

From Ferguson to Irvine: Why Suburban Diversity Matters

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Suburbs are more diverse than their pop-cultural image usually suggests. For just over a decade, New Suburban Historians have worked to analyze working-class owner-built suburbs, industrial suburbs, domestic-service suburbs, black suburbs, Latino suburbs, and trickling-up-from-the-working-class suburbs. This New Suburban History takes a broader metropolitan view, is attentive to regional power dynamics, and refuses to pre-define suburbs as only residential or only white, instead focusing on the entire fascinating range of spaces on the metropolitan fringe. America's suburbs often have a complexly segregated diversity, not one to be simply celebrated. Still, this suburban diversity is a vitally important insight into sprawl and into the stubbornly persistent ways that race and space reinforce each other.

Many of us New Suburban Historians found an odd sort of vindication in the recent public attention to Ferguson, Missouri, after the tragic death of Michael Brown and the impressive protests that followed. As Tom Sugrue wrote, with admirable regret, "Sometimes, I wish my scholarship were not so relevant."¹ It creates an interesting teachable moment because journalists repeatedly label Ferguson a suburb, yet Ferguson does not resemble the typical media image of suburbs. In 2015, Black Lives Matters protests sprang up in many suburbs, from the former suburb of Staten Island, where Eric Garner was choked to death, to the suburban HOA pool in McKinney, Texas, where a police officer tackled unarmed black teenagers. I will focus on Ferguson. Ferguson is not white, not wealthy, not prestigious—and it is a vitally important suburb, illustrating a great deal of 20th-century urban history. In interesting contrast, Irvine, California (the meeting space of the 2015 Western Humanities Conference, where this talk was first delivered) is also a not-quite-white suburb, but it is wealthy and prestigious and, especially in the circulation of credit markets, in some intriguing ways Irvine enables Ferguson.

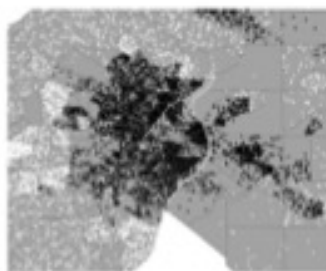
Ferguson reveals a great deal about how race and space have intersected in America. Beginning a century ago, racial covenants and racist realtors steered blacks to particular neighborhoods on the north side of Saint Louis, closer to industry instead of stereotypical suburban amenities. In 1915, the Saint Louis Real Estate Exchange helped pass a referendum limiting certain blocks to "Negro blocks." In 1923, when that law was ruled illegal, realtors worked to create "Negro zones" and barred from their association any realtor who

sold to blacks outside those zones. They established racially restrictive covenants in the 1930s and also encouraged racist neighborhood “protective” “improvement” associations. These private initiatives were reinforced by public policy, especially after the New Deal’s Home Owner Loan Corporation created maps predicting residential property values, maps that we now know as redlining, maps that were self-fulfilling prophecies whose effects have lingered for generations. Colin Gordon reproduces many of these maps in his wonderful digital-history of Saint Louis <http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/map/>.

After 1940, when Saint Louis residents began moving out of the city at an increased rate, whites had a wide choice of where to settle, while blacks were limited by those racial covenants and racist realtors to industrial suburbs like Ferguson, on the north side of Saint Louis. Urban renewal further disrupted Saint Louis’s urban core from the 1950s onwards, exacerbating white flight as well as also black flight to suburbs that were separate and not equal.²



Home Owner’s Loan Corporation 1940 security ratings of Saint Louis based on Elbring Survey Associates, “Map of Greater Saint Louis” (1940), box 2, City Survey Files, Record of Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, RG 195, National Archives. White areas were designated as the “best” homogeneous areas where property values were predicted to rise. Gray areas were “still desirable.” The hatched areas were “definitely declining” and often lacking racially restrictive covenants, while the crosshatched areas were deemed “hazardous,” often due to “infiltration of a lower grade population,” in the phrases of HOLC. Map courtesy of Colin Gordon.



