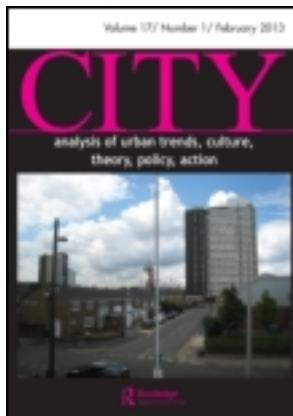


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Discourse and dystopia, American style

The rise of 'slumburbia' in a time of crisis

Alex Schafran

This paper examines the recent growth in the popular media of new discourses of decline focused on the American suburb. This new discursive twist, which appropriates language traditionally reserved for inner cities, is rooted in both the city/suburb dialectic, which has long dominated American urbanism, and the empirical realities of the foreclosure crisis and changing geographies of poverty in the American metropolis. Scholars should be concerned about the rise of this new discourse, as it reinforces a dialectic long since outdated, roots decline in a particular geography rather than examining the root causes of the crisis, and has potentially deleterious effects on communities already facing social and economic struggle in the wake of foreclosure. Linked as this discourse is to academic research on the suburbanization of poverty, it gives pause to those scholars who would speak in terms of 'suburban decline'.

Key words: foreclosure crisis, dystopianism, American suburbs, discourse, slums

Introduction

'Under a huge summer sky, the sprawling community appears overexposed and abandoned. The main drag offers an endless loop of failed businesses and vacant strip centers, the only relief coming from the landscaping in the Wal-Mart parking lot. Turn off onto any of the cookie-cutter side streets and it's post-Apocalyptic America.' (K. Hundley, 'Lehigh Acres: Florida's Lesson in Unregulated Growth', *St Petersburg Times*, 9 August 2009)

More than a half-century after American critics started hating the suburbs with the same fervor previously reserved for the cities, the

suburban critique has now dusted off the age-old language of urban decay and repurposed it for suburban use. If previous generations of suburbs were considered dull, conformity-inducing, environmentally harmful, exclusionary or just plain ugly, there was no confusing them for their dialectic twin, the dark, dirty, violent, impoverished and blighted city. Yet in the wake of the ongoing foreclosure crisis and continuous reports that suburban poverty has finally surpassed urban poverty in sheer numbers, commentators have reached for the pejorative urban language upon which generations of Americans have been weaned—slum, blight, ghetto—and begun unleashing them on

the suburbs. This is the epitome of old wine in new bottles, with the added dimension that the wine in question has already proved poisonous over the course of a well-documented century of urban history.

This paper is about the nascent rise of the language of 'slumburbia', an emerging discourse in the American popular media which labels both individual suburbs and large swaths of suburbia and exurbia with a dystopian language of 'slums' and 'blight' previously used to denigrate cities. The work of scholars like Bob Beauregard (1993) and Guy Baeten (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004) have made clear the power of geographically rooted dystopian and derogatory discourse in the shaping of political reactions to poverty and crisis. The fundamental argument of this paper is that the *geography* of this discourse in the USA shows early but profound signs of changing, and that we should have learned enough from history to be concerned with how the portrayal of rising suburban poverty can, like the portrayal of its inner-city counterpart, potentially have detrimental effects on the people who live there and reinforce and perpetuate troubling trends. Labeling these broad swathes of human settlements as slums merely roots our imagination of a problem in a specific geography rather than exposing the roots of the problem itself (Beauregard 1993). And much like Baeten (2001) made clear a decade ago with regards to inner-city stigma, contemporary academic research on suburban poverty and the foreclosure crisis is part of this process, both directly and indirectly helping produce and reproduce the 'stigmas, prejudices, fears and fantasies of mainstream society', whether intentionally or not (Baeten 2004, 236).

I begin by laying out my case that this emerging discourse is widespread enough to be a subject of concern, tracing both its spread through 21st-century media networks and its origins in a handful of influential articles. I then take a step back in an attempt to understand this emergence in a

historic context. If analysts like Baeten and Beauregard look to a century's worth of urban utopianism and dystopianism to understand the rooting of decline in inner-city geographies, this paper follows Nicolaides' (2006) lead in examining the question of suburban dystopianism through the lens of the city–suburb dialectic, which has dominated much of 20th-century American urban thought. It is a dialectic which scholars love to hate, but I would argue that the 'slumburb' discourse shows that this dialectic is alive and well, and in the process of being reinforced by this repurposing of destructive urban language for suburban use. What separates this current suburban dystopianism from the postwar variant which concerns Nicolaides is that it has completely inverted the dialectic, rendering the suburb not simply as hellishly dull but as the urban slum reborn in a suburban location.

Next, I return to some of Baeten and Beauregard's territory, reexamining the power of discourse in metropolitan settings, a power which extends not only to how we think about people, place and space but to the formal legal architecture of urban redevelopment (Solnit 2002). Although suburban slum talk has not yet reached the apoplectic fervor of its urban antecedents, we should be wary of the potential power of language embedded in redevelopment law, and some of the troubling definitions of slum emerging from major proponents of the suburban slum discourse.

I then turn my attention to the regional geography of suburban slum talk, centered for multiple reasons on the exurban fringes of California's major metropolitan regions. Again, much like the early examples of inner-city dystopianism, certain places emerge as profound symbols which anchor the emerging language, in this case cities like Antioch (Figure 1), Lathrop (Figure 2) and Manteca (Figure 3), California, whose struggles in the time of crisis have landed them at the top of the foreclosure rate lists and in the pages of the *New York Times*



Figure 1 Antioch, California in a better light
(Photo: Author)



Figure 2 The City of Lathrop
(Photo: Author)

(Brown 2008; Moore 2008; Egan 2010). In exurban California, residents not only face grinding commutes and the trap of negative equity, but a growing din in the media which labels their community, and them by default, not as a place with problems but a problem in and of itself. Moreover, these communities on the periphery of one of the most dynamic economic regions in American history are now home to vast communities of color, many of whom migrated to the fringe from the very disadvantaged neighborhoods we previously branded as ghettos or slums.

