

POSTWAR AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE IDEOLOGICAL INSCRIPTION OF
THE SUBURBAN NORM

By

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Suburbanization in the United States after the Second World War relied upon a popular idea about an authentic American culture in order to be seen as natural and necessary. This fact is rendered unintelligible by a narrative of consumer choice that would have us see a contingent socio-spatial arrangement as part of a grand American teleology. Thus, the story of US exceptionalism, as manifested in the popular idea of its culture, makes universal the normalcy of a particular landscape and its attendant ideology.

Looking at the rhetoric that accompanied the advocacy of suburban development—particularly the rhetoric of a large survey of Levittown, New York’s school system from 1954—makes evident how the concept of culture masks particular social choices, which is an obstacle to potentially valuable public discussion. Consequently, the field of rhetoric is in a unique disciplinary position to critique the ways written documents like the school survey participate in forms of undesirable social engineering.

INTRODUCTION

No study of education in this community would be understandable outside its setting.

—*Levittown's Schools*

In September of 1953 the Division of Field Studies of New York University received from Eleanor F. Brownwell, the then Supervising Principal of Union Free School District Number Five, Levittown, Long Island, a letter requesting a comprehensive survey of Levittown's public school system. The resulting survey, entitled *Levittown's Schools and the Future of the Community: a Survey by the Center of Community and Field Services*, would be delivered to Jerome Levitan, President of Levittown's Board of Education, on August 23, 1954. The cover letter to the President is signed by F.C. Rosecrance, Director for Community and Field Services, and Herbert B. Bruner, Coordinator of the Survey. This otherwise unremarkable document contains two sentences which subtly articulate the unprecedented nature of what the survey was attempting to accomplish: "Since conditions in Levittown change so rapidly, the reader may note, therefore, certain slight differences in data among the parts of the report. These have not affected the fundamental conclusions however" (iii). And it is precisely this simultaneity of a rapidly produced socio-spatial arrangement and the fundamental conclusions one must draw within its cultural/historical circumstances, that confirms the notion that Levittown's educational needs cannot be understood outside of their setting; but must, nevertheless, be understood through reference to documents that were critical to its development in order to reveal how the ostensibly contingent phenomenon of

suburbanization after the Second World War, became the incontestable norm.

Consequently, it is a form of composition studies research that is concerned with the theoretical and empirical implications of written communication that is in a unique position to understand this narrative of normalization and its cultural pedagogy.

Levittown, Long Island is the unequivocal model and paradigm of the post-War, “mass produced” American suburb. In the spring of 1947, when the Levitt and Sons organization began developing the area, 450 people and 37 students lived in the school district. By 1953 10,060 students were in need of accommodations. The initial influx of families consisted exclusively of young GIs, but even as a non-veteran population began to assert itself in the community, the survey asks proudly about its “setting”—about its spatial particularity:

Can you imagine a neighborhood in which, within four or five years, 13,000 families were brought together in a community situation which was almost a clean slate, where leadership performed without precedent, where there were no people of traditional standing, and status to be acquired, where all were relatively of the same age and income, all motivated by the same purposes: to settle in a home and start a family?—This is Levittown. (17)

Such unguarded praise for the homogeneity of an emerging socio-spatial phenomenon by a survey charged with “objective” analysis, makes evident the otherwise implicit notion that a victorious American culture is in a unique—indeed, singular—position to develop its landscapes into sacrosanct, market-driven (though government subsidized) spatial arrangements that will seemingly eventuate a utopian meritocracy in the United States. But this paper is not *about* Levittown; nor is it *about* suburbanization. The former is only intended as a model of writing that is also a model of the latter. And the latter is only a story about the production of meaning that is also a story about a social and spatial development process heavily indebted to the model of the former. Both

belong to an inquiry about the possibilities for rediscovering ideological critique in a historically situated analysis of written communication.

This task is counter-intuitively redolent of Jacques Derrida's discovery in his early work of the privileging of self-present speech over writing, which is haunted by absence. But is that not a form of ideological critique? Which is not to say that it is only or explicitly of that genre; but to situate it within the orbit of such critiques one need look no further than "Signature Event Context" where Derrida rebukes Marshall McLuhan's "ideological representation," that is to say, his belief that modernity's new technologies were creating the possibility of a greater immediacy to communication, that meaning would be less susceptible to deferral in the global village (329). Derrida sees this as "ideological" in the sense that it assumes the meaning of ideas can be communicated without acknowledging the limitations of all such transmissions. McLuhan's new writing—a sort of post-inscription—is, in a sense, post-ideological—i.e. meaning is no longer mediated by medium. But this paper is far more expressly an ideological critique, and an unambiguous recuperation of the category of ideology for the kind of intellectual work—the study of writing—that calls Derrida a forefather. It is within the emerging tradition exemplified by Susan Miller's project in *Assuming the Positions*, to "make a new material on which the identical productivity of material and discursive culture is visible" (8), that the Levittown survey and the concept of culture as a post-ideological universal in the United States are utilized as the logical coordinates for the sort of mapping such critiques demand.

CULTURE AND UNIVERSALITY

I claim that the “culture” particular to the middleclass and affluent American suburb since the Second World War—indeed, which is both the logical spatialization of a preexisting American culture and its social apotheosis—is portrayed, like the socio-spatial arrangement itself, as post-ideological. But in this context, culture is an empty universal signifier that is sutured by a particular content in a manifestly ideological manner. The very operation itself, in which the ideological particularity hegemonizes the empty universal through the rhetorical circuitry of culture, can be located in Levittown’s rapid development during the 1940s and 50s.¹

In order for me to elaborate upon and demonstrate the veracity of that claim, this analysis must first begin with an assumption derived from a *JAC* interview with Slavoj Žižek where the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic insists that “it is crucial that we never underestimate the material efficiency of ideology. Ideology is literally a material force . . . [it] structures our reality itself” (“Slavoj Žižek” 284). For us, the suburban is an instance of that structuring. The very material circumstances in which ideology is produced and the very production of the material circumstances in which the particular ideology may be reproduced as post-ideological, is found within the contingent historical process of suburbanization. The object of this process was first given a name in the fourteenth century, but, as Robert Fishman points out in his now canonical *Bourgeois Utopias*, it was only in the twentieth century that it became “a separate political identity . . . important in maintaining a separate social or design identity” (6). The suburb then

finds the conclusion of its history—that is, the point where it exceeds itself as a merely historical phenomenon—in the rich symbolic consistency of post-Second World War America.

Levittown is the major point of reference for that historical development. The Levitt and Sons model of mass produced tract housing was the inspiration for countless future subdivisions. The Levitts shrewdly took advantage of federal subsidies and the GM-driven economic imperative to standardize production material for efficiency's sake. The contradictions contained in the free market spirit of the day made it possible for William Levitt's family company to benefit from government handouts, while he once "said with a straight face: 'Utopia in this business would be to get rid of the government, except in its proper function of an insurance agency'" (Quoted in Hayden 135). In line with that philosophy and despite its urban scale, Levittown was built without a master plan. Extensive public services and infrastructure costs were passed onto the county and the state with impunity, and the state was forced to provide financial aid for its school system in order to avoid a crisis (137). Out of these material/historical circumstances, a new social ideal emerged.

Levittown's Schools and the Future of the Community is an exemplary artifact of that social ideal. Weighing in at roughly five-hundred pages and containing maps and extensive graphs on everything from statistical projections to demographic information, the survey aims to be nothing less than a comprehensive blueprint for the ideal school system. Subjects such as teacher tenure and the disciplining of students are blended seamlessly into discussions of citizen opinions about community recreation and periodic appendixes containing professional staff questionnaires and fixed charge rates for

transportation maintenance. Despite being outwardly unremarkable, it is a stunningly ambitious document that brings to mind adjectives like “bold” or “daring.” But such designations miss the point. Situated on the precipice of a new socio-spatial frontier, the survey, while certainly aware of the unique nature of its task, is a common product of a unique moment in American history: a moment when utopian ambition and commonsense could coalesce in the rhetorical antinomies of community and individualism, which, though seemingly contradictory values, are given coherence by an ascendant narrative of American culture.