Colin Gordon created this map of Saint Louis’s white flight in the 1970s based on the U.S. Census of 1970 and 1980 as well as the National Historical GIS database. Each white dot indicates an increase in 50 white persons while each black dot indicates a decrease in white people, revealing the deepening extension of the

racialized residential patterns set earlier in the twentieth century. For more information, see Colin Gordon, Mapping Decline: Saint Louis and the Fate of the American City (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Between 1950 and 1970, 60% of Saint Louis's whites left the city, generally relocating to the western suburbs, while whites also fled from suburbs in the city's northeast and northern neighborhoods, so that the suburbs like Ferguson, north of the city but south of Lindbergh Boulevard (Highway 67) came to be considered "ghetto spillover."³ Ferguson and its neighboring suburbs of Berkeley, Jennings, and Hazelwood are all majority-black suburbs, sometimes referred to as "inner-ring" suburbs, but they do not actually make a ring around Saint Louis. Instead they stretch northwards in a wedge around traditionally industrial, working-class, and African-American neighborhoods. The patterns set a century ago linger as inequality becomes concrete in our buildings.

Suburban historians have long studied the 1948 Supreme Court case, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which overturned racially restrictive housing covenants, after J. D. Shelley's attempt to buy a home just outside of Ferguson, Missouri, on Saint Louis's north side. Shelley helped pioneer Saint Louis's northern suburbs for blacks. Saint Louis historians also know that, in the 1980s, the construction of the St. Louis Airport was a late-stage example of the kind of urban renewal project that displaced many urban residents, so that former residents of the airport area were forced to relocate to Canfield Green, the Ferguson apartment complex outside of which Michael Brown died.⁴

This suburban history matters because many of Ferguson's challenges are suburban, not urban. For example, Ferguson has a poorly trained local police force that does not serve the local populace well. As the Department of Justice's 2015 report revealed, Ferguson police have a history of unconstitutional practices, from using racial slurs to handcuffing people without probable cause and using stun guns without provocation. Repeatedly since Michael Brown's death, county and federal forces have served Ferguson better than its local suburban police, who have failed to de-escalate conflict. Ferguson may be part of a common pattern where newer, diverse suburbanites are governed by older suburbanites who hold on to political power even after many whites have fled that suburb. Ferguson's policing problems are entangled with problems of local government financing, since Ferguson's cash-strapped municipal government was relying on fines and court fees to generate revenue, in what turns out to be a dismayingly common and illegal practice targeting America's suburban poor. Ferguson is not the only suburb that relies on police fines to fill its municipal coffers. In Chicago, as early as 1920, the African American suburb of Specialville became so notorious for levying dubious speeding fines on anyone who drove through there that, to save its reputation, Specialville chose to change its name to Dixmoor—which is still a struggling suburb.⁵

Suburban poverty can be more challenging than urban poverty, because suburbs often lack a diversified tax base, diverse job opportunities, public transportation, an urban infrastructure of social service agencies, or independent media to hold everyone accountable.

Prestige, in the case of suburbs, has a particular, material basis: property values. By drawing a bright line between white and mixed neighborhoods, it was 1930s banking policies and then post-1940s architecture that actually helped consolidate a sense of whiteness in America, bringing Jews and other ethnic Europeans into the fold of white suburbia and the wealth it can create, while leaving African Americans and Latinos out.⁶

One result of this history of suburban prestige is an enormous wealth gap between white families, whose median household wealth is \$111,146, and black and Latino families, whose median household wealth is \$7,113 and \$8,148, respectively: less than 8% of the wealth of white families. This is not entirely about urban history, of course. Some of that wealth gap is due to a gap in educational levels and job opportunities: whites are more likely to be college graduates and also more likely to get well-paying jobs after college. But a large amount of this is due to access to homeownership, along with the generational wealth, rising property values, and educational opportunities that homeownership can bring.⁷

What this racial wealth gap means on the ground is illustrated in the remarkable fact that, in Ferguson's neighboring black suburbs of Normandy and Jennings, fully one in four residents has wages garnished due to unpaid bills. That extreme debt collection is not due to present racism—computer programs administer the wage garnishing—but to the accumulated effects of past racism, as “generations of discrimination have left black families with grossly fewer resources to draw on when they come under financial pressure.” Black Americans who owe a few thousand dollars for a hospital bill or the financial pressures of divorce have tragically few options other than becoming trapped in indebtedness. Unlike white Americans, they cannot simply borrow \$1000 from a family member or friend, because their family members may also be facing wage garnishing due to relatively small but unpaid bills.