This attention to the difficult and troubling material reality of some of California's suburban environments is also an attempt to acknowledge Baeten's (2004) important point that the 'deprivation' in particular places is both imagined and very real. There is no doubt that the increasing concern in academic and policy circles



Figure 3 The suburban side of the American dialectic: a new subdivision in Manteca
(Photo: Author)

with suburban poverty is justified, both in the wake of foreclosure and independently. Yet as my analysis shows, many of the ‘slumburbia’ and ‘suburban slum’ articles directly reference or even quote leading academic contributors to the study of struggles in suburbia, even though only one of them ever uses the word slum prominently in his or her writing. As the growth of poverty across broad and diverse swaths of American suburbia appears to be anything but a fly by night phenomenon, this disturbing linkage between destructive language and generally excellent, well-meaning and much needed scholarship forces us to think more deeply about our own use of language, and about some of the pitfalls of a collected body of work too easily grouped as the literature of suburban decline. We are only beginning to ‘place the facts of [suburban] poverty in theoretical frameworks’ (Baeten 2004, 236), and we need to be hyper-aware

that the framework of decline too easily turns poor people into problems, especially in a 21st-century media environment where the lines between research and rhetoric are so thin.

Welcome to slumburbia

‘NELSON: We’re seeing a lot of the phenomenon that we’re calling now “slumburbia”, which is basically ...

WILLIS: What is that? Yeah, I saw that. I’ve never seen that word before. What does that mean?

NELSON: Yeah, I don’t know if you’re going to find it in the dictionary just yet, but “slumburbia” is the term we’re using to refer to, basically the result of all this overbuilding that happened in a lot of the suburbs that are fairly far away from major metropolitan cities. So, all of those homes were build, they’re new—newish, they’re very nice, but they’re kind of ghost towns because most of the people

who bought them took short-term, adjustable rate mortgages at the same time, they all reset at the same time and they all ended up in foreclosure at the same time.’ (Transcript of CNN’s *Open House*, 10 May 2008 [published online in print form])

As foreclosures mounted in late 2007 and early 2008, with ‘REO’¹ and ‘Bank-owned’ signs dotting dying lawns in record numbers, writers, researchers and advocates rushed to chronicle what was clearly shaping up to be one of the biggest challenges to American neighborhoods since the waves of urban abandonment a generation ago. Plywood increasingly appeared on commercial and residential windows alike, and stories of graffiti, arson and the stripping of houses began to multiply.

The cold turkey nature of the imploding real estate bubble and subsequent foreclosure crisis certainly helped—this was no slow death but a collapse so rapid and so intense that it brought the international financial system to its knees.² Yet as Lehman Brothers, credit-default swaps and bailouts fought for international attention alongside a historic election, the true epicenter of this crisis was somewhat obscured. Although the first wave of foreclosures hit hard in 2006, and advocates and researchers—many of whom had been calling attention to the singular or combined dangers of subprime lending, segregation and a housing bubble for some time—immediately began calling attention to the problem,³ public focus and political debate remained generally focused on the financial crisis perpetrated by the subprime disaster. It was not until 2008 that the wave of reports, scholarship and commentary began to capture *media* attention as to the deeper impact the crisis was having on neighborhoods and communities, that this was not just about Wall Street or Main Street, but about Elm Street, that quintessential American street found in cities and towns across the metropolis. And it certainly was a nightmare.⁴

Through a detailed analysis of media conducted over six months in 2010, using

Google™ and two subscription news services, LexisNexis and Access World News, which collectively cover most major US English language papers, magazines and even occasional TV broadcasts which are subsequently transcribed, I searched for all appearances of ‘slumburbia’, ‘suburban slum’, ‘suburban blight’ and their grammatical variants. These were then categorized and coded according to source type, geography, tone, internal links to other articles in the collection and references to policy and academic literature. Duplicates were discarded but noted, in order to understand how one article on the subject was picked up and spread virally through modern media distribution systems. The content analysis led to other terms—‘ghost towns’, ‘gated ghettos’—31 separate articles in all, mostly from mainstream newspapers and magazines, including multiple prominent national or nationally read publications (*New York Times*, *CNN*, *MSN Real Estate*, *CBSNews.com*, *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *GOOD*, *The Los Angeles Times*), an influential article in the UK’s *Guardian* and even a mention in Australia, all between early 2008 and late 2010. Unsurprising in the Internet age, these publications constantly linked to each other and referenced each other, both through online editions of newspapers, and blogs and aggregators such as Gawker and Synthesis.net. Some add little original content of their own, essentially reporting on reporting, seemingly more interested in using the term ‘slumburb’ than in learning more about struggling suburbs and the people in them.

Although there are odd references to ‘slumburb’ online in the late 1990s and an entry on urbandictionary.com in 2004, it is the emergence of ‘slumburbia’ in a column by Carol Lloyd (2008) of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in March 2008 which seems to have launched a dozen articles. Her column, entitled ‘Is Suburbia Turning into Slumburbia?’, was picked up in the blogosphere, linked to by dozens of news aggregators and eventually ended up in Timothy Egan’s

(2010) column for the *New York Times*—where it has then been picked up by other newspapers.

