Introduction

Race and the Suburbs in American Film

MERRILL SCHLEIER

*L*ost Boundaries (Werker, 1949) was released two years after the completion of the first Levittown suburb in Long Island, New York, which was a harbinger of the massive postwar expansion of such dwellings. Based on a true story that occurred in the 1920s, the film largely takes place in a small, white New England town and concerns Dr. Scott Carter (Mel Ferrer), an African American physician and his family who pass for white, but whose identities are unearthed when he tries to enlist as an officer during World War II and is rejected. The subsequent discovery by the townspeople and Dr. Carter's own children of his long-held secret prompts everyone's soul searching, before the venerable physician is embraced anew by his all-white patients, culminating in a sanctifying church service. The Colonial town with its lily-white homes and public buildings may serve as a synecdoche for the emerging suburb's little white houses, environs, and inhabitants.

Yet the community's embrace of Dr. Carter is not consonant with the reactions of whites to African Americans' efforts to integrate the country's newly built postwar suburbs. Hence the film's producer, Louis De Rochemont, believed that *Lost Boundaries* could have an ameliorative effect on current race relations and their concomitant spatial divisions, that it "might help white Americans turn away from outmoded 'separate

1

but equal' legislation" and change the country's racial dynamics, a hope that proved elusive. But the fact that De Rochement envisioned the film for white audiences served only to reinforce prevailing racial hierarchies.[1] Karen Bowdre argues further that the producer's use of white actors to play African American characters underscored the film's valorization of whiteness and the replication of the country's racial caste system.[2] By focusing the narrative on a singular and exceptional African American family at a time when race riots over housing were roiling the nation, *Lost Boundaries* served as only a liberal plea for limited integration. Its story of token inclusion through a conformist philosophy of racial assimilation, ostensibly told from the point of view of an African American family, foreshadows the manner in which most subsequent suburb films reproduced whiteness.

This anthology's chronological parameters begin during the postwar era when housing shortages altered the physical landscape of the United States, which resulted in a "suburban explosion," according to historian David M. P. Freund, and when a massive government-sponsored resegregation of the nation was underway.[3] Between 1950 and 1970, the population of the suburbs doubled to nearly seventy-four million, and by 2018 it rose to 175 million people. Even though suburbs developed in America in the early nineteenth century as a way for whites to retire to more salubrious, semirural locations, in part to avoid what they deemed riffraff in the increasingly more crowded and diverse urban centers, the far-reaching post–World War II exodus from cities to suburbs irrevocably changed the nation's geography and racial demography. The emergence of what has variously been referred to as suburb or suburban films, which continue up to the present, began soon after the war when these material changes coincided with political events—the suburban postwar housing boom with its concomitant racial restrictions and the civil rights movement's targeted focus on the integration of housing and social space. The book ends in the present when suburbs have increased exponentially with more diverse architectural and spatial typologies and inhabitants, but when segregation, discriminatory practices, and racialized income inequality still haunt their parameters.

Race and the Suburbs in American Film focuses on narrative films since they differ from television and other media in their initial representations of the suburbs. Postwar television shows were poised to satisfy sponsors and advertisers, often presenting, until not far in the past, a utopian, affirmative image of white nuclear families in such locales (e.g., *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*); while suburb films were

concerned more frequently with subject matter rife with conflict or with neighborhoods under siege, fabricated to garner wider audience members. This book commences with the premise that Hollywood cinematic iterations have not encompassed the suburbs' complexities—neither its varied typologies nor its heterogeneous inhabitants—nor do they address America's diverse audiences at the level of inclusion, production, or reception.[4] Up until recently many of those considered white, middle class, and heterosexual enjoyed the privilege of imagining themselves in such cinematic tales of suburban nostalgia, but despite the ability of Blacks, Latinx, Asian Americans, and other minorities to project themselves into these fictional settings, they possessed neither the luxury of inhabiting such locations nor of entering or leaving them at will.

Several studies concerning the suburb in film, television, and fiction in the last two decades precede this anthology, but the majority do not concentrate on race in American cinema exclusively. Perhaps the first to explore racialized representations of the suburbs in American literature was Catherine Jurca, focusing predominantly on the construction of whiteness. She claims that fictional portrayals of the suburbs frequently portray its privileged, dysfunctional middle-class white denizens as placeless victims at a time when African Americans were suffering real discrimination in matters of housing.[5] Amy Marie Kenyon's book *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture* (2004) followed; it explores spatial themes in suburban film and fiction, including the tensions produced by the racialized suburbs and their counterpart, the cities.[6] Both Robert Beuka's *Suburbia Nation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004) and David R. Coon's *Look Closer: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television* (2014) address utopian and dystopian suburban variants in cinema, and the "idea" of the suburbs, with single chapters on race.[7] Timotheus Vermeulen's *Scenes from the Suburbs* (2014) acknowledges rightly the need for an analysis of race and ethnicity in more theoretical and aesthetic terms, and includes a short treatment of the television show *Desperate Housewives.*[8] Recently Amy Lynn Corbin's *Cinematic Geographies and Spectatorship in America* (2015) asserts, in an excellent chapter devoted solely to suburb films, that the display of otherness in the suburbs is often accomplished through displacement; for example, themes of teen rebellion or alien invasion may serve as metaphors for racial and cultural difference.[9] In the last five years, several other books that treat film and the suburbs in an international context have appeared but have not concerned themselves with race as their primary focus.[10]