According to Fishman, suburbia “expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture that it might be called the bourgeois utopia” which is necessarily founded on “the principle of exclusion” (4). The usage of the term “bourgeois culture” deserves interrogation, but the excess which defines the symbolic coordinates of the suburban is the spatial periphery that consists of the antiquated cultural characteristics of the urban core—i.e. racial heterogeneity and economic deficiencies. Urban culture, in this sense, is a pre-gentrified lack that resists the symbolic efficiency of the suburban (utopian) norm. Even when situated on the suburban periphery of the city, its crucial feature remains a symbolic deficiency that helps define the empty signifier culture (in its most positive sense) as the rightful possession of the normalized, homogeneous periphery. Not coincidentally, the suburban is the dominant spatial form in the United States. This is the logical result of a unique development imperative that became pervasive after the Second World War. As Kenneth T. Jackson points out in the opening sentence of his singular account of American Suburbanization, *Crabgrass Frontier*, “Throughout history, the treatment and arrangement of shelter have revealed more about

a particular people than have any other products of the creative arts” (3). If this is the case, it is extremely significant that the postwar boom, despite the “prevailing myth” that it exclusively resulted from “the preference of consumers who made free choices in an open environment,” was actually compelled by the irresponsible policies of the federal government (293). The arrangement of the American shelter was highly dependent upon government impetus and the deterioration of alternatives that did not fit the federal schema. In the Levittown survey there is no sense of incommensurability when the praise of the communities’ entrepreneurial spirit turns into the admission that “Federal funds of an emergency nature have helped to meet school expenditures” (410). The sense that it all could have been otherwise is exemplified by the important historical case of the Brookline suburb of Boston. In 1874 Brookline was able to achieve its independence during a period when a national urban consolidation movement was vigorous enough to annex even affluent suburban communities. The reality is that even though we can see in that massive defeat an attitude toward development that had less to do with “rejecting growth” than with an expression of “a determination to control the physical and social environment in which [people] lived” (149), the court’s unaccountable decision made it easier for affluent communities to imagine a form of sociospatial isolation that was previously unthinkable. It is clear that court decisions, federal subsidies, and localized capitulations to developers, had more to do with the development patterns of the United States than a recognizable cultural inclination. That is not to say that it would have been otherwise if only the results of a few early battles had changed hands, or that there were no, shall we call them, “cultural characteristics” that lent themselves to a conducive atmosphere for those development patterns. Only that it is possible to chart a logical

course through the history of suburbanization in the United States and the markers that overtly guided the trajectory had substantially less to do with popular preference than with the predilections of powerful interests. “Cultural characteristics,” then, are comparable to the Marxian “real abstraction” that misses, among other things, hard economic determinants that have nothing to do with choice.

It must be reemphasized that the importance of national housing policies for suburban development does not mean that there were no cultural predilections or characteristics that would help compel the process. Kevin M. Kruse’s *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* contains a singularly comprehensive analysis of how a southern cultural tradition of racism in the Atlanta area made the politics of “suburban succession” so effective:

The transformation of segregationist rhetoric in the postwar era had led southern conservatives to reject traditional appeals to populism and racism and instead embrace a new, middle-class rhetoric of rights and responsibilities Removed from their obviously racial origins, segregationist phrases, such as “freedom of choice” or “neighborhood schools,” as well as segregationist identities, such as the angry taxpayer or concerned parent, could be easily shared by middle-class whites who had no connection to the segregationist past but who gladly took part in crafting the suburban future. (245)

The rhetoric of choice in these circumstances is realistically no different than normalizing the destruction of opportunities for the underprivileged and the marked reduction of the long term wellbeing of the working and middleclass African Americans in the city. Undoubtedly the failure of this population to economically recover from white flight is the result of their own culture, which is less a “culture of poverty” than an implicitly inferior African American culture whose members, theoretically speaking, also have the choice to move to the suburbs. The overtly racist housing policies that will either prevent that move or shift it into areas that are or will become slurbs (suburban slums),

are less useful for understanding this socio-spatial phenomenon than the rhetorical circuitry of cultural inclination: the language of choice that presupposes an existing ground that is machinic in its ordering of space and structuring of social relations within these spatial arrangements. A white, southern, middleclass culture would cease to be a particularity by the time Richard Nixon was insisting that his so-called southern strategy was really “an American strategy” (254). And, as Kruse indicates, the truth of that common culture would become evident in the ideological composition of southern suburbs as racists and non-racists found a common justification for segregation in the rhetoric of freedom; a rhetoric that was more explicitly racist and class conscious when it was used by the upper-class suburbanites in places like Brookline.

Note

¹ While the conception of this operation is derived from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s own conception of “hegemony,” it does not claim to be faithful—particularly in its treatment of ideology—to their specific recuperation of the Gramscian concept. I will attempt to clarify some of our differences later in this paper.

RHETORICS OF SPACE

Revealing the power structures which sustain and the techniques used to normalize various rhetorics has traditionally been an essential concern for most compositionists. The idea that space is its own form of rhetoric—a unique ideological inscription—is only beginning to stimulate popular attention in the field. The movement to correct this oversight is significantly indebted to Nedra Reynolds' *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Differences*.

Reynolds describes her recent book as being meant to “illustrate how geography contributes, metaphorically and methodologically, to literacy practices, to conceptions of discourse, and to postmodern composition theory attentive to difference, the material, and the visual” (7). In other words, she asks a lot of *Geographies of Writing* and manages to stimulate interesting and important conversations along each of the lines of inquiry she pursues. However, my own inquiries into the subject of space and ideology in writing emerge from many of the metaphorical and methodological fissures in Reynolds's crucial, but still embryonic, project. Even as we both recognize the work to be done as simultaneously different from and constitutive of conventional discourses on class and ethnicity—while focusing on a rigorous analysis of spatial demarcations relevant to the study of writing—I see her work as complicit in a more general and historically continuous tendency in composition scholarship to unnecessarily fragment, concretize, then uncritically centralize our “field's” universal subject: the student. In doing so, Reynolds has participated in composition's unique form of metaphorical/methodological

post-inscription: the projection of our own desires to be beyond mediation—i.e. having settled upon a determinate conception of the writing act that is untroubled by the larger questions of communication—onto the denizens of our material classrooms. In choosing a hegemonized identity over a radical possibility, *Geographies of Writing* is a concession to an illegitimate hegemony that wants its theory banal, and its subject the ubiquitous student in a test tube without substantive examination of the scientists doing the tests, the legitimized science that guides their research, the institution in which that science finds space for its legitimacy, or even what writing is—the relationship between ideology and inscription. In other words, Reynolds’s otherwise important book has not gone far enough in challenging the post-inscriptive regime of normalization that keeps theory in composition studies from asking broader questions that may radically effect how knowledge is produced in the field.

Many of these limitations can be located in the context of the twin foci of this analysis. For instance, “culture”—a concept that is *a priori* identical with its subject—is inscribed into the historical script of suburban development. Using Susan Miller’s path breaking work *Assuming the Positions* as a model, this analysis is able to locate in the Levittown survey, as an exemplary piece of textual production from the most crucial period of post-War American suburbanization, a cultural pedagogy that seeks under the aegis of a singular American “culture” to make contingent socio-spatial arrangements normal and natural. The 1954 survey is a disinterested, social scientific exemplar of how the age of the “end of ideology” in the West is coincident with the analytical imperative to map the post-ideological form onto the suburban landscapes that so perfectly fit the mass consumption ideal. This post-ideological ideology of the suburbs is inseparable

from its spatial specificities, which is something *Geographies of Writing* is sensitive to. But a Miller-inspired analysis of textual production goes further than Reynolds's work in "mapping" the relationship between theories of space, the empirical dimension of constructed spaces and their attendant ideologies, and the study of written communication. This is the case because the specter of subjectivity that has haunted composition scholarship and never ceased to preoccupy twentieth-century thought—whether in the form of a Gramscian hegemonic relationship between seemingly disparate social units or the Althusserian interpellative recognition of ideological mystification—may find its newest and most provocative expression in Miller's "radically textualized writing subject" (*Assuming* 6).

By concentrating on the simultaneously material and discursive conditions of the Levittown survey's production, while crucially subordinating any interpretation of its content to an analysis of the cultural work it could be expected to do in its social and historical context, an agentic mobility is revealed to transfigure the modes of inscription within the space of articulation offered by its limited means. Consequently, and as a means to articulating the relationship between ideology and the socio-spatial composition of the suburbs, the survey can be utilized in several ways: as an example of a certain kind of textual production that presupposes a post-ideological object of analysis; as a story about the concept of culture in its historical moment; and as a social scientific production that emerges during the period in which first year writing classes became standardized nationally. This latter focus certainly encompasses the institutional context of the study of writing, but I will limit my contribution to the exhausting conversations about composition's disciplinary identity to a demonstration—via the survey and the historical

uses of the culture concept—of how scholarship in written communication can shed theoretical light on the relationship between writing and the concept of ideology.