Yet behind the Lloyd article is the fact that the column is written in response to the single most important article in the ‘slumburbia’ discourse—a March 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article by University of Michigan Planning Professor and Brookings Institution Fellow Christopher Leinberger entitled, aptly, ‘The Next Slum?’ The subtitle of the article leaves little doubt as to the legacy Leinberger and the *Atlantic Monthly* are consciously tapping into: ‘The subprime crisis is just the tip of the iceberg. Fundamental changes in American life may turn today’s McMansions into tomorrow’s tenements.’ This is not just about subprime, Leinberger argues, but about the larger reversal of the suburbanization process, a pendulum swinging where affluent Americans will choose walkable ‘urban’ neighborhoods, leaving ‘... many low-density suburbs and McMansion subdivisions, including some that are lovely and affluent today, [to] become what inner cities became in the 1960s and ’70s—slums characterized by poverty, crime, and decay’.

The article spread like wildfire, leading to a slew of articles, blog posts and columns in the spring of 2008, and it has now been cited by 25 separate books, academic papers and reports.⁵ Yet though he does not shy away from the language of decline, neither he, nor Arthur Nelson, a University of Utah planning professor whose work provides the social scientific backbone to Leinberger’s claims of suburban decline and has played a similarly influential role in media articles about the subject since 2008, use the term ‘slumburbia’.⁶ This seems to be an invention of the media, inspired and empowered as they may be by Leinberger. That does not stop the *Guardian* from postulating that the term ‘slumburbia’ must necessarily stem from the expertise of an ‘analyst’, or for one blogger to implicate experts when opining that ‘the sprawling suburbs in their outlying areas are quickly heading for what

some Urban Planners [sic] are deeming Slumburbia, the type miserable crime-infested living conditions usually associated with inner-cities’ (Taylor 2008). The link he uses to implicate ‘urban planners’ is the Lloyd article, not a missive from the American Planning Association. Even in this digital age where ideas and concepts are even more unmoored from their traditional sources of validity and increasingly taken uncritically, this is troubling.

However, the links to academic and professional knowledge production are only one aspect of the problematic nature of this new discourse. As one can glimpse in the words of Leinberger and the quotes from media sources throughout this paper, the slumburbia discourse is rooted in the deeper history of the city/suburb dialectic, a dialectic constructed in part by utopian and dystopian ideas and sadly reinforced by the very idea of a ‘slumburb’.

Dueling dialectics

‘The full onset of the mortgage foreclosure crisis, coupled with demographic changes, rising fuel prices and a host of other factors means that the suburbs could be on the way out. One analyst has postulated a future in which the suburbs, which once promised so much domestic happiness, are transformed into the new slums, with rampant crime fuelled by poverty and decay. The term “slumburbia” was not far behind.’

(D. Glaister, ‘There Goes the Neighbourhood: Mortgage Crisis sees Suburbs Slump’, *Guardian*, 28 April 2008)

The role of utopian and dystopian thought in urban thinking has received a great deal of attention over the past few decades, from Fishman’s (1982) account of early modernist urbanists to Harvey’s (2000) struggles to find hope amidst the ruins of capitalist urbanization, from Merrifield’s (2000) Berman-esque dalliance with Mumford, Jacobs, Marx and Dostoevsky to MacLeod and Ward’s (2002, 153) examination of the

'intensely uneven patchwork of utopian and dystopian spaces' of the contemporary metropolis. The reasons behind the ongoing waves of interest in dys/utopian urbanism are numerous, but my interest here stems from the ongoing truth of Faulkner's (1951, 80) maxim that 'the past is never dead, it's not even past'. As Guy Baeten (2002a, 103) noted in this journal, 'the 21st century urban dystopia'—especially in regards to the growing metropolises of the global south—'is fuelled by the resurrection of the 19th-century notions of the "underclass" and "orientalist" constructions of urban deprivation and the urban deprived'.⁷

Even if it has been muted over the past half-century by the ascension of policy analysis and the tentative diggings of contemporary social science, much of the foundational work in urban thought either directly or indirectly engaged with the utopian/dystopian city—not just Fishman's (1982) design-oriented trifecta of Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright but Engels, Weber, Wirth, Burnham, Mumford and Jacobs as well. My argument is not about the prevalence or importance of utopianism, but rather that this ongoing duel between utopian and dystopian visions has been constructed discursively, at least in the American context, through the defining dialectic of the past century of American metropolitan thought—the city versus the suburb.

Following Nicolaides (2006), one can perceive a metropolitan and historical pattern to the spaces of utopia and dystopia over the past 150 years. Early American urbanism, whether drawing from the pure anti-urbanism of Jefferson, Emerson and Thoreau to the more European-style ambivalence of Robert Park and Louis Wirth or the muckraking journalism of Upton Sinclair and Jacob Riis, 'hell', to use Nicolaides' language, clearly lived in the city (White and White [1962] 1977; Beauregard 1993; Nicolaides 2006). In direct response to this came the suburban utopians, Howard's Garden City and Wright's Broadacre City, powerful imaginations of a utopia

specifically designed to counter and undo the city by building a new 'city' in the suburbs (Fishman 1982).

These dueling conceptions with markedly different locations held strong through World War II, and helped to cement the transformation of the dominant European urban dialectic of city/pastoral, under which writers like Emerson and Thoreau very much operated, into the city/suburb dialectic which remains today. But the hegemonic conception of urban hell and suburban paradise would not hold in the face of mass suburbanization and the actual destruction of the American city. During the first 20 years of mass suburbanization following World War II, as the postwar expansion of the suburbs increasingly made this new form of life available to the white middle and working classes, a counter-narrative to the suburban ideal grew amidst a diverse array of Eisenhower-era social critique. From William Whyte's (1956) *Organization Man* to Peter Blake's (1964) *God's Own Junkyard*, from feminist critiques of the female domesticity of the single-family house to the combined Mumford/Jacobs indictment of homogeneity and dullness, the reaction to Ozzie and Harriet America was swift and fierce (Mumford 1961; Jacobs 1961).⁸ As Becky Nicolaides (2006) has so keenly observed, America had discovered a new dystopia in a different location.

