. As Malcolm X proclaimed in his 1964 speech on the Ballot or Bullet: "I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream – I see an American nightmare."

Perhaps, the question is not: How can we include more blacks and non-whites in the American suburb? Maybe the question is: Why must ownership of land and property be the only tool to build and measure wealth?

Malvina Reynold, *Little Boxes on the Hillside*, written and performed 1962:

Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,  
Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes all the same.  
There's a green one and a pink one  
And a blue one and a yellow one,  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses  
All went to the university,  
Where they were put in boxes  
And they came out all the same,  
And there's doctors and lawyers,  
And business executives,  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course  
And drink their martinis dry,  
And they all have pretty children  
And the children go to school,  
And the children go to summer camp  
And then to the university,  
Where they are put in boxes  
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business  
And marry and raise a family  
In boxes made of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.  
There's a green one and a pink one  
And a blue one and a yellow one,  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.