Suburb Films—From Cycle to Genre

American suburb films emerged in Hollywood in the late 1940s and lasted for about ten years during a time of intense debate concerning the viability of white middle-class suburban living and a vexed period of racial apartheid when overt and covert racial violence was employed to protect white suburban domestic space from Blacks, Asian Americans, Latinx, and those deemed other. These include such post–World War II examples as *Pitfall* (De Toth, 1948), *Desperate Hours* (Wyler, 1955), *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Johnson, 1956), *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1956), and *Crime of Passion* (Oswald, 1956). Suburb films rely on the suburban environs (place), which may include the negotiation of its domestic interiors (space), as a motivating force in the cinematic plot in significant ways, whether thematically, through character development, or spatial logic. Defying cinema's traditional categories and periodizations, suburb films include but are not limited to melodramas, film noirs, social problem films, comedies, science fiction, and horror films. These diverse examples of suburb films are part of a cinematic cycle, according to Amanda Klein's definition, sharing similar "images, characters, settings, plots, or themes."[11] According to Klein, cycles are short-lived and topical and may emerge from a single film, continuing beyond their original source only if they are critically successful and garner a large audience, ever attendant to the latter's desires, while pointing to films' commercial or use value. Preceding genres, film cycles are concerned especially with the way cultural discourses by filmmakers, audiences, reviewers, and current events interact with cinematic texts.

Since cycles are linked to current events or material conditions, it is necessary to historicize them in their cultural, political, economic, and material milieus.[12] Suburb films from the late 1940s until the late 1950s accord with Klein's assertion that cycles emerge in response to contemporary discussions taking place in the mass media, in this case the widely debated nature of suburban life after World War II. Contemporary boosters, politicians, and real estate interests promoted the suburbs as utopian, wholesome, and exclusive, while social critics such as David Riesman, William H. Whyte, and Betty Friedan decried variously their putative soul crushing conformism and commodity fetishism for middle-class white people, while remaining conspicuously silent on the suburb's effects upon racialized others.[13] Most suburb cycle films begin by establishing the insufficiencies of white middle-class suburban life; but

even at their most disparaging and destabilizing, these seemingly dystopian tales opt for suburban restoration or rehabilitation. For example, *No Down Payment* (Ritt, 1957) explores a Japanese American family's effort to move into the all-white Sunrise Hills in Southern California's Orange County, far from Los Angeles's dense urban population and diverse inhabitants. Despite the cinematic suburb's upbeat moniker, wholesome architectural façades, and seemingly friendly nuclear families, dysfunctional men and their accommodating wives—an alcoholic philanderer, a sadistic former sergeant turned rapist, and an ineffectual organization man—occupy the cloistered enclave. At the film's denouement, the rapist is killed, the husbands regain their professional standing, and the churchgoing Japanese American family is allowed to move in by ellipsis, thus restoring the promise of the suburb.[14]

Suburb films have surprisingly continued after the cycle's initial decade and up to the present with similar syntactical and semantic elements, thus rendering them more akin to Rick Altman's theorization of genres. But Altman cautions us not to assume that all genres operate in the same manner or in universal terms; some begin slowly, assuming familiar patterns, while others go through various paradigms, but always in dialogue with the flow of time.[15] Generic suburb films include but are not limited to *Bachelor in Paradise* (Arnold, 1961), *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975), *Ordinary People* (Redford, 1980), *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), continuing into the twenty-first century with *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001), *Revolutionary Road* (Mendes, 2008), and *Suburbicon* (Clooney, 2016). Many of their syntactical and semantic features, which commenced in previous cycle films, have been identified in several of the aforementioned cinematic suburb studies. Key themes include the appearance of a white, dysfunctional middle-class family unit, often consisting variously of emasculated male homeowners, bored housewives, and rebellious teenagers who seek independence from their surroundings, often in the city, all of whom are subject to the overwhelming character of suburban conformity and the quest for consumer goods occasioned by a belief in the American Dream. Even the few midcentury suburb films about the provisional, and problematic, inclusion of minorities, such as *No Down Payment* (Ritt, 1957) and *Take a Giant Step* (Leacock, 1959), or minority assimilation, transgression, and rebellion in the later *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin, 2002) and *Amreeka* (Dabis, 2009), explore newcomers' negotiations of predominantly white spaces and their challenging attempts at assimilation. These thematic

features are accompanied by such semantic elements as placelessness and entrapment, which are prompted, in part, by the homogeneity and seeming pervasiveness of the built environment. Placelessness is often represented by downward tilt shots or bird's-eye views of nondescript prefabricated houses as far as the eye can see, engendering a sense of social and existential alienation among its largely white denizens. While I do not seek to interrogate all of the syntactical and semantic elements and narrative conventions of typical suburb films, it is necessary to problematize them in order to excavate their racialized underpinnings. That said, films situated in African American, Asian American, Latinx, and immigrant suburbs have been understudied, excluded from the canon, prompting a reevaluation, if not an expansion, of the suburb film's cyclical and generic parameters, and a reconsideration of what we mean by a suburb film.