Yet it is critical to carry Nicolaides' argument one step forward and one step back. First, the creation of new suburban dystopias required the imagination, or reimagination, of a utopia back in the old hell of the city, often through the same thinkers. Again, functioning dialectically, Jane Jacobs' (1961) vision of suburbs as places lacking tolerance or diversity is superseded in our imagination by her more famous vision of an idealized and semi-utopian 'sidewalk ballet' in a diverse, energetic and eclectic city filled with a mix of old buildings and interesting characters. Mumford's urban ideal was more nostalgic—if he vilified the postwar suburb as a perversion of Howard's ideal, he had no love for

the modern urban center. Rather, *à la* Weber, he harkened back to an imagined medieval urban for his alternative urban utopia.⁹ Secondly, although the location of dystopian visions may have moved from city to suburb, the critical language did not. The specter of the ‘slum’ and the omnipresent ‘blight’—or as Rebecca Solnit (2002, 43) calls it, ‘the magical word of urban renewal’—remained behind in the city, reinforcing the imaginary line between city and suburb.

Despite all this, the American metropolis never stopped changing, and by the 1970s and 1980s scholars began to take note of a slow but steady undoing of this operating dialectic. Emerging literatures on gentrification (cf. Smith 1982; Zukin 1982; Beauregard 1985; Ley 1986; Smith and Williams 1986), African American suburbanization (cf. Schnore, Andre, and Sharp 1976; Rose 1976; Clay 1979; Lake 1981; Kain 1985) and decentralized employment centers (cf. McDonald 1984; Nelson 1986; Cervero 1986) merged with earlier concerns about the ‘exploding metropolis’ (Whyte [1993] 1958) and the need for regional governance to signal a more nuanced and holistic view of the American metropolis. The LA School of urban geography helped lead a formal attempt to rethink and rename metropolitan geography in the face of post-Fordist production and rapid demographic shifts (cf. Soja 1989; Scott 1993; Scott and Soja 1996; Flusty and Dear 1999). Revisionist historians emerged en masse over the past decade to inform us that not only were the current suburbs changing, but that our conception of suburbia was always wrong—the dialectic was never based on empirical reality (Wiese 1999, 2004; Nicolaides 2002; Kruse and Sugrue 2006). When 1990s scholarship chronicling the changing geography of poverty (Frey and Fielding 1995; Madden 1996) was reinforced by another decade of a continuing trend and even more scholarship (Lucy and Phillips 2001; Orfield 2002; Berube and Frey 2002; Frey 2003), some felt that the city/suburb dialectic was dead.

The problem with this logic is that it assumes that popular discourse follows academic thought. As is evidenced by the slumburb discourse, the old city/suburb dialectic is still very much in operation outside the halls of academe (and at times inside as well), despite the best efforts of a generation of scholars to undermine what approaches the status of modern popular urban episteme. The intense process that was the production of the 20th-century American metropolis—the racialized suburbanization, urban renewal and redlining, the ideology of homeownership and the creation of a property-based ‘American Dream’—was so formative to how we think about space and place that the dialectic remains ingrained. It has become an apparatus, not primarily for determining scientific thought as Foucault (Foucault and Gordon 1980) would define it, but rather for determining many of the possibilities of popular thought.¹⁰ This does not mean that the dialectic continues just as it was, but following Elliot and Mosley (2002) it is merely flipped and reversed—the suburb becomes the slum, not simply a dullish hell different from the city but the worst of urban dystopia reborn in a new geography. Either way, it reinforces an old idea we have been fruitlessly attempting to leave behind, an idea produced through the power of discourse.

The power of discourse

‘Is Suburbia Turning into Slumburbia?’
(C. Lloyd, headline, *San Francisco Chronicle*,
14 March 2008)

At the heart of the constantly reproduced city/suburb dialectic is the power of words to determine action, and few words contribute as much to this particular dialectic as the notions of slum and blight and ghetto. This manifests itself in two ways in the urban world, one technical/legal and one conceptual, the combination of which should raise alarm bells for any student of urban history. Blight has a technical definition in redevelopment law in many states, and both blight and

slum remain a part of the lexicon of federal urban policy under the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.¹¹ It remains the ‘magical word’ of urban renewal, albeit under the kinder and gentler notion of redevelopment—in California, for example, redevelopment is triggered by a declaration of blight codified under Public Health and Safety Law (§33000–34160).¹² It is a declaration which can include everything from high crime rates to poor community facilities, from high rates of business vacancies to overcrowding. Blight can even result from ‘depreciated or stagnant property values’ (§33031(b)(1)—a condition which describes huge swaths of working class and newly built suburbs across California and the USA.

This is an observation not lost on Leinberger. In a 2009 article in the *Washington Examiner* (Myers and Sherfinski 2009) entitled, ‘Bedroom Community Blues: Foreclosure Crisis Creating Suburban Slums’, Leinberger posits his own definition of slum which correlates strongly to property values. ‘When the market value is less than replacement, there’s no incentive to put the next dollar into a house. That’s the definition of a slum.’ This is a marked departure from the operational definition of slum used by the 2003 UN Habitat report, which focused almost exclusively on conditions and security of tenure (UN Habitat 2003, 12). In Marxian terms, Leinberger’s definition is based on exchange value, the United Nations’ based on use value—a most critical difference.