Even African Americans who manage to achieve homeownership can find themselves trapped by predatory lending practices. For African American homeowners, the rate of return on investment is only 65% of the rate of return to white homeowners. What this means in Ferguson is that the average home price before Michael Brown's death was only \$66,764; after the protests, average home prices dropped by 46% to \$36,168 and are still declining, even while Ferguson's tax rate is predicted to rise, since Ferguson can no longer collect the 20% of its government budget that it used to derive from court fees.⁸

Michael Brown's high school in Ferguson is named Normandy. Even before Michael Brown hit the news, in 2013, the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* called Normandy “the most dangerous school in the area” because it was underfunded, poorly staffed, and facing daily fights and dismal academic scores.⁹ It is also 98% black. The whites who live in Ferguson choose to send their children to private schools. In 2012, Normandy was one of only three schools in Missouri to actually lose its accreditation, forcing Ferguson to pay millions to bus its students to nearby schools that did not want them. Normandy High is now subject to a state takeover. Michael Brown was one of the unusual students at Normandy who did graduate when more than 40% of his classmates did not—making it even more tragic that, just after graduation, Michael Brown was killed.

What does this have to do with Irvine, though? Unlike Ferguson, Irvine can be seen as a quintessentially bland, upper-middle-class suburb. One of the many websites guiding tourists to popular Orange County filming locations explains: “From ‘Iron Man’ to ‘Transformers’ to various commercials, the go-to location that screams ‘upscale corporate headquarters’ is located in Irvine,” at 52 Discovery near Irvine Center Drive.¹⁰ The median home price in Irvine is \$730,000. Even given the different real-estate markets in California and Missouri, this is still a stark difference in home prices: more than ten times the pre-protest home price in Ferguson and twenty times Ferguson's post-protest home price. Unlike Ferguson, Irvine's schools are

ranked among the top in the state. Irvine does not face the challenges that Ferguson does. It has other challenges: for instance, it is difficult to imagine the protests in Ferguson actually happening in Irvine. Where would people gather; where is the public space?

Irvine's history is not as clearly explained by redlining or white flight. In Orange County, parts of Santa Ana were subject to redlining, while the Los Angeles protests of 1992 prompted Korean flight, but that is not the full story. Orange County was the site of the largest of the large Spanish land grants, later exacerbated by the oligarchical corporate organization of the orange industry, so it still has an extreme wealth gap between landowners and the transnational labor force who serve them. Irvine was one of the last of the large Spanish ranchos to be subdivided (indeed, James Irvine actually acquired his land from three Spanish land grants)—so the current owner of the Irvine Company is the richest real estate developer in the nation.

Instead of the largely binary race relations of Saint Louis, Irvine has the triangular or quadrilateral race relations of the Pacific Rim/Greater Americas borderland.¹¹ Orange County does have issues with policing those of a different race and class: from the police shooting of unarmed, schizophrenic, homeless Kelly Thomas in Fullerton in 2011, to the 1969 Black Panther shooting of a policeman near Sasser Park in Santa Ana, back to the days when posses hunted Mexicans in the canyons. Recently, after the 2007 wildfires, rangers at Irvine Canyon Ranch were surprised to notice that the fires exposed a plaque identifying one oak tree as a “Hangman’s Tree” used on “bandits” from Juan Flores’s “gang” in 1857. The plaque was proudly erected in 1967 by equestrians, but then later forgotten until the fires exposed it.¹² It is remarkable: there is a lynching tree in Irvine, a lynching tree that was once memorialized but then forgotten.

There is much that is forgotten here, in this semi-amnesiac, often contradictory space. In 1936, when 3,000 Latino orange-pickers went on strike, the Orange County sheriff deputized 400 private guards, armed with guns and tear-gas, in a show of force that journalist Carey McWilliams named “fascism in practice.” When McWilliams visited Orange County, he observed, “It is astonishing how quickly social power could crystallize into an expression of arrogant brutality in these lovely, seemingly placid, outwardly Christian communities.”¹³ That is a particularly ominous foreshadowing of the hyper-militarization and racialized policing that we have seen more recently in Ferguson.