I do not intend to make Reynolds's a straw person representative for the ills of composition studies—though the very term “composition studies” is saturated with the historical detritus of the often too limiting scholarship it can represent. In fact, *Geographies of Writing* offers an important rejoinder to such limitations on research. But at certain points in her book Reynolds, in the crucial spirit of experimentation, draws on metaphors of questionable value to her argument. The most germane example of this excusable but undesirable tendency can be located in Reynolds's metaphorical usage of the *flaneur* as a “compelling example of moving through the world, dependent on both walking and seeing, and how place and materiality construct identity” (8). In this minor but persistent theme, she has vigorously embraced an apolitical rhetoric of occupation and dwelling that fails to materialize sites of lived-dissent. In drawing on Michel de Certeau's “Walking in the City” chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Reynolds has produced a “tactical” *flaneur* whose limitations are bound up in a Foucaultian micropolitical orientation that eschews broader strategies of enunciation. Even as Reynolds incisively brings de Certeau's “attempt to claim walking as a rhetorical practice” (69) in a parallel orbit with Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin's preoccupation with the urban practices of the street strolling *flaneur*, by remaining faithful to the tendencies of de Certeau's theoretical framework Reynolds allows his interesting conception of “walking as a space of enunciation” (*Practice* 98) to render the city-as-text substantially less legible than a properly Benjaminian political project would tolerate. Closer to the transformative potential that lies at the political nucleus of

Benjamin's theories is the theory of the derive, or drifting, developed by the radical Parisian avant-garde group, the Situationist International. Drifting is a form of playful mobility long articulated in practice, but first described in writing by a 1956 article authored by Guy Debord, "Theory of the Derive."

Here we must insist upon a distinction between the Situationists' theory of the derive and Michel de Certeau's well-known conception of "walking as a space of enunciation" (*Practice* 98). Both speak and both inscribe themselves upon the urban landscape. But the latter is micropolitical in its Foucaultian sense: local tactics for articulating the spatial dimensions of the cityscape; the *flâneur's* untroubled, stylized gait. The derive is emancipatory in a modernist sense: articulating the system—the alienating, capitalist system—in order to transform it through revolutionary expression. As a concept and consequence of capitalist production, alienation is based on essentializing recognitions of social relations. The text propelled by it will traditionally seek to systematize its script. The Situationists, however, resist traditional systemization in the aimlessness of their trajectory. Debord, in "Theory of the Derive," goes out of his way to differentiate drifting from the stroll. He claims that because the derive "entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects," it is "completely" different from the stroll (22). So for Debord, it is the "randomness of the derive" that makes it "fundamentally different" (23). But here Tom McDonough's excellent "Situationist Space" makes evident the extent to which Reynolds, through de Certeau, has embraced a historical model of occupation and inhabiting that, unlike the Situationists, does not seek to construct spaces that will accommodate differences (254). As McDonough explains, the *flâneur* is strictly masculine, economically privileged, and

can assume a detached attitude and merely “observing gaze” toward the social constructions of the urban form—never seeking to disrupt the metaphorically and materially embodied narrative of modernity as the deriver seeks to do (257).

But we shouldn’t let the Situationists off the hook. In Guy Debord’s major theoretical work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, he attempts to understand the spectacle of alienated subjectivities as analogous to ideology in its material form. The extent to which this materiality is really material, and not based on the emerging immaterial production of consumer desire, is a separate issue. What is important here is the metaphorical dimension of Debord’s rhetoric of alienation in the urban context. If we now live in an “era of hyperreality . . . entirely without metaphor” (*Ecstasy* 16), as Baudrillard would contend, the rhetoric of Debord and the Situationists suggests that the metaphor was crucial for constructing liberatory spaces. We can see in the strictly urban spatial practice of drifting the relationship between metaphorical constructions of mystification and free subjectivities in the context of the urban particularity, a distinct parallel with what Michel de Certeau sees as the modern mythical practice of writing. According to de Certeau, writing is a modern transport that no longer has as its origin what is narrated, “but rather the multiform and murmuring activity of producing a text and producing society as a text. ‘Progress’ is scriptural in type” (134). Consequently, the modern city—as metaphor and material space—is like revolution itself: modern ideas that represent “the scriptural project at the level of an entire society seeking to constitute itself as a blank page with respect to the past, to write itself by itself (that is, to produce itself as its own system) and to produce a new history . . . on the model of what it fabricates (and this will be ‘progress’)” (135). The scriptural economy of play that the Situationists subtract or

withdraw from the normative structure of everyday communication, presupposes a “readable city” and a radical subjectivity that cannot be textualized—i.e. that is not susceptible to the ideology of communication (93). The intelligibility of the urban particularity allows it to be conceptually sutured to the empty universal as the only true post-ideological space and as a social inevitability.

From this we can draw three important conclusions: the value of the metaphor to the study of written communication is not to be assumed and may constitute an analytical detour; it is better to look at what cultural work a text can be expected to do in its socio-spatial/historical circumstances so as not to find yourself celebrating the agency of a white, male, heterosexual upper-class caricature; and the recognition of a spatial particularity necessitates the understanding of its material presuppositions or (in vulgar terms) its material base. Miller has already demonstrated some ways in which this matrix can manifest itself in her own work; but this analysis must still establish the “grounds”—as Fredric Jameson might call them—of the post-War phenomenon of suburbanization.

NORMALIZING SPRAWL

The ways in which “sprawl became the national housing policy” after the war have been documented by a number of credible, and even remarkable, sources¹ (Hayden 151). But none of those accounts have sought to tackle in any depth the extent to which the concept of culture has subsumed within itself the particular ideologies which informed the postwar socio-spatial arrangement of the suburbs. This subsuming of particularities largely, but imperfectly, masks a variety of disparate aims within a strategic alliance to form a common identity for the suburban ideological field. If, as Jackson insists, we can think of those arrangements as the most revealing cultural production of our society, then reading the arrangements as contingent and largely deficient would mean calling into question the material efficiency of American culture—or, more precisely, the ideological field that is permitted to constitute an American culture through its various symbolic exclusions and discrepancies. Consequently, establishing the identity of the postwar suburb is an important first step toward mapping its ideological coordinates. Since Kenneth T. Jackson has presented the problematic, I will turn to him for establishing the identity of the particular cultural production.

According to Jackson, the postwar suburb was located along the periphery of the city; in contrast to European development patterns at the time, it maintained a relatively low density and primarily consisted of architecturally homogeneous tract housing. Due to “mass-production techniques, government financing, high wages, and low interest rates” it was a more affordable living arrangement than the inner cities. But “perhaps [its] most

important characteristic . . . was racial and economic homogeneity” (238-41). Despite a considerable amount of working-class flight to the suburbs, it was the middleclass and affluent neighborhoods that maintained supremacy over the idea of the suburban. And this identity was more than a discursive concoction transmitted by television programming, which, to this day, glorify “the single family house as the standard American home, enshrine the low density neighborhood, and (perhaps not coincidentally) has provided an unrelentingly negative picture of the city as the haven of crime and deviance” (Fishman 202). Of course, it is not coincidental that the availability and popularity of that medium increased exponentially in the years following the Second World War. But the material identities’ proximity to its discursive ideality is simultaneously the production of a signified content (idea) and forthright signification of that content within a material particularity. That is to say, and to repeat the Levittown survey’s crucial disclosure, we are speaking of an at least partially accurate correspondence between the idea of the suburban and its material facticity as a space in which “all were relatively of the same age and income, all motivated by the same purposes: to settle a home and start a family” (17). This always-already middleclass home and the unambiguously white, heterosexual constitution of the family unit, belongs to the idea of that space—an idea derived from, and enshrined by, its material efficiency; but its capacity to reproduce itself and generalize a particularity beyond its factual socio-spatial borders—to make the idea of the suburban normal—necessitated the cultural pedagogies inscribed in textual productions like the school survey.

It is not at all self-evident that the survey contains a unique window into the historical/ideological circumstances of post-War suburban development. That is, it is not

self-evident if we choose to entertain the absurd assumption that such a survey can contain a neutral content that is not informed and constrained by the material and discursive conditions of its production. Written communication depends upon a vast artillery of socio-spatial assumptions that cannot be divorced from the limitations of its historical and social circumstances. The idea and concomitant identity of the suburban form can be situated in the conceptual blind spots of the survey—the points where it superimposes the idea over its empirical substance. The power of the study of writing to disturb the presumed composition of an identity through the analysis of its relationship to its textual product finds its validation in Miller’s *Assuming the Positions*. In keeping with the survey’s value, we can also locate in Miller’s important text a response to those who would dismiss the commonplace writing of affluent nineteenth-century Virginians “as only elitist jottings,” because to do so, “as is conventional in works of history and criticism, too easily hides the mobility of all inscribed identities, the simultaneous presumption and submissiveness of ‘assuming positions’” (5). The survey, as a composed window into the normalization of suburban development in the U.S., insists that the compositionist—as a scholar of writing—must be prepared to locate Miller’s “radically textualized writing subject” in forms of communication that attempt to negotiate a conception of their spatial specificity. To ignore these spaces of production is to not take seriously the way the “mobility of all inscribed identities” can take them beyond the blank page and into a narrative of lived space. Reynolds has provided this problematic; Miller has demarcated a viable form of engagement.