There is no consensus concerning what constitutes a real suburb since they have changed so dramatically over time, including edge cities, ethnoburbs, and planned sprawl. Nevertheless, Hollywood has appropriated and focused repeatedly on a particular variant—privately owned, generic looking homes in planned, decentralized communities where white heteronormative families reside. Yet since the 1970s the suburb's shifting demographic, geographic, and diverse architectural character calls for a critical analysis of Hollywood's stubborn adherence to outdated suburban stereotypes, constituting a veritable cultural lag. The film industry's selective depictions of demographic and architectural sameness prevail even though working-class and racially, ethnically, and architecturally diverse suburbs have existed in Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Washington, DC for decades.[16] Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese in their magisterial *Suburb Reader* point to the suburbs' multiplicity and the particularized experiences of its varied residents—African Americans, Latinx, Asian American, and working-class suburbanites.[17] Just as the suburbs were engaged in the politics of racial exclusion, in a parallel process Hollywood has habitually occluded others' points of view from its suburban-inspired boundaries, often reducing them to ancillary characters that occupy the margins of the narratives. Nicolaides and Wiese claim that these representations remain "one legacy of a long history of imagineering in the mass media in which whites were the only suburbanites who mattered."[18] In addition to interrogating whiteness, this book adapts Nicolaides and Wiese's important query to suburb films, "How did the 'other suburbanites' ascribe meaning to their own living spaces?"[19]

The Racialized Spatial Turn:
Suburban Typologies, Suburban Neighborhoods

Race and the Suburbs in American Film's contributors open up suburb films to spatial theorization whether through an analysis of location shooting, production design, or characters' habitation and negotiation of such places and spatial arrangements. Even though films are not passive reflections of material or social reality, they engage in a dialogue with their actual counterparts and inform cinematic adaptations. In this way, this book expands upon my own *Skyscraper Cinema* (2009) and Pamela Robertson Wojcik's excellent books *The Apartment Plot* (2010) and *The Apartment Complex* (2018), with a focus on the constructed cinematic environment's spatiality as a crucial component of investigation rather than relying on traditional genre or auteurist analyses.[20] As urban geographer David Delaney argues, space is an "enabling technology" through which race is produced—for example, it may be the result of such diverse ideologies as colorblindness, race consciousness, integrationist, assimilationist, separatist, and nativist, among others. Delaney encourages us to interrogate the spatial conditions under which one absorbs an assigned racial category and how one learns to negotiate its spaces. When we take such racialized spaces seriously, he continues, we must also consider such "race-making events" as "displacement, dislocation, and relocation."[21] It is well known that post–World War II suburbs were built on the principle of the exclusion of those deemed nonwhite, enshrined in racial covenants, redlining, and Federal Housing Administration rules and further enforced by physical barriers such as walls, cul-de-sacs, dead ends, and greenbelts; even freeways were constructed to separate the city from suburban neighborhoods to safeguard whiteness. Yet most of cinema's suburban cinematic narratives focus instead on the spatial travails of their white inhabitants, rather than the white suburb's more urgent sufferers, while ignoring the heterogeneous suburbs and their diverse inhabitants.[22]

For example, the semantics of placelessness seen in many suburb films is not simply an illustration of feelings of spatial alienation experienced by monolithic suburb dwellers, as several scholars claim, but it affects diverse populations and cinematic characters differently.[23] One way to understand the racial underpinnings of placelessness is to problematize the suburb's uniformly styled houses peopled by similar, conforming inhabitants who mirror their generic dwellings as well as their cinematic representations. We must bear in mind that real estate developers like William Levitt

adopted architectural sameness in part as a purposeful tactic to valorize whiteness and the assimilation of racial and ethnic differences—a ploy copied by Hollywood filmmakers and production designers to signify the suburbs. Architectural historian Dianne Harris explores how such unacknowledged whiteness and its connection to property ownership permeated all aspects of the ideological and physical construction of the midcentury suburbs—its standardized classical revival and ranch style architecture, house plans, and interior design principles—which were then repeatedly reinforced in the media as a form of publicity and propaganda, instructing suburban residents how to perform and assimilate to whiteness in their suburban abodes and surrounding environs.[24] Writing in 1955, housing expert Charles Abrams demonstrates that architectural consistency was supposed to extend to a house's inhabitants—suburban middle-class denizen were "told to be homogeneous, not to mix with the rich or poor, and to use 'restrictions' to keep the 'wrong people' out" because "inharmonious racial, national or income groups" led to a decrease in property values.[25] Thus Harris insists that no exploration of the suburbs or its various representations in popular culture, and I argue in Hollywood cinema, are valid without a discussion of race even when it seems invisible.[26]

Filmmaker Jordan Peele explores placelessness in an exclusive, white suburban space from the perspective of African American city dwellers in *Get Out* (2017), employing the horror genre to underscore his point. An anonymous Black man in the film's initial nocturnal scene feels trepidation while traversing a generic suburban neighborhood in Connecticut, indicating that de facto segregation and Jim Crow are still prevalent in the putatively liberal Northeast. Sensing that he is out of his element, the man describes the neighborhood's look-a-like dwellings and the confounding spatiality of its cul-de-sacs as a "confusing-ass suburb," where Edgewood Way and Edgewood Lane are indecipherable. As architectural historian Barbara Miller Lane explains, the layout of these suburbs—the large picture-windowed houses facing one another in circular cul-de-sacs, featuring ample front lawns without boundary fencing, which extended to the street—were purposely planned as confounding spaces, in part to keep such unwanted visitors out.[27] Soon the man's anxiety assumes tangible form as a color-coded white vehicle begins to track his movement down the street before a masked Ninja emerges and removes him forcibly, recalling the body snatching occasioned by slavery, police violence, and the white suburban resistance that accompanied integration.