Conceptions of blight and slum do important work to determine both action and inaction beyond their legal and quasi-technical definitions. Much of the concern in the literature surrounding dystopian language revolves around how it can offer, spur or justify both state and market action that results in displacement, devaluation and delegitimization of people, places and communities. Beauregard, in his masterful *Voices of Decline* (1993), uses two operational definitions of discourse, both of which have relevance here. The first draws from Geertz and Sussman, and sees discourse

as a catch-all, a receptacle of contradictions and ambitions, using Geertz’s (1973, 5) notion of a ‘web of significance’. They become terms with great short-term political power and incredible socio-spatial impact, and their power lies in their ability to gather together seemingly disparate groups and ideas into what I call a *discursive coalition* in order to determine specific actions and policies, to both wield power and be wielded by the powerful. Slum and blight in an earlier generation became lightening rods for urban renewal policy, merging age-old concerns about inadequate housing and the deplorable living conditions with urban boosterism, concern about the impacts of suburbanization on central city real estate, the need for a renewed urban tax base and an utter disregard for the rights of African Americans. They did not become magic words overnight, but as Beauregard has shown, were slowly made such by both popular and expert sources, often in conversation, over a period of years—hence my sensitivity to their current deployment in the wake of yet another sub/urban crisis.

The coalescent power of discourse has a flip side, one which Beauregard similarly recognizes and which is of equal or greater importance when it comes to the current crisis in suburbia. Drawing from Foucault, Beauregard points to the role of discourse to dismantle and construct meaning, and from Hayden White the idea that discourse constitutes modes of comprehension and legitimate facts. This is the frightening and more hidden power of discourse, less in forming coalitions and more in subtle and hardened Foucauldian *epistemes*, or *discursive formations* which ‘mediate among the choices made available to us, the values we collectively espouse, and our ability to act’ (Beauregard 1993, 5). These formations close us off to possibilities, or to use a term perfectly suited to the moment, they foreclose upon new ways of thinking about class and race over space and place, about how and for whom and where we built cities. Reaching back for old terminology to

describe a new condition in a new place is a weak attempt to avoid what Judith Butler would call a 'crisis in ontology' (1999, xi)—that more fundamental reconsideration required by deeper change.

The combined conceptual and legal power of urban discourse can be a slippery slope. Talking about slums and blight have a remarkable way of leading to decisions by the state, with the support of capital and often civil society concerned with 'doing good', to demolish what it—often knowingly—failed to prevent, and evict those who were victims of a failed system. We saw this throughout the history of urban renewal in the USA, and now see this history repeating itself in new geographies of the global south (Gilbert 2007; Ghertner 2008).

Moreover, when used in the urban context, there is a spatiality to discursive formations which are particularly problematic, in that they not only foreclose the possibilities of a more fundamental rethinking, but that they locate the problem in a particular community, implicating those living and working there regardless of their relationship to the root causes of the problem. Again, as Beauregard reminds us,

‘The genesis of the discourse is not the entrenchment of poverty, the spreading of blight, the fiscal weakness of city governments, and the ghettoization of African-Americans, but society’s deepening contradictions. To this extent, the discourse functions to site decline in the cities. It provides a spatial fix for more generalized insecurities and complaints, thereby minimizing their evolution into a more radical critique of American society.’
(Beauregard 1993, 6)

Nowhere is this ‘spatial fix’ more apparent than California.

Californication¹³

‘The California dream is dead. Long live the California dream.’ (P. Ornstein, ‘The Coast of Dystopia’, *New York Times Magazine*, 15 January 2010)

The new dystopian language is remarkable for having two distinct geographies. Major local dailies in nine different states (California, New York, Florida, Washington, Virginia, Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and North Carolina) ran stories using this language, yet the focus of the national media was primarily on California.¹⁴ But then California has long been the center of our national imagination about the future urban world, and not solely because it was the cinematic center of the world. California has been an early and consistent innovator in urban form, finance and fencing—the late 19th-century invention of zoning to exclude the Chinese, Los Angeles’ developer-driven streetcar sprawl in the early part of the 20th century, blue-collar Lakewood and the post-war, mass produced suburb (the second after Levittown), suburban-driven property tax revolts in 1978, gated communities and ‘fortress’ urbanism, and even the subprime mortgage debt which helped produce the foreclosure crisis in the first place (Loeb 2001; Weiss 1987; Davis 1990; Bardhan and Walker 2010).¹⁵

So perhaps it should not be surprising that talk of ‘gated ghettos’, suburban ‘ghost towns’ and ‘slumburbia’ should originate here as well.¹⁶ If there is a center of the new dystopia, it is Southern California’s Inland Empire¹⁷ and the eastern edges of the San Francisco Bay Area, a stretch of marshy farmland and exurban residential landscape stretching from Modesto (Figure 4) in the



Figure 4 A billboard in Modesto, California
(Photo: Author)

south to the southern suburbs of Sacramento like Elk Grove. It is here, in the old farm towns, industrial suburbs and railroad stops which morphed over three decades into cities as large as 125,000 people, that this renovated dystopian urbanism is being laid on thick by the national and international media—*Newsweek's* (2009) 'Slums of Suburbia' takes place in Manteca, the *New York Times'* Timothy Egan (2010) visits Lathrop, the *Guardian* (Glaister 2008) 'travels' to Elk Grove and the *Los Angeles Times* (Semuels 2010) to Stockton and Tracy.

Once again, there is a logic here—not only is the crisis severe in this stretch of the Central Valley, but it is new. Elk Grove went from being the fastest growing city in the USA in 2004–2005 to a foreclosure rate (2.47%) three and a half times the state average (0.69%) and almost 10 times the national average (0.28%) in 2009 (United States Census Bureau 2006; City of Elk Grove, California 2009). Brentwood went from being the fastest growing city in California for much of the 1990s to the 'poster child for [the] housing bust' by 2008 (Temple 2008; Heredia 1998). It was not supposed to happen here—this was not Oakland or Watts, Detroit or New Orleans, speculative Florida or wild Las Vegas, but the edge of one of the most powerful regional economies in human history, home to the Silicon Valley tech miracle and a region with the highest median household income of any region in the country in 2000.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by the third quarter of 2007, the Stockton and Sacramento metropolitan statistical areas (MSA), which include Lathrop, Tracy, Manteca and Elk Grove, ranked first and fifth, respectively, in foreclosure filings per household. In the Stockton MSA, foreclosures hit one in every 27 households.