To a large extent the identity of the suburban can be located within the split, the essential antagonism, between the desire to escape the dangerous center and the

reproductive nature of that desire. The center becomes more dangerous as the result of flight and further flight becomes more desirable because of previous and continuing departures. Predictably the center is degraded and the periphery creates new, but not fully self-contained, centers that lack the gravitational pull to keep the social organization of space conducive to a high level of socioeconomic heterogeneity. Yet the dispersed arrangements require certain economically and socially deficient spaces in order to keep the exclusive spaces sufficiently manicured. As Fishman suggests of the classical suburb, “If [it] was the bourgeois utopia, it existed in an inevitable tension with the bourgeois hell—the teeming world of the suburban slum—from which suburbia could never wholly escape because the crowded city was the source of its prosperity” (135). Today the suburb, or what Fishman calls the “technoburb,” is less dependent on the inner city, but consists of a landscape without boundaries—an endless highway that can never expand fast enough to curtail congestion and is everywhere “divided into a crazy quilt of separate and overlapping political jurisdictions, which make any kind of coordinated planning virtually impossible” (190). But Levittown belonged to the classical form, and its socio-spatial problems were consistent with that form.

Though suburbanization in the United States was certainly not limited to the period after the Second World War, that period’s unprecedented level of proliferation made some social critics concerned about what this emergent ideal would do to a traditionally spatially bifurcated American culture. The Levittown survey was sufficiently apprehensive about the criticism to make note of it in the conclusion of its second chapter, “Levittown: Community without Precedent.” This is the most interesting chapter from the standpoint of this analysis because it contains the most transparent window into

the ideological foundations of the surveyor's project. They conclude the chapter with brief references to critiques of the homogenizing tendency (even imperative) of suburbanization. The first critique is from *Harpers Magazine* and the other is from *Fortune*. It is probable that this sample is intended to represent the perfect bifurcation in American political and social thought: the overly idealistic liberals at *Harpers* contra the often backwards looking conservatives at *Fortune*. But the *Harpers* article is portrayed as more concerned than critical; and the hostility of the conservative position is fueled by concern over the possible stifling of creative, entrepreneurial impulses, which are the lifeblood of the now hegemonic American culture. The authors respond by reaffirming the legitimacy of these concerns while demonstrating that they are misplaced: "The controls which stifle creativeness ordinarily are found in older communities where aspiring young people are assimilated into traditions about what cannot be done" (18). Given the context, "older communities" alludes to and inner city geography and the spirit of creativeness that characterizes the United States under the normative liberal consensus requires no further elaboration. But then the survey reveals a normative dispensation that is both utopian and cruel:

It is apparently true that there is a loss of populations at both ends of the socio-economic spectrum—the ones who succeed move on; the ones who can't keep up the mortgage move on—but even so, the inbetween represents the great forces of the economic and social screening which takes place in an environment which will perhaps attract young families for a long time to come. (18)

There is little doubt that we are privy to a quasi-evolutionary outlook in the dismissive attitude towards "the ones who can't keep up the mortgage"; but the utopian dimension is equally apparent and consequential. Economic "social screening" initiated by the "great forces" of middleclass families belongs to a common articulation of suburbia's possibilities as a force for creating an egalitarian middleclass society.

Implicitly there will be elites and lower classes; but these sparsely populated stations will be assumed by the truly deserving and their offspring will face the same challenges regardless of their birth. The phenomenon of suburbanization (as an idea) was a specifically middleclass phenomenon; and the urban form (as an idea) was a rapidly depopulating lower-income form, except in its rarified pockets of gentrification. In other words, we are looking at a period of rhetorical invention that describes egalitarian social arrangements without reference to extensive safety nets, and in explicit contradistinction to the even distribution of misery that denotes ideological socialisms.

Of course the success of what was then rapidly becoming a socio-spatial juggernaut depended to a substantial extent on the automobile and the concomitant development of the postwar highway infrastructure. It was a material/technological innovation that made such reckless development planning—or lack of planning—possible. Jackson observes that “the automobile had a greater spatial and social impact on cities than any technological innovation since the development of the wheel” (188). Nowhere was that more true than in the United States. Marshall Berman’s *All that is Solid Melts into Air* connects the modern expressway with the “innate dynamism of the modern economy, and of the culture that grows from this economy, [which] annihilates everything that it creates” (288). Perhaps “consumes” would be a more fitting term than “annihilates” when considering the economic impetus of suburbanization; but Berman’s superb depiction of the urban planner Robert Moses as a symbol of modernity’s ceaseless tendency to consume its own creations in the name of progress, perfectly articulates the way New York’s Triborough Project was the work of a larger than life genius, rather than a spatial necessity. Moses’ Project quite literally paved the way for Levittown and further

suburbanization north of the City, and it can be located within the broader tendency of the day to use—as Moses did so brilliantly—Federal Highway Program and Federal Housing Administration funds to recreate the American landscape in favor of urban peripheries that “conceived of cities principally as obstructions of the flow of traffic, and as junkyards of substandard housing and decaying neighborhoods from which Americans should be given every chance to escape” (307). The Levittown survey is similarly unapologetic about the community’s need for state subsidies to deal with the severe transportation problems eventuated by its spatial particularity. And the survey’s assessment of the material organization of this utopian social experiment is sober and revealing:

Because of its suburban location and its nearness to industrial establishments and to main traffic arteries, Levittown has more than a normal amount of traffic flow in the morning hours. The heavy traffic and the three parkways running through Levittown present a situation which must cause anxiety to a great many parents. (331)

In order for Berman’s culture of the modern economy to become an overt culture of consumption in the postwar period, private companies had to embrace the political rhetoric of Americanness. In a summary of citizen comments over the course of seven meetings that were intended to provide focus to the survey, the category “Learning duties and responsibilities as American citizens,” was considered fundamental to the “Foundations of good citizenship” (8); as were, not surprisingly, “Individual skills for living” (9). A good American citizen was a devout individualist who understood that the economic and social wellbeing of his nation necessitated middleclass aspirations in its citizenry. Indeed, Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumer’s Republic*, which incisively charts the consumption-driven political landscape of postwar America, demonstrates that the purchase of cars and household appliances was overtly situated within the normalized

consumptive regimen of the average American family. Idealized representations of suburbia became “an unambiguous marketing tool” and were linked to the broader mass consumption patterns deemed necessary to express and sustain the American way of life (195). Despite the egalitarian rhetoric associated with the selling of suburbia, the vast social and economic stratification eventuated by post-War suburbanization was predictable:

Ironically, it was this bond between suburban living and mass consumption—the source early on of egalitarian hopes—that was largely responsible, as it made market concerns paramount in decisions about how and where one lived. As home in the suburbanized Consumers’ Republic became a mass consumer commodity to be appraised and traded up like a car rather than a longstanding emotional investment in a particular neighborhood, ethnic community, or church parish, “property values” became the new mantra. (202)

The question then becomes, to what extent was this consumption-driven development imperative the logical consequence of a distinctive American culture or set of cultural characteristics? Fishman calls the suburb a socio-spatial utopia for those privileged to share the values of the bourgeois culture that compelled its creation. Similarly, Jackson notes that “By 1985 reasonable people could debate whether the United States was a racist nation, an imperialist nation, or a religious nation, but scarcely anyone could quarrel with its designation as a suburban nation” (284). That designation implies both a spatial arrangement and a culture that proceeds from and reproduces that arrangement. But the idea of a suburban culture is the longstanding and problematic possession of that culture—of a racially and socio-economically distinct stratum. To see suburbanization as the logical result of the desire of a small, powerful elite to inscribe its cultural predilections onto the lived spaces it inhabits, is too reductive a reading of that inscription. Similarly, to see suburbanization as a substantively democratic process that logically reflects a popular desire is to ignore the extent to which, in its Marxian sense,

the very actuality of consumer choice, like the democratic process generally, can act as a “real abstraction,” or an abstraction from power and economic relations that is inscribed into the processes. Culture, it would seem, is in both cases the implicit and explicit abstraction from real power relations.