Augmenting the work of David Delaney, George Lipsitz challenges us further to assess the relationship between the spatial dynamics of racial segregation and racial representation. He argues that "racism takes place" and that social relations "take on their full force and meaning when they are enacted physically in actual places" such as the suburbs, which shape and reproduce the significance of race.[28] He further posits the idea of white and Black racialized spatial imaginaries, in material spaces and in fictional, artistic, and, by implication, cinematic representations. For instance, the white spatial imaginary, of which the suburb serves as an archetype, structures feelings as well as social institutions. "It idealizes 'pure' and homogeneous spaces, controlled environments and predictive patterns of design and behavior."[29] According to Lipsitz, suburbs promote the values of individual escape and private acquisition (e.g., home ownership and commodities), which he refers to as a "possessive investment in whiteness" rather than collective action seen in the Black spatial imaginary that benefits all, serving as the locus for exchange value and the exclusion of nonnormative others.[30] While his paradigm is useful for the analysis of such spaces in cinema, we must also recognize that racialized spatial imaginaries are neither transhistorical nor perpetual and must be interrogated to identify how they operate temporally and in discreet locations.

Most Hollywood-produced suburb films are predicated on such white spatial imaginaries, and have until recently been composed of generic neighborhoods that house heteronormative families, which either exclude or jettison people of color and those considered other from their boundaries, both narratively and spatially. *Crime of Passion* (1956), for example, tells the story of queer, white San Franciscan Kathy Ferguson (Barbara Stanwyck) who begins the film as an accomplished journalist, supporting a community of distinct women through her newspaper column, but marries her way to a lowbrow, all-white Los Angeles suburb in the San Fernando Valley where social conformity and architectural monotony prevail.[31] The now stymied housewife soon covets a majestic Westwood suburban home like the one owned by chief inspector Tony Pope (Raymond Burr), her husband's boss, a way of "trading up" to attain success, wholly absorbing the values of the American Dream and its spatial analogue, a better white suburb. A failed extramarital affair with Pope to achieve her quest for upward mobility leads to a criminal act, hence her ineluctable downfall, transferring her from the perceived carceral spaces of the suburbs to the penitentiary, thereby jettisoning her from the former's environs. *Crime*

of Passion's spatialized white imaginaries of two suburbs, its syntactical elements (e.g., emasculated husband, dissatisfied wife, dysfunctional family unit) and semantic features (e.g., placelessness, entrapment, surveillance) remain the bulwark of most Hollywood suburb films.

In addition to suburban typologies, we may apply Lipsitz's notion of racialized imaginaries to specific geographies, neighborhoods, and places that have discreet histories. Several contributors to this anthology demonstrate that suburb films include such wide-ranging settings as the decentralized neighborhood of Los Angeles's Sugar Hill, the older suburbs of upstate New York, or in the urban fringes of Chicago. As I have previously argued, it is vital to excavate the built environment's embedded character to discover its hidden layers, following Walter Benjamin's example in his discussion of the Paris Arcades.[32] Architecture and its surrounding environs often serve as a palimpsest, preserving both a diachronic and synchronic relationship to present structures and their accompanying ideologies in culture.[33] Yet one must expand on Benjamin's project by excavating the impact of race on cinema's built environment, in this case the suburbs' domestic abodes and neighborhood milieus. Architect and architectural historian Craig E. Barton notes that architecture and its contiguous spaces have the capacity to serve as repositories of our individual as well as our collective racial pasts, encouraging scholars to recover these lost histories and inner meanings.[34] Thus middle-class Connecticut suburbs composed of white Neocolonial homes redolent of both the nation's founding and its slave-owning legacy in the films *Take a Giant Step* (1959) and *Get Out* (2017), the once utopian but now decayed suburb of Liberty City outside Miami in *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), and the location-shot and production designed working-class ethnoburb of Quincy, Massachusetts in the independent film *Children of Invention* (Chun, 2009) and the challenges it presents for its newly arrived Chinese immigrants, present vastly dissimilar architectural and spatial histories that have implications for their inhabitants' identities.

One must bear in mind that African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx home seekers were formerly steered to older, well-established open access neighborhoods that whites had vacated rather than the newly built Levittown-like suburbs. These established localities were filled with variously styled houses (e.g., Victorian, Craftsman, Mission Revival) that were sometimes situated over the redline, not the little white, classically inspired dwellings and manicured lawns found in the new subdivisions that were pitched to white Americans. Historical suburbs possess their own repositories of memories and associations, which may include

afterimages of slavery and recollections of racialized oppression. Thus, films about Black suburbs and their inhabitants, for example, may emit haunted presences that serve as specters of suffering or even death as illustrated in *Ganja and Hess* (Gunn, 1973), *To Sleep with Anger* (Burnett, 1990), and *Get Out*, constituting a subgenre. Coextensive with such geographical locations and styles are the interior spaces of such suburban houses—their circumscribed plans and layouts, rooms, walls, doorways, and other architectural features—which are occupied and mediated by their inhabitants, and may either reinforce or challenge Hollywood's racial stereotypes.