As of 2012, foreclosure rates in the area are still far above state and national average, and just a fraction of the wealthier core of the region to the west. Every city which saw rapid growth has seen its average home value cut at least in half from the 2006 peak, and closer to two-thirds in most cases.¹⁹ Yet

what is truly troubling is how far they have fallen in regards to other, wealthier communities at the core of the region. Compared to core areas in San Francisco or wealthier suburbs like Danville, these exurban locales have lost virtually every penny they have gained in value over the past two decades, dramatically increasing the already widening gap between wealthy core and struggling periphery.

The real estate crash has left huge numbers of borrowers underwater, shackled to homes they cannot sell or with credit scores so damaged by foreclosure they can only hope to rent—assuming their prospective landlord does not perform a credit check, as many now do. In the highly constrained fiscal environment that is post-Proposition 13 California,²⁰ many of these cities now teeter on the brink of insolvency, hammered by plummeting property taxes and caught between a budget overly dependent on now dormant development fees and a commercial and industrial base that has not kept pace with the wealthier core (Schafran, 2013). These were house-rich and job-poor cities which bet on a growth machine that seemingly would not end, but which ultimately failed spectacularly.

There is also the pesky matter of demographics, and their unfortunate relationship to the new discourse of dystopia. The dramatic growth that these cities experienced over the past two decades brought an incredible diversity to what had largely been small-town America, with black, Latino and Asian households joining the ranks of homeowners and exurban citizens in record numbers. Some of this growth was blue-collar, some were low-income households receiving federal housing assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher Program, many were immigrants and first-time homeowners.²¹ It was a demographic shift driven in part by a longer term pattern of the suburbanization of the poor and communities of color, by homeownership opportunities on the fringe, job growth in the suburbs, and gentrification and rising housing prices in

the core (Lucy and Phillips 2001; Hanlon, Vicino, and Short 2006; Nelson 2009).

The end result is that cities like Manteca are roughly half white, half non-white; in Elk Grove and Antioch, it is more like 60% non-white.²² Yet rather than ask ourselves how as a society we have once again consigned communities of color to bear the brunt of our metropolitan restructuring—the foreclosure crisis has already produced ‘the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in recent U.S. history’ (Rivera and United for a Fair Economy 2008, p. v)—we instead deploy the pejorative language of dystopia, labeling these new locales as ghettos, blighted and slums. Many families from places we have previously labeled as ghettos bought into this new suburban dream on the fringe in the hope of a better life with less crime and functioning schools. Some overextended themselves financially to do this, taking on bad debt or simply too much of it; some were extremely prudent, buying in early at a level they could afford only to see the market collapse and take their equity (and perhaps nest egg) with it. Not only are they now facing a personal crisis in a struggling community, society has now consigned them back to the very place which they had worked so hard to escape.

A crisis of representation

“They were interested in building the city of tomorrow”, Anglickis said as he steered his SUV through an area he called “little Baghdad” for its bombed-out appearance. “The next guys were just interested in cashing a check.” (K. Hundley, ‘Lehigh Acres: Florida’s Lesson in Unregulated Growth’, *St Petersburg Times*, 9 August 2009)

The language of urban decay is not the only linguistic newcomer to the suburban fringes; so too has the urban metaphor, the use of certain famed metropolises to stand in for a particular phenomenon. Whether Baghdad, Detroit or New Orleans, we know that these cities mean ‘destruction’, and so we

use them as quick references, a touch of socially acceptable hyperbole designed to make a point. In cities like Antioch and Brentwood, there is a more pernicious version of metaphor, the use of nearby cities Oakland and Richmond to stand in for race and poverty and crime, a way of saying without speaking, ‘if you know what I mean’.

The use of specific cities as metaphors for destruction and/or racialized euphemisms is simply another example of the ongoing crisis in how we speak and write and think about the contemporary problems of American urbanism. Even if some of the problems laid out in the media coverage are perhaps overblown—for instance, crime rates in the new ‘slums’ of exurban Northern California do not appear to have shifted dramatically vis-à-vis state and regional averages—to ignore rising unemployment, abandonment, racial tensions, gang problems, poverty rates and fiscal deficits is unacceptable. Suburban poverty rates have risen from parity with central cities in 2000 to outpacing central cities in 2008 by 1.5 million (Kneebone and Garr 2010b). When combined with increased racial, ethnic and national origin diversity (Frey 2003; Orfield 2002; Singer 2003), the future of American suburbs writ large is clearly going to be different from its past, both real and imagined.

Scholarship with regards to suburban poverty has similarly grown significantly over the past decade.²³ While a major focus of the more sociological and policy-oriented literature has been on social service provision in newly poor suburban regions (Murphy 2010; Kneebone and Garr 2010a; Allard and Roth 2010; Allard 2004), geographers have honed in on struggling inner-ring suburbs, often through a lens of ‘decline’, examining the challenges of increased poverty and diversity in the face of ageing infrastructure and fiscal constraint (Orfield 2002; Hanlon, Vicino, and Short 2006; Short, Hanlon, and Vicino 2007; Vicino 2008a, 2008b). Berube and Frey (2002) work to contextualize the process as part of the larger changes at the regional level, pointing to decreasing

poverty levels in core downtown areas—and linking gentrification to the suburbanization of poverty.²⁴ There is some debate about whether the focus should necessarily be on older, inner-ring suburbs in the Midwest and northeast, as advocated by Madden (2003) amongst others. Holliday and Dwyer (2009) counter this rust belt geography with an argument for recognition of the more varied forms of suburbanized poverty, especially in communities with large Latino communities.