Unfortunately there is a common trend among even the best scholarship on postwar American suburbanization to uncritically invoke a vague conception of suburban culture for explaining the historical phenomenon. On the one hand, the development patterns are manifestly contingent. On the other hand, there is a certain guiding spirit—perhaps invisible hand—that, like the capitalist economy that is its necessary enabler, depicts the results as inevitable. Kenneth T. Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier*, though a deservedly celebrated statement on suburbanization patterns in the United States, is a perplexingly overt example of this scholarly trend. While Jackson argues that racial prejudice and cheap housing are the fundamental “causes” of American residential deconcentration, he insists on two necessary “conditions”: “the suburban ideal and population growth” (287). But how have other “causes” potentially constructed this so-called suburban ideal? Must the conditions predate the causes, and if not, why wouldn’t racial prejudice inform the ideal? Jackson’s schema is inadequate, and in the book’s weakest moment he will contradict the invaluable wealth of information he has presented by making a claim for a certain ambiguous inevitability driving suburban growth:

I would argue . . . that suburbanization can best be seen as part of an urban growth development model. The spatial arrangement of cities depends less on ideology than on economics, less on national idiosyncrasies than on industrial development, technological achievement, and racial integration. Thus, American cities are not so much different from those of other countries as ahead of them, and we might expect cities elsewhere to follow the “North American” pattern just as soon as they have enough automobiles, highways, and disposable wealth to make it work. (303)

Jackson goes on to assert that the United States will be the world's first and last suburban nation because the requisite space and resources will not be available to other countries (304). First, this latter observation, given the time he wrote it, cannot take into consideration a form of development that is becoming paradigmatic throughout the global South and which can be characterized as slum sprawl.² But, of greater immediacy for this analysis, Jackson's inelegant bifurcation of the ideological/idiosyncratic from the economic and material production of a society is untenable. Rather than bypassing the idea of a distinctly American suburban culture, Jackson has universalized the cultural particularity by making it the natural expression of material circumstances. Ideological contestation is subsumed within a material teleology that is driven by innovation without regard for the way innovations are utilized by particular social orders. His text does not support that conclusion as it makes evident that the economic circumstances of suburbanization both produce the process and are reproduced by the process of suburbanization. This reality necessitates ideological formations concomitant with and generative of the process. If you do not entertain the presence of ideological particularities actively molding the process, you leave a space open to generalized cultural characteristics shared by advanced social orders. It is highly doubtful Jackson intended such a circumstance, but that is the cost of ignoring specific ideologies and even cultures. For that reason, it is apparent that a more complex understanding of what a suburban culture consists of requires at least a preliminary understanding of the culture concept and how it differs from the concept of ideology.

Notes

¹ Fishman, Jackson, Hayden, Cohen, and Gwendolyn Wright's *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*. Cambridge: MIT, 1981. are just a few outstanding examples.

² Mike Davis's significant review article, "Planet of Slums," offers a multitude of eye-opening statistics that describe this emergent phenomenon. Davis contends that "Whereas the classic slum was a decaying inner city, the new slums are more typically located on the edge of urban spatial explosions . . . [This] 'slum sprawl' is as much a problem in the developing world as suburban sprawl in the rich countries" (14).

EXPANDING THE CONCEPTS

To adequately interrogate these concepts I turn first to the well-known “Ideology as a Cultural System” chapter of Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Here Geertz can be seen as expanding and deepening his project to see the culture concept as a particularity, as located in particular cultures, rather than permitting earlier suppositions of universal human traits to obfuscate the important work of anthropological “thick description”—or, the analysis of various stratified hierarchies of meaningful/meaning producing structures (7). Admittedly, my own analysis is not sensitive enough to particularities to achieve an appropriate thickness. That may be an inevitable result of the object of study, which is so pervasive as to undermine the important work of ethnography when one is confronted with the question, “where to begin?” But Geertz’s imperative to ground the dangerous culture concept in the sensitive and rigorous analysis of the particular is essential. Conversely, his actual definition of culture is never convincingly differentiated from ideology. Despite his purposes at the time he was writing, this conflation can not be completely divorced from the social circumstances of the Cold War.¹ For our purposes, the non-ethnographic analysis of suburban universals, we can not afford to see neutrality in this oversight. If, as Geertz suggests, “It is through culture patterns, ordered clusters of significant symbols, that man makes sense of the events through which he lives,” and the study of culture consists of “the accumulated totality of such patterns, thus the study of the machinery individuals and groups of individuals employ to orient themselves in a world otherwise opaque” (363)—then the definition of

culture is almost functionally identical to three of the most common definitions of the term. These definitions can be found in Terry Eagleton's *Ideology: an Introduction*—a book that is far too comprehensive to be introductory—which begins with a list of sixteen of the most common definitions of ideology. Among them are, “the process of production of meanings, signs and values of social life;” “the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;” and “the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure” (1-2). Each definition arguably contains the main thrust of Geertz's culture concept, and each definition is ultimately judged by Eagleton to be too inadequate to stand for a general theory of ideology.

It may be fair to assume that no single concept of ideology or culture will ever contain the requisite critical force and appropriate theoretical elasticity to fit every circumstance. But when the former concept is subsumed by the latter—indeed, is seen as the historical conclusion of the latter—the circumstances are political enough to insist upon an understanding of what both concepts are supposed to be doing. In many instances one will sufficiently do the work of the other. However, *it is a thesis of this analysis that the idea of the suburban as a post-ideological cultural form is an aggressive, hegemonizing tendency*. If that is the case, it makes sense to question Geertz's definition of ideology as a sort of symbolic map that arises when groups experience “a confluence of sociopsychological strain and an absence of cultural resources by means of which to make sense of the strain” (220). Ideology is thus “maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience” (ibid.). This schema might articulate itself in the context of postwar suburbanization as a form of elite-driven propaganda that seeks to normalize suburban development through the repetitive

insistence that such spatial arrangements are normal and a logical correlate with the broader consumption-based economy that allows America to actively contest its cold war adversaries. This definition also permits a very broad conception of culture that fails to imply inevitability or the possibility of universality. It also lends itself to the relationship between mapping as a metaphor and guide to conduct, and the spatial materiality of ideological production. Unfortunately, in our context it fails to contain the necessary force of a theory it claims to subsume: the interest theory of ideology. According to Geertz, “In the interest theory, ideological pronouncements are seen against the background of a universal struggle for advantage” (201). Its shortcomings are numerous and Geertz is wisely dismissive of the notion that all ideology is bound up in a tactical struggle for dominance over the dimension of the universal. Such a recognition can not explain the particular, modest ideological formations, nor can it envision spaces of substantive negotiation between disparate ideologies. In other words, it can not make sense of the world we live in, and, at the very least, a definition of ideology should attempt to do exactly that. But what interest theory does articulate is a meaningful framework in which to describe the aggressive universalizing of suburban culture, while negating the possibility of a post-ideological content. This is a paramount concern when one considers the ill-considered conclusion of Geertz’s analysis, which consists of a blatantly post-ideological articulation of liberal democratic norms. Geertz insists that “The existence of a vital tradition of scientific analysis of social issues is one of the most effective guarantees against ideological extremism, for it provides an incomparably reliable source of positive knowledge for the political imagination to work with and to honor” (232). The call for reasoned analysis and stable, tolerant, democratic institutions

that open up spaces for debate and consensus is seen in grand Enlightenment fashion as the conditional foundation of a progressive social order. Geertz has made the central suppositions of his own ideology necessary universals. Despite the very reasonable symbolic map the call describes, a space has once again been opened for the democratic abstraction to describe a post-ideological content without substantive regard for the real power relations it represents. Geertz has not rendered problematic enough the spaces that, out of self-interest, promoters of the suburban ideology would seek to normalize and universalize.

In order to remain faithful to the guiding assumption of this analysis—that ideology is a material force and it structures reality itself—it makes sense to return to the author of that statement. Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* keeps the concept of ideology grounded in a material/spatial recognition, without permitting a symbolic map that may be read in favor of a post-ideological Western rationalism. That’s because for Žižek we already live in post-ideological times, and the widespread acceptance of that doxological assertion is productive of its own impossibility—that is to say, *the assertion itself is strictly ideological*. It is a fundamental characteristic of any meaningful ideology that it must see itself as beyond ideological mystification. Otherwise it would lack the capacity to quilt the ideological field. For Žižek, this “‘quilting’ performs the totalization by means of which [the] free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed—that is to say, by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning” (87). This operation comes close to Geertz’s attribution of a machinic ordering of symbols to his culture concept, but his conception of ideology as a response to strain makes it more instrumental than properly cynical.² That is an important shortcoming because Žižek

recognizes that ideologues are not necessarily the embodiment of their central ideological models. When the subject traverses the necessary cynical distance a postmodern/post-ideological ideology insists upon, that over-identification becomes an obscene excess that the system which arbitrates for the ideology must extirpate. Contemporary ideologies require a cynical distance in order to operate: the old Marxist definition of false consciousness, “They do not know it, but they are doing it,” has become, “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.” What we do, as opposed to what we think we know, becomes the determinant of our ideological particularity. However, Žižek asks us to accept an abstruse theoretical framework when he insists that we are only in a position to critique ideology if we assume the existence of a spectral supplement to reality, which conceals the gap opened up by the failure of reality—the Lacanian Symbolic Order—to either fully disguise or explain the presence of the Real. So our reality in this model is always-already structured by the mystifications of the Symbolic, preventing a truly objective subject-position. But the supplement still authorizes a broad critique of ideology and the capacity of subjects to “traverse” their ideological fantasies and, like the last moment in the psychoanalytic process, recognize the constitutive lack that structures the symbolic. Crucially, the model accounts for the impossibility of post-ideology, the cynical constitution of contemporary universalizing discourses, and the possibility of ideological critique, without conflating it with cultural analysis or depriving either of their normative dispensations—that is, it maintains their status as partisan normalizing machines that must, nevertheless, be embraced by the cultural critic and theorist of ideologies.