History of the Racialized Suburbs: American Dreams/American Nightmares

Race and the cinematic suburbs must be considered extra-cinematically, especially in view of the racialized ideologies that inform material places and their inhabitants, which were often adopted by Hollywood. Robert Beuka and others point out that suburbs became stereotypical images of the American Dream after World War II, with the popular media proffering "glowing images of American life to an emerging sense of the suburbs as the promised land of the American middle class."[35] Such superficially promising views, despite their drawbacks, are intrinsic to cinematic suburban discourses, and are often conflated with notions of the American Dream—the valorization of individual achievement realized by the ownership of a private, detached home, or a more upscale variant, a stable heteronormative family, and the acquisition of consumer appliances and an automobile. Such is the premise of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (H. C. Potter, 1948), *Crime of Passion* (1956), and *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018). Even immigrants and minorities who move to the suburbs are in pursuit of the American Dream in *Towelhead* (Ball, 2008), *Amreeka*, and *Better Luck Tomorrow*, albeit with different obstacles placed in their paths. But as Vermeulen argues, this façade often hides a dark and sinister underbelly, but how and for whom?[36] If the American Dream is but a provisional mirage that requires a rehabilitative intervention as staged in suburb films, why have they largely considered its impact on white denizens or through strategies of assimilation?

Procuring a suburban house was also regarded as the quintessential symbol of American citizenship, a fulfillment of a patriotic adherence to capitalist principles amid the fear of Communist or alien infiltration,

especially during the Cold War. Many postwar suburban cycle films present such aspects of the American Dream under threat or siege by swarthy criminals (*Desperate Hours*), urban marauders (*Pitfall*, *The Reckless Moment*), or even mental instability (*Bigger Than Life*) which required extirpation in order to restore suburban equanimity, hence the Dream. Viewing these films through a racial lens during the prevailing attempt by civil rights organizations to integrate the suburbs may suggest the metaphorical incursion of "others" into the suburbs and a concomitant desire to maintain its racial purity.

While American Dream propaganda reached fruition after World War II, its racialized foundations were already apparent in the earlier pronouncements of President Herbert Hoover. In a 1930 speech delivered at the Conference on Building and Home Ownership, he waxed poetic about suburban home acquisition as the realization of racialized citizenship, albeit articulated in coded terms: "Those immortal ballads . . . such as 'Home Sweet Home' . . . were not written about tenements or apartments. They are expressions of racial longing, which find outlet in the living poetry and songs of our people. . . . That our people should live in their own homes is a sentiment deep in the heart of our race and of American life."[37] Realtors, bankers, and elected officials knew full well that Hoover's allusions to race meant that such houses were meant for middle-class white citizens only, far removed from the problems of the urban sphere. Architectural historian John Archer points out that one of the animating forces of the American Dream was escape from the "pressure, congestion, and corruption of urban life" to locales that resembled more readily the salubrious open spaces of the country.[38] Whites employed segregation as a strategy to effect this purifying regime, according to Archer, constructing homogeneity by race and class, thereby more readily preserving their rights as individuals.[39] By juxtaposing suburban homes with tenements and apartments, Hoover relied on an established trope of distinguishing and separating them in the spatial imaginary from diverse cities where people of color and lower-class ethnics resided.

Postwar suburbs were deliberately planned and built as segregated spaces for returning white veterans and their families by private developers with the aid of federal subsidies, demonstrating the manner in which race, the built environment, and real estate are mutually constitutive.[40] Yet legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris argues that the inextricable link between whiteness, private property, and value was foundational to the United States, predating the advent of suburbs; Blacks were treated as property while white ownership of property (e.g., land, dwellings,

possessions) was validated, while accruing such additional privileges as human rights, liberties, and immunities, and the right to exclude others not deemed white.[41] Indeed, even a neighborhood's worth was thought of as intrinsic to those that inhabited it; locations with white occupants were appraised higher than those with predominantly African Americans, Latinx, and Asian Americans. Charles Abrams asserted that real estate law even regarded upscale Blacks who wished to provide their children with a college education and "thought they were entitled to live among whites" as poised to "instigate a form of blight," reinforcing the idea that real estate value was superimposed on racialized bodies.[42]

Thus the postwar Levittowns and Lakewoods of America and their suburban offspring followed established racialized traditions enshrined in legal doctrine (e.g., racial covenants, racial zoning, redlining); updated during the Depression with the formation of the Home Owner's Loan Corporation and continued by the Federal Housing Administration, and the Veterans Administration after World War II, which denied FHA and VA loans to Blacks; administered and solidified by physical barriers; and reinforced and codified by de facto practices (e.g., steering and blockbusting by realtors), which were all constructed to bar African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and other minorities while sanctioning European ethnics to become white through assimilation. Suburban white homeowners often augmented such state authorized and private business practices by embracing NIMBY (not in my neighborhood) policies, which were invented ostensibly to protect their investments, in turn creating a generation of mostly white suburban dwellers who were hostile to the civil rights movement and to those they deemed nonwhite. Many suburbs were consequently produced and maintained as racialized spaces in which private property rights were valorized over nondiscriminatory human rights, serving as the material manifestations of the "set of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that both reflect and help create and maintain race-based outcomes in society."[43] However, many suburb films persist in addressing the adverse effects of the American Dream upon whites rather than upon African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx, immigrants, and ethnic minorities, the real victims of its de facto and de jure practices.