It is clear that the challenges facing suburbs and suburban residents, both now and in the future, are very real, and we have an obligation to see that these issues are part of a vigorous public discussion. The answer is not some Joel Kotkin-esque defense of suburbia, which merely denies problems and even more problematically works to maintain the city/suburb dialectic both intellectually and politically (Kotkin 2010). Nor should we be sanguine about the ease with which we can possibly find a ‘harmless’ way of speaking about difficult problems in difficult times. Leaving behind the poisonous and loaded language of slum and blight would be an excellent first step, but all language has consequences, and as fallible humans in an increasingly sensitive and interconnected era, we will make errors beyond our control.

Part of the challenge is that the production of the contemporary suburban dystopia is being created through the combined but generally uncoordinated efforts of academics, professional journalists, columnists and bloggers, that discursive mash-up powered by the digital age which is slowly transforming our public intellectual space. It is akin in many ways to the complex new realities of visuality and the possibilities and responsibilities of visual urban representation which partially prompted a two-part feature on *The Wire* in these pages (Atkinson and Beer 2010), save that the issue is headlines in hypertext rather than images in HD. This is a product of what Simon Parker calls ‘Sociology 2.0’, ‘sociology by the public’, and is undoubtedly a product more of the ‘screen world’ than ‘the

Gutenberg galaxy’ (Parker 2010, 493, citing McLuhan 1967).

While modern media technology has opened the doors to new forms of sharing and collaboration, it can also make people lazy. The *Guardian* ‘article’ seems to have been written from afar, basically after a reading of Leinberger’s work, as were other pieces that stemmed from his essay. A few good quotes from locals plus a picture or two of decay plus some statements from a few researchers do not equal quality journalism. It does not have to be this way—both Alana Semuels’ (2010) investigation in the *Los Angeles Times* about the economic roots of the crisis in the San Joaquin Valley (this is not just about foreclosures but deindustrialization and economic restructuring) and Paul Reyes’ (2008) brilliant work in *Harpers* about the on the ground materiality of the crisis rely not on hyperbole or over-used metaphors but on old fashioned fieldwork and investigation. As Thomas Morton (2009) so wisely points out, there is a parallel in the inner city, where lazy journalists exploit Detroit’s misery with cool pictures of ‘ruin porn’, rarely digging into the complex reality that is contemporary Detroit. Wyly’s (2010, 503) argument for the need for some serious ‘epistemic honesty’ with regards to photojournalism extends to language as well, to both caption and photograph.

When seen through the lens of both the history of American urbanism and the ways in which this new discourse was created, two interlinked conclusions stand out. The first is that as academics and researchers we must do an even better job engaging in public discourse now that the space and pace of ideas has changed. Our work will be picked up by the news media and the blogosphere—if we are either lucky or very good or have a good publicist—and we bear some responsibility for how it is used. One article entitled ‘Suburbs—Our New Slum?’ (Villano 2009) quotes not only Leinberger and Nelson but prominent scholars George Galster, Ed Goetz and the Brookings’ Alan

Berube—none of whom talk about suburbs in this way but yet are dragged into the mire. We can demand of those that quote us, if not a more nuanced and better researched article, at least the omission of certain harmful concepts. Even better is to engage in this new public intellectual realm ourselves, exploring new forms of hybrid writing and visual representation to expose problems in ways that do not define whole communities as the problem and which forces us to do some of the deeper rethinking which has been and should be the hallmark of scholarly work. Academics like Leinberger (2008) and Richard Florida (2002) have recognized the power of new media to reshape public perception, but unfortunately their work seems blind to the impacts their slum talk and ‘creative class’ fetishization can have on communities.²⁵

Secondly, scholars of suburban poverty and the deeper structural problems of the metropolitan fringe should be wary of the concept of ‘suburban decline’. It is all too easy to fall into a means of defining decline based on who lives there, or even worse on who has moved there. Lines like ‘declining suburbs suffer as a consequence of a lack of capital disinvestment and shifts in demographic structure’ (Hanlon and Vicino 2007, 269) in an academic text merge with ‘the burbs are in decline as more poor move out from the cities and more suburbanites struggle to stay in the middle class’ (Villano 2009, headline) to harden the notion that poor people are a problem in and of themselves. Even with exhortations from some of the most ardently critical and progressive academics that ‘suburban decline cannot be explained solely in terms of the supposed deficiencies of new residents’ (Smith, Caris, and Wyly 2001, 497), controversies about the migration of low-income people to the suburbs continue, at times fed by media coverage (Moore 2008; Rosin 2008). I question whether describing a place as declining, especially in the face of demographic shifts that can never be truly separated from physical changes or economic upheaval, is not

just an academic euphemism for slum and ghetto. It functions geographically in the same way, situating decline in suburbs rather than cities, and once again allowing too easy ‘a spatial fix for more generalized insecurities and complaints, thereby minimizing their evolution into a more radical critique of American society’ (Beauregard 1993, 6).