Zizek's path breaking theories still insist upon a substantial conceptual baggage that say more about ideology in general than they do about ideologies' relationship to written communication. It is my wager that Susan Miller, whether consciously or not, has developed an interesting theory of ideology that is coincident with a form of ideological analysis that remains within the gravitational pull of textual production. In addition to providing the impetus for understanding the cultural pedagogy of the written text, we can also locate in Miller the crucial fear of post-ideology. What she calls "true biases" are like a "tension" in the even flow of discourse. Miller insists that "Looking for true biases uncovers traditions that resist and would deform their current cultural representations as hegemonic common sense" (*Assuming* 146). Textual production becomes the site of contestation against inscribed *doxa* and the dominion of common sense. The recognition that "discursive and material circumstances are identical" permits Miller to think about ideology in terms of this production of identity and subject positions through acts of writing (3). In that sense, she may be granting the study of writing legitimate access to a radically new understanding of ideology as inseparable from the union of the material and discursive circumstances of its articulation/inscription. Miller, whose theory of ideology appears to be more nascent and less explicitly central to her overall project, can still be seen as going further than Zizek in trying to understand what he also sees as the important relationship between the material and discursive conditions of the ideological field. And she does this without the elaborate and frequently questionable conceptual baggage of Zizek's theories. However, the theoretical sophistication of Zizek's early work in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* can not be taken for granted. This is particularly true because it keeps the concept of ideology grounded in a material/spatial recognition,

without permitting a symbolic map that may be read in favor of the post-ideological Western rationalism that characterized the Situationists' reading of the city. In fact, Zizek ham-handedly rails against "deconstructionists" who "usually start with a statement that production is also part of the discursive regime, not outside the domain of symbolic culture—and then go on to ignore it, and to focus more or less exclusively on culture" (*Did Somebody?* 137).

Here we can return to Miller's concerns and suggest that they may be engaged in exactly that task of consciously linking the circulation of meaning and strategies of articulation with their material conditions of production—and going so far as to insist they are identical. Setting aside simplistic "Marxist reproduction theories, to instead analyze how generations reappear in an active discursive capitalism" (*Assuming* 11), means that we can precisely locate in modern suburban socio-economic suppositions within the period of their intelligibility, and create a timeline to the present that tells us a story about our own framework of intelligibility: the cultural representations that disown their contingency and ideological particularity so as to parade as common sense. And if we understand the relationship between spatial arrangements and practices, and locate the discursive regimes that make them normal through acts of writing, we will find in the ironically dissimilar rhetoric of suburbanization in the United States and France, a strategy not unlike the conflation of globalization with the current neoliberal paradigm of global capital in the media, and the simultaneous blurring and reassertion of borders to trade and immigration throughout the world. All are stories about residual and emergent ideas, the production of space and the identities that inhabit those new or dying spaces;

and all are ideologically interested ways of making the contingent and particular seem permanent and post-ideological.

Notes

¹ In fact, a less generous reading of Geertz's text might see it as "merely" symptomatic of its times. I hope to engage its content on its own terms, even if that means a certain over-generosity, because it is highly debatable whether or not mainstream conceptions of ideology have truly improved upon (even unintentionally) partisan Cold War versions.

² In fact, a close examination of Geertz's theory will reveal the extent to which it is unaccountably functionalist in nature.

POST-IDEOLOGY AND PARTICULARITY

Despite its debatable theoretical suppositions, when armed with Zizek's conceptualization of postmodern ideology, it is possible to engage in a mapping of the material and rhetorical spaces of suburban culture as its self-interested drive toward universality today reveals a paradigmatic need for the cynical dimension of ideology. How else does one normalize, with the purported clarity of hindsight, a spatial arrangement that owes much of its form to systematic campaigns against mass transit, like the infamous thirty year effort by a subsidiary corporation of General Motors beginning in 1926 "to buy nearly bankrupt streetcar systems in order to substitute rubber-tire vehicles for the rail car" (Jackson 170)? Even our historical memory of Henry Ford's kindness toward his workforce masks an unintended social consequence. In reality—i.e. if one traverses the fantasy—Ford's despotic insistence on frequently inhumane levels of discipline in his factories and use of spies and armed thugs to undermine unionization, pale in their viciousness to the availability of his vehicles to the people who made them. As Jackson points out, "his cheap cars weakened the Marxist claim that laborers 'had nothing to lose but their chains'" (161). The very technical innovation that, because it was so widely available, would permit the U.S.'s remarkably dispersed variety of suburbanization, played a crucial role in undermining the economic health of the blue-collar worker who would find the suburbs an often elusive object of desire. The desire not to acknowledge the implications of these widely available historical facts speaks less to the presumption of false consciousness than a willingness to suspend critique of the

ideological foundations of the material spaces we inhabit. And further evidence suggests that even as the U.S. became a “drive-in culture” during the postwar boom, its populist pretensions masked the social impetus to embrace distinctly nineteenth-century bourgeois ideals.

Miller’s intervention reveals that the masking of social directives is really a matter of available tools for articulation within a given framework of intelligibility. This suggests the Foucaultian definition of discourse as the things that can be said and understood in a particular time and place, but Miller’s “new humanism” is far more agentic in its analyses of how “students of culture” make sense of the world they live in through acts of writing (*Assuming* 3). Consequently, Miller’s “radically textualized writing subject” circumscribes dynamic yet constraining discourse formations that contain both their own limits and the provisions necessary to exceed or subvert those limits. In this context, we might say that the Levittown survey is a poor exemplar of the mobility of individual inscribed identities—the demonstration of which was crucial to Miller’s last major work—and a better example of the relationship between homogenizing discourse formations that seek to transform individual mobility into the divine stasis of elite consensus. So when the survey acknowledges the necessary limitations of objective analysis, but then goes on to tell its audience that “those who wrote it [the survey] can assure them that objectivity was their constant aim” (11), the “those who wrote it” is a reference to an institutional authority, not just a group of researchers and interns. Similarly, after the survey has established its discursive authority, it can authorize an intelligible connection between material substance and social cohesion by making the claim that “The stability of almost any community is determined in no

small measure by its economic base” (26). Despite the weak qualifiers—“almost any,” “no small measure”—this superstructural claim about social cohesion is a concurrently radical and conventional claim for the value of and limitations to the survey itself: because the survey is only commissioned to order the social composition of their educational system, scarcity is an intractable barrier to the implementation of its facts. On the other hand, failure to implement the programs and suggestions that the survey had exhausted every conceivable measure of objective certitude within their own economic capacities before providing, would implicitly detract from the full flourishing of the community’s economic potential. Thus, the cultural logic of these assertions insists upon a commonsensical relationship between the kind of material provisions available to the students of culture and the value of the culture they are capable of reproducing. But there is also a less commonsensical story about ideals and limitations inscribed into the very material landscape of the suburban socio-spatial arrangement.

For instance, the large front lawn, which is a mainstay of the American suburban norm, first emerged as a cultural marker of the bourgeoisie in the 1870s. Because so many of that class were dependant upon urban industry for their wealth, it only made sense to make seclusion from the other—a difficult task in urban settings—essential to good taste. After all, it was the dirt and dissolute behavior of the frequently exploited laborer that made flight necessary; why not, while simultaneously emulating the English estate, inscribe the motivation into the layout of your property? Of course the maintenance of those lawns has largely become one of the few places of interaction between the working and affluent classes in contemporary suburbia, but the consumerist utopianism of the immediate postwar period did not require such a cynical interpretation

of the lawn's function. Inclusion in a landscape filled with big front lawns was rhetorically represented as every human's birthright. The drive-in culture was an inclusive culture and it gave every Caucasian male the opportunity to move his family out of the necessary, but unbearable, evil known as the city. As the cities become less and less necessary Henry Ford's dream of a country where every family owns an automobile, and is thus freed from reliance upon the urban core, has virtually realized itself in contemporary America. Even after Hurricane Katrina left tens of thousands of mostly African American residents stranded in New Orleans because they were too poor to afford an automobile or, in some cases, the gas to make one run, questions related to nonexistent intercity rail systems and a national dearth of buses did not breach the cynical distance between the Real of a race and class-based tragedy and the normalcy of a pervasive socio-spatial arrangement that would permit such stratification. Calls for more government action on pressing social issues barely kept pace with reasoned denunciations of the local government's handling of the situation. And why should they have? If the call desires the continuation of the existing Symbolic Order—indeed, articulates itself as the very possibility of that continuation—why should a power structured along the periphery see the plight of the interior as significant to its prosperity and longevity? In the absence of a fundamental change that would both figuratively and literally insist upon the denormalization of the very ground on which we speak—i.e. demand the recognition of an existing, contingent network of meaning that lacks the symbolic efficiency to sustain itself—it is absurd to seek more than charity from the successfully evacuated periphery. As Jackson notes, one of the primary economic factors that eventuated suburbanization—which we, in our cynical, post-ideological times are expected not to name because to do

so would be perceived as an ideological gesture that only the extremist yuppies on Wall Street or overly idealistic left-wing college professors would encourage—is the capitalist system itself. According to Jackson, “One need not be a Marxist to observe that outward residential growth in North America coincides with the rise of industrial capitalism and the separation of the population into extremes of wealth and poverty” (296). But that’s exactly wrong! You would have to be a Marxist or an ideological capitalist to name the system. That is why, for Žižek, Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* is a brilliant example of what it means to breach the cynical distance that separates the object of ideology from the subject—the one made subject by the ideology: Rand’s over-identification with capitalist mythology causes her to create a beautiful example of proto-fascist propaganda.