After World War II, Orange County drastically increased its tract housing, its military-industrial complex, and its reputation for conservatism. There are important cracks in that conservative reputation: for example, the military actually brought some racial diversity here. Harold Bauduit in Garden Grove, Kazuo Masuda’s family in Fountain Valley, and Dorothy Mulvey in Santa Ana were all members of the military who led the desegregation of Orange County and California, especially after Mulvey successfully took her case for fair housing to the state supreme court. There is a largely forgotten history of progressive protest here, including University of California, Irvine’s vanguard artists and anti-Vietnam protests.

Still, Orange County conservatism has meant, in the built environment, a penchant for privatization. Orange County contains America’s first walled community, Rossmore; first age-segregated community, Leisure World; and first Home Owners Association, in Huntington Beach. Irvine is so privatized that it has one of the largest HOAs in the nation, the Woodbridge neighborhood with 10,000 homes, 35 parks, 48 pools, and 2 manmade lakes. This, too, is connected to the history of race and space. In Orange County, Mondays used

to be “Mexican Day” at municipal swimming pools, the day when Latinos and African Americans were allowed to swim just before the pools were cleaned. In the early 1960s, as civil rights groups successfully protested for the right to use public swimming pools on any day of the week, Orange County’s real-estate developers created the privatized swimming pool known as an HOA, which served to segregate swimmers by class instead of race. America’s current HOA boom began in 1963 in Huntington Beach, when developers had to lobby the federal government for homeowners insurance to cover this new model.

The Federal Housing Association not only agreed to insure the new HOAs, they then promoted HOAs through a series of pamphlets teaching developers how to build these privatized, dense, and profitable spaces. By 1965, Orange County had 10,000 HOA units in 80 developments,¹⁴ even before Irvine’s Woodbridge neighborhood was built in the early 1970s. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development explained in their how-to booklet that, while public ownership of public facilities had been the norm before the early 1960s, public ownership “may encourage heavy public use which can adversely affect the residents of the subdivision [and] would undercut one of the principal attractions of the planned-unit concept”: property values.¹⁵ The public hurts prestige. It was that sort of defensive, market-oriented, and subtly racist privatism that led to the scene in summer, 2015, outside the HOA pool in McKinney Texas.

As one of its first advertisements proclaimed in 1970, Irvine was designed to be a park-like space with white-collar industries. A pigtailed young girl is pictured standing in front of impressive modernist architecture, above these lines of less refined yet fascinating poetry: “If I could wish a place to live, / I’d wish it put somewhere / where grass is green and flowers give / a wonder to the air. // If I could wish my daddy’s work, / I’d wish it neat and clean; / and not where smog and uglies lurk / but more like parks I’ve seen.”¹⁶ The phrase “not where smog and uglies lurk” hints that other suburbs might have factories or factory workers. It is a subtle acknowledgment of spaces like Ferguson.

While Irvine may appear to be nearly the opposite of Ferguson, actually both are non-white suburbs. Ferguson is majority black; Irvine is near-majority Asian. It is 39% Asian, 9% Latino, and only 45% white. That racial difference contributes strongly to the prestige difference, yet in ways that are difficult to untangle.

One of Irvine’s smog-free industries is banking, especially mortgage banking, especially subprime mortgage banking. Irvine was the national center of subprime mortgage lenders—the ones whose predatory lending practices hurt predominantly black, Latino, and female homeowners in spaces like Saint Louis and Ferguson.¹⁷ That is one of the ways the two suburbs are, oddly, tied together. Tracing credit markets is a project that urban historians and business historians are only beginning to do, but it is likely that some of Irvine’s million-dollar houses were paid for by profits made from issuing mortgages to Ferguson’s \$30,000 houses.