Notes

- 1 Real Estate Owned, a class of property generally owned by the lender, typically a bank or government agency or insurer, after an unsuccessful foreclosure auction.
- 2 If society as a whole did not see this coming, many academics did. For haunting scholarship which is the proverbial writing on the wall, see, for example, Wyly and Hammel (2004), Immergluck and Smith (2004), Newman and Wyly (2004), Case and Shiller (2003), Squires and Kubrin (2005) and Lanzerotti (2006).
- 3 The work of scholars like Carr (2007) and Immergluck and Smith (2006) (amongst many others) and groups like the Center for Responsible Lending sounded the alarm early.
- 4 It should be noted that foreclosure and subprime lending had been a problem in communities of color for decades. Early scholarship by scholars including Green and von Furstenberg (1975) and subsequent work including Quercia and Stegman (1992), Lauria and Baxter (1999), Squires (2002, 2003) and Taylor, Silver, and Berenbaum (2004) were part of a large body of scholarship clearly documenting the depths of the subprime problem and its links to race. Not only did the political establishment largely fail to act despite clear and decades-long impacts of ‘predatory lending’ in communities of color, national attention commenced when foreclosures began to impact white and middle-class communities.
- 5 Google scholar search conducted 5 October 2010 and verified for duplicates.
- 6 Nelson, despite being quoted in numerous articles about ‘suburban slums’, never seems to use the language himself, although analysis of his entire 40-page CV was not possible. Rather, he is generally quoted about his research showing a dramatic overbuilding of large-lot ‘McMansions’ and increases in suburban poverty.
- 7 Ironically, the epitome of Baeten’s ‘hypochondriac geographies’ is Mike Davis’ (2004) *Planet of Slums*, which comes out one year after Baeten’s two articles on the subject.

- 8 *Ozzie and Harriet* was a 1950s and 1960s American sitcom which depicted an idealized American family life.
- 9 Nostalgic utopian urbanism is a powerful American trend in itself, epitomized by New Urbanism's 'neo-traditional design', which blends semi-urban design features with generally suburban settings.
- 10 Foucault's idea of episteme evolved from its original conception in the *Order of Things* ([1965] 2002) to his brief but powerful reconsideration in *Power/Knowledge* (Foucault and Gordon 1980), but throughout he is primarily concerned with scientific knowledge and knowledge production connected to systems of power.
- 11 CDBG is currently the largest source of federal monies for urban development in cities, and is a successor to the infamous urban renewal programs of the post-war era. Sections 570.208 and 570.480 of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development regulations which govern CDBG under the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act explicitly list 'activities which aid in the prevention or elimination of slums or blight' as eligible recipients of CDBG monies (24 CFR Ch. V. § 570.208 (b)) The definition of blight and slums is left to local jurisdictions.
- 12 An excellent summary of important sections of redevelopment law as they apply to blight is provided by Public Health Law and Policy at http://www.barhii.org/programs/download/redevelopment_law.pdf
- 13 This section is based in part on extensive fieldwork conducted from 2007 to 2010 in Eastern Contra Costa County and the Northern San Joaquin Valley.
- 14 Of the 31 articles, 14 concerned California, including most of the pieces by the national outlets—*Newsweek*, *CNN* (twice), *CBSNews.com*, *New York Times* (twice), *MSN Real Estate*.
- 15 Calabasas-based Countrywide Savings was the largest mortgage lender at the peak of the bubble, issuing 20% of the nation's mortgages; IndyMac Bank of Pasadena was one of the first major casualties of the crisis when it became the third largest bank failure in US history (it is now fourth, following the Washington Mutual failure, a failure brought on in part because it gorged itself on Southern California subprime laden banks); Golden West/World Savings of Oakland was the largest originator of adjustable rate mortgages when it was sold to Wachovia, which then had to be taken over by Wells Fargo (Bardhan and Walker 2010).
- 16 The idea of a 'gated ghetto' was at times heard both pejoratively and ironically to describe gated communities before the crisis to refer to the mentality of those communities rather than the material conditions, but there are no suggestions or use in the pioneering work of Blakely and Snyder (1997) or Low (2001, 2003) on gated communities, nor in any other academic work I am familiar with, of the idea of 'gated ghettos' literally meaning poverty in gated communities.
- 17 Riverside and San Bernadino Counties.
- 18 Based on rank of Combined Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) for the 2000 US Census. There is a long literature on the region's wealth, from Brechin's (2006) masterful account of the early origins of San Francisco's global power to Saxenian's (1994) seminal account of the rise of Silicon Valley. Buoyed by defense and infrastructure spending from Washington and the state capital and by constant cycles of innovation and the exploitation of natural resources and finance capital, the region has experienced few major economic downturns over the course of the past century.
- 19 Based on zillow.com's estimates of current values. Estimates of values based on sales prices from DataQuick—another respected real estate data source—indicate a similar pattern.
- 20 Proposition 13 is a 1978 ballot measure which both severely limited property taxes and established a two-thirds majority requirement for virtually all tax increases at both the state and local levels. It has been much studied and much debated. See Coleman (2005) for an excellent primer on California city finance, Barbour (2007) on state-local fiscal conflicts including Proposition 13, and O'Sullivan, Sexton, and Sheffrin (1995) and Schwartz (1997) for just a small portion of the broad literature on the impacts of the proposition.
- 21 Formerly known as Section 8, this federally funded and locally administered program provides low-income households with vouchers that subsidize market rents in private residences, and can under certain conditions be used for homeownership.
- 22 Source: 2006–2008 American Community Survey (ACS). Lathrop and Patterson are too small for ACS estimates.
- 23 For an excellent review of the early suburban poverty literature and its links to the legacy of Herbert Gans and urban sociology as a whole, see Murphy (2007). Murphy's analysis of the thematic variants in the suburban poverty literature has been very influential in my own thinking, and the debt is obvious.
- 24 The question of causality, which includes recent work on job sprawl as a driving force (Raphael and Stoll 2010), hinges in part on an understanding of whether suburban poverty is caused by outmigration of the poor from the inner city or the impoverishment of prior suburban residents. Cooke (2010) argues strongly for the latter explanation, but the issue remains largely unresolved.
- 25 Leinberger's (2008) concern with the poor construction quality of many new suburban spaces, compared to the bricks and mortar industrial city, represents a real concern in terms of its ability to

withstand abandonment. A discussion of Florida is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that my major critique is not the idea that creativity and creative people create innovation and economic growth, but that his normative conclusion is to attract these people from the outside as opposed to building an urban environment which taps into and builds local creativity.

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