Another important claim in this analysis, which the idea of a suburban culture makes evident, is that *the post-ideological is always a claim to universality*. At first glance this may be an obvious statement, particularly if we are conceiving of the claim to universality in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s schema as articulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For one thing, to be post-ideological is to be beyond one’s social and historical particularity. Even the idea of cultural/ideological relativism—whether nihilistic or naively affirmative—is a claim for the universal validity of all particularities. And in Laclau and Mouffe’s subtractive definition of the social—indeed, their contention that the social does not exist—politics becomes the struggle for the content of the representative form of Society’s impossibility: the empty signifier. The lack of content of the universal signifier makes it susceptible to the “suturing” of a particular content, which constitutes an equivalent claim or demand within the political order of the signifier. The suturing of the particular content to the universal is called “hegemony,” and the

contestation of the universal—which must remain empty—is the necessary precondition for democracy. Laclau and Mouffe’s advocacy of a radical democracy that recognizes the struggle for egalitarian democracy as an ever-receding horizon, still allows that in the “multiplicity of antagonisms” that occur on “democratic” terrain, the space of the social is necessarily open to reactionary elements or claims upon the universal (168). Within this framework it is senseless to suggest that the post-ideological/political is always-already a claim to universality or post-particularity. Commenting on this operation, Zizek, in his seminal work *The Ticklish Subject*, insists that “The struggle for ideological-political hegemony is...always the struggle for appropriation of the terms that are ‘spontaneously’ experienced as ‘apolitical,’ as transcending political boundaries” (178). This statement can stand for the terms “suburban” and “culture,” but is especially pertinent for recognizing the logic of their combination. Though Laclau and Mouffe are content to see the concept of ideology as a product of, or subsumed by, the interpellative struggle for hegemony, it more useful to retain the term’s broader usage. As Zizek crucially remarks in implicit opposition to the uncritical adoption of the existing field of the “democratic struggle” as a horizon within the definitional field of the capitalist Master Signifier’s real abstractions: “the task of today’s critique of ideology [is] to unearth, beneath any semblance of a ‘reified’ ontological order, its disavowed ‘political’ foundation: how it hinges on some excessive ‘subjective’ act” (169). That is to say, the broad usage of ideology enables a critical recognition of how even the term democracy can not be an unproblematic presupposition since it required a passage to a moment when a particular field of meaning came to stand for the universal field of signification. We can not account for the efficiency of suburban culture without investigating it the same way

as every universal ideological notion—whether human rights, democracy, or free trade—in each case “one always has to look for the particular content which accounts for the specific efficiency of an ideological notion” (175). This means the recognition of “fantasy” as the supportive structure of the universality that translates it into “a notion which directly relates and applies to our ‘actual experience’” (ibid.). The extent to which the notion becomes “typical” will determine its ideological efficacy.

Crisis, in this schema, is a failed naming. In a section entitled “The Problem,” the Levittown survey reveals that “Levittown is in many respects a ‘powder keg’ that may explode at any time” (98). In reality, the survey is only describing a phenomenon that will become “typical” of suburban communities—that is to say a normal characteristic that doesn’t disrupt their symbolic efficiency as a socio-spatial ideal. This problem or crisis is simply finding something to do with all of the kids in a community with few “recreational outlets” to keep them occupied. In retrospect, this high drama sounds absurd; but it is a perceived dilemma in its historical context and concomitant socio-spatial particularity. That is, after all, the real work that the survey is being asked to do: to delimit an exemplary trajectory of a then emerging phenomenon that has become so normalized as to have disguised—if not eliminated—the story of its origins and emergence. And if that sounds like the critique of writing that Derrida revealed as a foundational supposition of Western thought, then it should be unsurprising that the arbiters of cultural normalization in the survey’s historical context are the quintessential white, male patriarchs whose post-ideological rationalism privileges them to finely-tune the trajectory of an expansive world teleology from the safety of their suburban communities. Locating moments of false crisis in their written artifacts reveals the

contingency of the trajectory they once presided over, and opens spaces to critique its resulting culture as a mere particularity.

A SUBURBAN IDENTITY

This leaves us to consider the characteristics which typify the suburban culture and are, likewise, rendered typical by its form. The first, and arguably the most obvious, is economic. Suburban culture is largely upper-middleclass, with its ostentatiously wealthy and working class deviations representing outlier forms that reinforce the norm by being distinctly Other.¹ This is an incredibly important characteristic of suburban culture because, as Žižek wisely maintains, the middleclass is currently the only class that “explicitly conceives of and presents itself as a class” but is simultaneously a “non-class” that only defines itself in opposition to “both ‘extremes’ of the social space—non-patriotic ‘deracinated’ rich corporations on the one side; poor excluded immigrants and ghetto-members on the other” (186). And it is also the embodied refutation of the constitutive lack (in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms) which defines Society. In fact, it is the very post-political, post-ideological, content of the social—the real subject of the social that proclaims, “Society *does* exist” (187). The place to go from this recognition of “social space” is toward the conclusion that the universal notion of the middleclass, like Žižek’s conception of having a “profession” under the neoliberal paradigm of global capital—i.e. playing a role predicated upon “contingent social circumstances”—belongs to a concurrent regime of normalization that, “In the specific social conditions of commodity exchange and the global market economy,” is one in which “‘abstraction’ becomes a direct feature of social life, the way concrete individuals behave and relate to their fate and to their social surroundings” (“Against” 129). But here, in the name of

furthering a critique of economic abstraction and class antagonism, we run the risk of misrecognizing the middleclass subject, and in particular a more distinctly upper-middleclass subject that often manages to stand in for the middleclass norm. If, as Laclau and Mouffe contend, the subject is the very agent who accomplishes the operation of hegemony, then it cannot be ignored that the suburban middleclass particularity is unambiguously Caucasian; and so is its attendant culture.

Here it is necessary to properly historicize the phenomenon. Lizabeth Cohen offers a crucial and explicit link between the postwar consumer culture of the United States and its racial presuppositions. According to Cohen, “Race was intrinsic to the process of postwar suburbanization, as the steady influx of African Americans to Northern and Western cities during the war, and the second great migration out of the South that followed it, helped motivate urban whites to leave” (212). The race-based migration that followed the war was facilitated by government policies that preceded it:

The same governmental forces that stratified suburbia by class helped segregate it by race, and did an even better job. Federal mortgage guarantee agencies—the HOLC, FHA, and VA—adopted and elaborated the discriminatory practices of private lenders by considering the presence of racial groups other than whites the greatest obstacle to assigning neighborhoods a favorable rating; a stable community promising minimal defaults on mortgage loans was assumed to be a segregated, white one. (214)

Cohen’s analysis makes clear connections between the capitalist mythology of the wise, self-interested consumer determining where he and his family live, and openly racist government interventions assisting that interest. The economic may not be the sole determinant, but the consequent spatial arrangement has profound economic implications. We are speaking of a spatial problematic that is unambiguously related to a prevailing socio-economic rationality, and in a modest sense, it can be said to resemble another distinctive spatial problematic that, for Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis*

Bonaparte, was embodied in the French peasantry. In the early 1850s Marx famously observed: “The Small peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions, but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse” (608). In other words, for Marx the peasant lacked the spatial, and concomitantly social, characteristics of the proletariat, and thus became a reactionary force during the period of struggle that led to Louis Napoleon’s seizure of power. But what is interesting about this example is the implied relationship between the spatial, economic and cultural particularities and how they interact within their specific historical circumstances.² We can compare those circumstances, without being overly insensitive to obvious differences, to the problem of urban isolation that more rapidly emerges during postwar American suburbanization, as an urbanized periphery in the United States becomes a reactionary force, disempowering ironically isolated ethnic populations in the cities.³ As Fishman observes, even today, a “largely black and Hispanic minority are forced into decaying neighborhoods, which lack not only decent housing but jobs” (199). The racial component of this spatial problematic has immediate implications for the perception of an urban culture. The yuppie or gentrified neighborhoods are certainly prevalent enough in the popular American consciousness to problematize any single conception of an urban culture; and urban middleclass and working class neighborhoods are still depicted on popular television shows. But it is uncontroversial to suggest that clearly raced and even racist notions of what constitutes a central urban model of culture have a substantial role to play in defining its suburban polarity.⁴

I'll propose that culture, in its suburban context, cannot be understood apart from its racial suppositions. Indeed, the term race is often subsumed within the empty signifier culture. This is a logical consequence of the raced Master-Signifier "the urban," which lends the empty signifier symbolic efficiency. Likewise, the urban cannot be understood apart from its antithesis, whiteness. Whiteness is the desired object of a properly suburban culture, and a central constituent feature of its identity. The urban creates racialized fantasies which threaten the symbolic sovereignty of whiteness and the material product of its attendant ideology: the suburb. Now what does that mean?