But the premise that the American Dream, of which the suburban house was a bulwark, was available to anyone if they simply exerted the requisite effort needs to be problematized in both material reality and cinematic representations. Only recently have suburb films begun to address the suburban genre's dystopian syntax and semantics for people

of color in such films as *Amreeka*, *99 Homes*, and *Get Out*. But as early as 1964 Malcolm X took issue with the mythos of the American Dream, arguing that African Americans were neither the beneficiaries of American democracy nor its institutional privileges, but rather of its hypocrisies. "We didn't see any American Dream," he charged. "We experienced only the American nightmare."[44] For African Americans, this was especially applicable to the purchase of a suburban home. While it is accurate that token Black families were admitted to some white suburbs, beginning in the postwar period, realtors steered most African Americans to open access or to all Black suburbs, preserving the country's racial apartheid, a practice that is still prevalent today. The segregation of most suburban neighborhoods, and the lower wages and the banning of subsidized loans for African Americans and other minorities, precluded their entrance to white suburban neighborhoods, which enjoyed higher tax revenues, better schools, available jobs, and enhanced services. While middle-class African American and Latinx suburbs were established, they often had private economies that were less prosperous than their white counterparts.

Thus middle-class prosperity and respectability did not necessarily benefit the minority house seeker or owner; rather, their achievement was often exploited by predatory lenders to plunder their resources further in the secondary loans markets after World War II and beyond, as Ta-Nehisi Coates and others have observed. African Americans in particular paid more than whites for comparable houses and were compelled to buy contract loans at higher interest rates, with no ability to accrue equity, hence wealth accumulation, like their white counterparts.[45] Before the 2008 housing crisis and subsequent economic meltdown, for example, lenders such as Wells Fargo and Countrywide Financial (now Bank of America) targeted African Americans and other minorities for predatory loans, even forging relationships with church and community groups to achieve their goals. For example, Blacks with "sterling credit ratings" were charged higher fees and rates on mortgages and steered into subprime and adjustable loans when they could afford cheaper ones compared to white borrowers with similar credit profiles.[46]

Developing Malcolm X's notion of the American Nightmare, Kee-anga-Yamahtta Taylor begins by exposing the Dream's underbelly—that when people fail at attaining the promise of American exceptionalism and opportunity, their personal failures, rather than a racist and class based system, serve as the explanation. In response to then governor Ronald Reagan's valorization of the plentitude occasioned by the American Dream in 1974, Taylor argues that it was "wholly contingent on the

erasure or rewriting of three themes in American history—genocide, slavery, and the massive exploitation of waves of immigrant workers."[47] In her book *Race for Profit* (2019), she investigates further the continued exploitation of African Americans in the acquisition of privately owned homes after the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. That is, despite the federal government's purported desire to provide more Blacks the opportunity to purchase houses, they were often located in economically depressed urban locations, in an effort to preserve the lily whiteness of most suburbs. But the government abrogated the program's supervision to private industry, to the very lenders that had hitherto preyed upon African Americans, in effect allowing the wolf to guard the henhouse. Mortgage lenders used the program as an opportunity to further extract monies from already economically disadvantaged Black communities. Additionally, federal inspection standards were loosened, paving the way for so-called "zombie homes" that would never accrue equity, and sold with HUD assistance to the unsuspecting poor, often Black welfare mothers who could ill afford them and their inevitable repairs.[48] Houses were thus repossessed and sold again, with the government guaranteeing the mortgage broker's initial investment while disadvantaging the homeowner, who lost everything. Taylor refers to these practices as a form of the "predatory inclusion" of African Americans in the so-called American Dream. Similar rapacious practices commenced in the 1990s and continued until the economic meltdown of 2008.[49] Lenders targeted poor minorities with subprime or what was referred to in internal memos as "ghetto loans," fully aware that when the interest rates rose, their victims would default.[50]

The American Nightmare also extended to various types of antagonism perpetrated against people of color especially in the suburbs, from microaggressions to overt acts of hostility against those who dared traverse its white designated spaces. As Andrew Wiese has noted, "When it came to race, arson was as suburban as the backyard barbeque grill during much of the postwar period.[51] Yet these acts of explicit aggression were purposely suppressed in the mass media, according to historian Arnold R. Hirsch, leading him to refer to the mid-twentieth century as an era of "hidden violence" against African Americans in particular, but also perpetrated against Asian Americans and other minorities who tried to gain entrance to the white suburbs.[52] While microaggressions in the white suburbs are seen in many postwar suburb cycle films, including *Take A Giant Step*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *No Down Payment*, blatant acts of racial violence perpetrated by whites against Blacks are likewise omitted.