First, we should be conscious of the work a Master-Signifier is expected to do. This term is central to Žižek's more recent analyses of ideology, and it can help formulate interesting and important connections between culture, race, and ideology. The Master-Signifier is the empty signifier of symbolic authority that makes typical, and even natural, forced, contingent, and illusory constructions of reality. We can say that the idea of "the urban" contains numerous characteristics in the popular consciousness. The element of danger which it contains may even be romanticized by certain youthful demographics that see excitement in racial and economic heterogeneity. But regardless of the various particular ideas of the urban that may constitute the most prevalent conceptual models of the notion, the urban as Master-Signifier is not a "simple abbreviation that designates a series of markers but the name of the hidden ground of this series of markers that act as so many expressions-effects of this ground" (Interrogating 202). In other words, it does not matter which of those markers/characteristics are not present at a given time or place. Absences are deviations from the legitimate hidden ground which defines the normal construction. The largely negative perception of the urban in the United States is

coincident with both the spatial problematic of urbanism and its racial implications. In a fascinating account, France Winddance Twine draws upon ethnographic studies that demonstrate the intersection between whiteness and middleclass privilege in contemporary suburbia. Locating gender in this matrix, Twine asserts that:

The women I interviewed identified their socioeconomic-economic status as one basis for their claim to a white cultural identity. In other words, they argued that they had been white because they had the same material privileges and socioeconomic-economic advantages as their suburban peers. Hence, white identity was inextricably linked to a middle-class position. (224)

The perception of whiteness as contingent upon “material privileges” should not be surprising.⁵ Twine merely adds valuable empirical and sociological confirmation to a relationship that the history of postwar suburbanization already makes clear: the central model of what it means to be suburban is laden with racial suppositions. The Levitt organization’s refusal to sell homes to blacks for two decades after the war was unsurprising, and so was the result: “in 1960 not a single one of Long Island Levittown’s 82,000 residents was black” (Jackson 241). The true suburbs are white and prosperous; the true urban core is ethnic and poor. Suburban culture is a utopian universality; urban culture is the dystopian Other. Both categories contain immense symbolic efficiency and neither can be supported with empirical data *except as ideas about the world*. The actual ground they occupy and define—with the urban lacking the power and agency to define itself—turn differences and inconsistencies into deviations and irrelevancies. The importance of modeling them as such lies in the “typical” strength of much similar modeling: developing the critical force to estrange the model by demonstrating its incapacity to represent the grounds for which it is the authoritative signifier. The weaknesses of such modeling are likewise representative of much modeling of its kind: having to insist that the model’s exclusions, whether recognized or not, do not

incapacitate its critical force or, in this case, reproduce the reductive confluences of the model's object. But a historical view of the racial, spatial, and economic phenomenon of postwar suburbanization suggests that these models already exist as ideas about the world, and that they have occupied the terrain of culture for too long without their most articulate critics voicing an articulate objection to that terrain.

One form of this objection can, of course, insist upon new particularizing. For instance, some authors in critical whiteness studies have called for particularizing white experience in order to displace "whiteness" from its universal stance.⁶ That approach refuses the normalcy of existing universal conceptions, whether they pertain to race, class, or culture. On the other hand, pure cultural particularism can be deeply reactionary and immanently resistant to the kind of progressive judgments that most of its advocates would not be able to restrain anyway. And the outward efficacy of the particular claim to universality, as demonstrated by suburban culture and its racial suppositions, should give us pause. What if a more progressive structuring of the sociospatial can only be accomplished by an ideological particularity's claim to universality? Would we deny ourselves the necessary rhetorical circuitry—the rhetorical and conceptual strategies that make the ideological mechanism run—simply because reactionary hegemonies have gained power in a similar operation? I would suggest that, when we are speaking of "bourgeois utopias" (Fishman), we should not settle too quickly for pure particularity as some sort of micropolitical contestation/closure of all universal categories. Rather, we might turn again to Žižek for a recognition of "what Fredric Jameson calls the utopian moment present in even the most atrocious ideology" (*Ticklish* 185). Speaking of Fascism, but in a way that is still applicable to our suburban subject, Žižek insists that it

is wrong to condemn that political ideology's longing for authentic community as simply totalitarian. Instead, "the non-ideological utopian character of this longing is to be fully asserted. What makes it 'ideological' is its articulation, the way this longing is functionalized as the legitimation of a very specific notion of capitalist exploitation" (Ibid.). Similarly, strengthened by the obvious dysfunction of the category, we might find in the post-ideological ideology of the suburban norm a more functional striving for authentic community. But that would also require that the empty universal authentically represent its content, and that may be—with apologies to Laclau and Mouffe's schema—as impracticable as it is redoubtable.

Notes

¹ The McMansion and other common forms of subdivided suburban housing can run well into the million dollar price range, requiring a level of affluence that exceeds most conceptions of the upper-middleclass lifestyle. However, they *tend* toward a lower level of spatial segregation from middleclass housing than more stereotypical mansions, which often require substantial amounts of property to support their enormous structures. Consequently, the "tract mansion" and other wealthy structures may be judged to belong to the upper-middleclass suburban norm.

² Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, considers a similar problematic in the context of the struggles of Detroit's League of Black Revolutionary Workers during the late 1960s. In attempting, but eventually failing, to generalize their movement's political model, Jameson claims that their problem was essentially spatial in character: "how to develop a national political movement on the basis of a city strategy and politics" (414).

³ It should be understood that suburbanization is the urban development of the periphery. It is its low density and relationship to a traditional urban core that makes it "suburban."

⁴ For example, the mission statement of The National Urban League takes as its central objective, "empowering African Americans to enter the social and economic mainstream" (nul.org).

⁵ For an excellent analysis of how "the pleasure of whiteness" functioned "as a wage" in white working class culture, see David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.

⁶ For representative examples of the call for new particularizing, see Dreama Moon's "White Enculturation and Bourgeois Ideology: The Discursive Production of 'Good (White) Girls.'" *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. London: Sage, 1999. and Nakayama, T.K., and R.L. Krizek. "Whiteness: a Strategic Rhetoric." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. (1995) 81. 291-309.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

Speaking more specifically about the concept of culture, the recognition of the suburban as an ideological particularity provides a localized framework for critiquing broader structuring in the world system. Given the enormity and complexity of world system in our epoch—and here I am indebted to Fredric Jameson’s various famed articulations of these circumstances—the local mapping becomes an inadequate but necessary operation in the creation of cogent frameworks of intelligibility that may be sutured to the impossible totality in a manner similar to culture under the suburban hegemony.¹ But this, of course, is not tantamount to a “seizure of power” for a newly (or re-)hegemonized culture concept. In fact—and this crucial problematic is only a very peripheral concern of this study—we may find the concept wholly untenable in our post-ideological age given its various dubious ideological imbrications. Even Lenin, the revolutionary figure much maligned by bourgeois evolutionary historicism as a cynical advocate of totalitarian *realpolitik*, would insist in “The State and Revolution” that the existing apparatus of the state, the political form through which power is exercised, is not to be seized, but destroyed, so that a new form may be invented. But here the history of the victors, which is necessarily the history of the suburbs, has something to teach us about the relationship between the state and exploitive concepts: their dissolution is not to be assumed or expected. So before we throw culture to the dogs, we would do better to recognize its efficacy for creating debates about stable social forms. This is the case because to insist that something inhabits a fixed symbolic space may leave it open to an

“act” that, through its total rejection of the existing Symbolic Order, can reorder the symbolic efficiency of that space—i.e. could change what that space is permitted to mean, which, in the context of suburban culture, could mean the renegotiation of the material spaces designed by a (unfortunately stultified) utopian imagination. Even though the Levittown survey’s emphasis on “civic engagement” and praise for “the people of Levittown” presupposes a dubious position of enunciation with numerous racial and class exclusions; at the level of enunciated content it participates in a narrative of hope. A close analysis reveals the limitations and contradictions contained in that narrative and its attendant ideologies, particularly when it is placed within the broader contexts of its production.

Note

¹ In recent composition scholarship, Gwen Gorzelsky’s *The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change*, though reliant on a questionable theoretical framework and not explicitly indebted to the field’s spatial turn, is an interesting exercise in mapping the relationship between the local and the global, the contemporary and the historical, the academic and the world beyond the academy. And it conducts its mappings alongside serious analyses of historical acts of writing.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael Vastola earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Florida Gulf Coast University in 2004. This thesis is the culmination of his work toward the Master of Arts degree that he will receive in 2006. His plans for doctoral work are to continue and broaden his investigation of the relationship between theories of ideology and written communication, and to theorize their connection to particular historical acts of writing.