Racialized Production and Distribution of Suburb Films

Just as the real suburbs were engaged in the politics of racial exclusion, Hollywood has habitually occluded others' points of view from its suburban-inspired boundaries, often reducing them to secondary characters. (e.g., *Mr. Blandings*, *Reckless Moment*, *Rebel Without a Cause*). Hollywood preferred white suburbanites while creating and reinforcing an audience of white, middle-class consumers, believing them to be the most lucrative revenue stream. If cinema's houses entail a vicarious form of property ownership, habitation, and emplacement, as John David Rhodes claims in his book *The Spectacle of Property* (2016), then Hollywood's cinematic suburbs have omitted people of color from its parameters in a similar manner.[53]

This volume aims to remedy these exclusions by problematizing the very notion of the suburb or suburban film by reinserting those that have been neglected, rendered marginal, or invisible whether through lack of analysis, funding, distribution, or promotion. Benjamin Wiggins identifies the manner in which the racialization of cinematic suburban space occurs at the level of distribution and promotion in such films as *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Hughes and Hughes, 1993) while urging us to think beyond traditional genre categories. For example, despite *Boyz*'s location in the suburbs of Inglewood, California, it was nevertheless marketed as an inner city and urban film, which reflects a "conservative, imaginative geography put forth by Hollywood's marketing department, which render the systematic problems of race as confined to the urban sphere."[54] In order to fully understand the plight of its Black cinematic suburban protagonists and their often economically depressed environs, one must begin to situate such films in the context of governmental policies of redlining, the purposeful defunding and disinvestment of neighborhoods, and the introduction of low income public housing, which altered their racial and class makeup.

Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the mid-1980s and beyond, a group of independent Black filmmakers, such as Charles Burnett, Bill Gunn, and Kathleen Collins, to name a few, began to explore African American suburban spaces and family life, which were created in part as a reaction to Hollywood's Blaxploitation films and renditions of the Black rural experience. Recent research on the L.A. Rebellion and East Coast Black independent filmmakers offers an antidote to the representation of stereotypical white suburban subdivisions.[55] We discover in works by African American filmmakers another suburb that did not require whiteness,

but might reveal what Ellen C. Scott refers to as "colonial entanglements, back migration, or tangled domestic and familial concerns" explored through domestic abodes.[56] Often apprehended through their own life experiences in domestic spaces, Black filmmakers reveal the L.A. group's socially conscious commitment to "the real world material, psychological and spiritual challenges that Black people face in a racist society." As Allyson Field, Jean Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart have recently contended, they created and circulated films free from the restrictions that made "commercial 'official cinema' corrupt and conservative in style and politics, such as manipulative narrative conventions, high budgets, censorship, and prohibitive distribution and exhibition systems."[57] Most Black filmmakers were not able to obtain Hollywood backing from producers who routinely rejected their scripts and from distributors who refused to carry their independently made and financed films.[58] Scholarship on the Los Angeles independent school of filmmakers offers a paradigm for other marginalized independent cinemas to recover productions that have been left out of cinema studies discourses, leading to a reevaluation of traditional cycle and genre categories, to which this anthology gestures.

Race and Bodies in Space

In accord with Henri Lefebvre, this book also differentiates between place and space: place refers to a material location, and social space is produced by human activity.[59] Critical race theorists build upon the work of Lefebvre by acknowledging how race is also constructed and performed in the world. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant claim that race is an artificial process of "making people up," while reminding us that these ideological constructions are subject to change in lived experience.[60] Likewise, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields caution us to be leery of even the concept of race, which has its genesis in bio-determinism, and is often conflated with racism, although they belong to "different families of social construction." Inventing the term "racecraft," they claim that it is a mental process akin to witchcraft and subject to all forms of irrationality. This accords with Omi and Winant's claim that race exists in both the imagination and in human action, hence in space.[61]

    Race and the Suburbs in Postwar American Film considers how the suburb's cinematic inhabitants affect such locations through their own agency, sometimes as a form of resistance to white hegemony and its

assimilationist project. Adapting Lefebvre's theorizations of human conduct to the spaces of cinema, the book's contributors pay particular attention to how racialized bodies negotiate their ways in and through cinematic spaces, which can alter and disrupt physical environments. Real and imagined suburban locations are occupied by bodies, which may appear phenotypically and culturally different from one another and perform and negotiate their identities through interaction with others. Thus, this book considers how people of color, minorities, and nonconforming whites negotiate spatial politics in various suburban settings, including physical and psychological exclusion, isolation, containment, and entrapment, variations of the ideological and spatial barriers operative after World War II and beyond. Yet there is a mediation of and a resistance to such obstacles, demonstrating a sense of agency and cultural power. Geographers Wilbur Zelinsky and Barrett Lee employ the term "heterolocalism," or the ability of immigrants to maintain their distinctive cultural or ethnic identities in the suburbs despite the pressure to conform to white hegemonic standards.[62] Likewise, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans and others forge new versions of the suburbs, infusing them with their own spatial practices and cultural or ethnic histories through the introduction of art, food, and music, thereby creating new suburbs by altering their formerly white parameters.

In the last twenty-five years, suburbs have become new immigrant gateway communities, further problematizing issues of race and ethnicity in their environs. Urban geographer Susan W. Hardwick has even gone so far as to refer to this period as a time when the United States became a "suburban immigrant nation."[63] Additionally, the emergence of ethnoburbs from the effects of globalization, the struggles between nations, and shifts in immigration policy has led to a new Asian American global citizenry, which has changed the assimilation imperative in some suburbs.[64] At the same time, suburbs vary considerably in their treatment of those perceived as nonwhite, including immigrants, migrants, and asylum seekers, to either occupy the public square or seek shelter. Laws and ordinances may be passed to either preserve or alter its majority, white demographic. Films about the suburbs have not caught up sufficiently with such ever-changing places, particularly in light of the resurgence of nativism, accompanied by xenophobic and racist rhetoric and new legal restrictions in many suburbs, which escalated in the age of former President Donald Trump. Before the 2020 election, Trump sought to appeal to white suburban voters with anti-Black and anti-immigrant racist speech, attempting to frighten them into believing that a vote for Biden would mean the

incursion of Black Lives Matter protestors—who he labeled violent—into their neighborhoods. But according to the Brookings Institution, Biden's presidential win was due largely to his capturing the votes of those in diverse suburbs and smaller metropolitan areas in several swing states, demonstrating that Trump's strategy had not only failed, but that his view of a nation of mostly white suburbs was an anachronism.[65]

Contributions

My research has long focused on urban architecture and environs in cinema, especially how such spaces and bodies are mediated by gender, class, and race. In my book *Skyscraper Cinema*, for example, I explored the manner in which the postwar suburbs were seen as counterparts to lofty office buildings, employed as spaces of containment for white organization men. In addition, I showed that in such silent films as *Safety Last* (Newmeyer and Taylor, 1923), the Boy's (Harold Lloyd) white, middle-class ascension to the skyscraper's crest, a test of his masculine mettle, is buttressed narratively and spatially by the film's African American and Jewish characters. As previously stated, my interest in race and the suburban environs in cinema was stimulated by an invitation to contribute to Stefano Baschiera and Miriam de Rosa's anthology, *Film and Domestic Space* (2020), in which I examined Japanese Americans' efforts to inhabit white domestic and suburban spaces.[66] But my concern for race's embeddedness in such environs goes deeper, prompted by my personal memories of the white, middle-class suburban housing project where I grew up in the 1950s and early '60s, a segregated environment that was created by the New York City Housing Authority, a government agency.

The current book collection continues my abiding interest and represents the first sustained effort to interrogate race in the suburbs in American film, although it is not meant to be all-inclusive or comprehensive, but rather to open the subject up to further examination. Each of the chapters employs a different combination of strategies and methodological approaches to interrogate the manner in which the suburb and race are imbricated. Several of the themes that wind their way throughout, but are not limited to, include the new racial and ethnic complexity of suburban environments in contemporary films; the interaction of seemingly homogeneous suburban neighborhoods and diverse metropolitan locales in forging identities; the effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial trauma on the Black suburban experience; intersectional notions

of race, ethnicity, and identity formation among suburban inhabitants; suburban inclusion and visibility versus exclusion and invisibility; the links between race and neoliberalism in suburban space; and the vexed experiences of new immigrant populations in the suburbs, among others. Several authors explore how racial and ethnic characteristics coalesce with class, sexual identity, and gender to disclose the manner in which identities are overdetermined especially as they interact with the built environment. It is my aim that this volume will inspire further scholarship in the aforementioned areas of inquiry, while serving as an impetus to interrogate other issues relating to racialized bodies and racialized places and spaces in the cinematic suburbs.

John David Rhodes explores the Black female domestic servant as a cipher of the house's racialized spatiality, at a time when their emplacement in Hollywood films echoed Black actors' underpaid bit parts and anonymous roles as extras. Rhodes theorizes that the Black maid's body graphs the terrain of the suburban house, including its spatial parameters in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) and as an autonomous, and spatially defined agent in *The Reckless Moment* (1949), consonant with director Max Ophuls's mobile camerawork.

Merrill Schleier focuses on the travails of the Scotts, the first Black family to move into an all-white northeastern suburb in *Take a Giant Step* (1959). Experiencing what Omi and Winant refer to as various scales of racism, Schleier argues that the Scotts are subjected to the racialized ruptures between institutional, social, and private domestic space for middle-class African Americans in the white suburbs. These unequal spatial divisions ensure their racial containment, prompting their feelings of isolation, placelessness, and even entrapment, which are determined by both race and class. Schleier analyzes production design, architectural style, and prop placement as indicators of white material and ideological spaces in which the family is ensconced.

Through Bill Gunn's independent horror film *Ganja and Hess* (1973), Ellen C. Scott examines the understudied Black cinematic suburbs as a place of lush landscapes and gothic-styled homes that are replete with the traumas of colonialism and migration, far removed from Hollywood's standardized white depictions. In a suburban home of multiple rooms replete with art objects that bear the stain of European oppression and African memories alike, whites haunt the interior as spectral presences of death. As Scott demonstrates, Gunn locates the class divisions that trouble its Black suburban inhabitants in *Ganja and Hess*, rendering them at once predators and prey. She suggests that the despite the Black sub-