In 2008, when Irvine’s 18 subprime lenders imploded, they had to lay off 4,100 people, 2% of Irvine’s workforce, with a ripple effect that left 20% of Irvine office space unoccupied and led CNN Money to call Irvine “subprime’s ghost town.”¹⁸ Yet today, Irvine’s current office vacancy rate is around 10% and it does not feel like a ghost town. Irvine had a quick recovery. Ferguson may not.

That is the difference in prestige. Even before the 2008 subprime meltdown, both spaces had faced challenges funding their local government, but Orange County bounced back so quickly from its 1990s bankruptcy that that bankruptcy is hardly visible here and largely not part of public memory.¹⁹ The wealthy are more permitted to fail.

Ferguson seems to be in a particular downward spiral now, as its property values plummet and many businesses struggle in the wake of the riots. Hearing about Ferguson's \$30,000 homes and state-controlled, failing high school, may make it seem un-suburban, yet it also has the oldest organic farm in Missouri, a popular farmer's market, extensive bike paths, and a large office park that houses, among others, the Express Scripts Corporation, the most profitable firm in Missouri, mailing prescription drugs to health insurance customers.²⁰ Yet it must have taken corporate welfare deals to lure Express Scripts to Ferguson, so that despite its corporate profits, Ferguson's municipal budget still struggles.

The problems Ferguson faces are due to past government policies, from redlining to urban renewal to the more publicized and more recent problems with policing and municipal financing. Therefore, changing government policies may help address these problems. After Michael Brown's death, there have been many conversations about changing the ways police work, starting with installing body cams. There should be more conversations about changing how housing works: capping the mortgage interest tax deduction, better insuring fair lending practices to make up for more than a century of discrimination, authorizing Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac to modify lending policies for struggling homeowners, and more strictly enforcing laws against housing discrimination. Those conversations about housing and home financing relate to conversations about education and municipal financing, because it is clear that Michael Brown was failed by his school before he was ever failed by his police.

Until we begin to see the huge range of suburban spaces in America, we cannot begin to fix their problems. We cannot understand that Irvine's subprime mortgage lenders are connected to Ferguson's struggling homeowners, or see that Irvine's HOAs are connected to the over-policed pools in McKinney, Texas. We cannot see this interrelated system in which some of us have inherited privileges that we did not earn. The built environment actually solidifies inequalities from the past and extends them over generations in ways that make it all the more important to understand now.

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1. Tom Sugrue, Facebook comment to the author, August 2015.
2. See, for example, Bryce Covert, "The Racist Housing Policies that Helped Fuel the Anger in Ferguson," *ThinkProgress*, August 14, 2014, <https://thinkprogress.org/the-racist-housing-policies-that-helped-fuel-the-anger-in-ferguson-ae964b22d05/>.
3. Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: Saint Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), including its terrific accompanying website, <http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/map/>, especially the "race" map for 1970s onwards.

4. Jeffrey Smith, "You Can't Understand Ferguson Without First Understanding These Three Things: Reflections from a Former State Senator from Saint Louis," *New Republic*, August 15, 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119106/ferguson-missouris-complicated-history-poverty-and-racial-tension>.
5. See Elaine Lewinnek, *The Working Man's Reward: Chicago's Early Suburbs and the Roots of American Sprawl* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 155.
6. See my own work on Chicago, as well as George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, as well as Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*.
7. Amy Traub and Catherine Ruetschlin, *The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters*, <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/pdf>, calculates that equalizing homeownership rates across races would reduce the wealth gap by 30%, bringing black wealth up to \$37,561 and Latino wealth up to \$39,226. Equalizing homeownership rate of returns on investment would reduce the wealth gap even more: for every \$1 that whites gain from their investments in homes, blacks gain only \$0.75 and Latinos only \$0.65.
8. Daniel Rivero, "Ferguson home values are plummeting and residents are feeling the pain," *Fusion.net*, March 16, 2015, <http://fusion.net/story/104184/ferguson-home-values-are-plummeting-and-residents-are-feeling-the-pain/>.
9. Elsa Crouch, "Normandy High: The Most Dangerous School in the Area," *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 15, 2013.
10. "OC's Most Popular Filming Locations," CBS Los Angeles, Nov. 22, 2015, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/top-lists/ocs-most-popular-filming-locations/>.
11. I borrow the term triangular/quadrilateral from Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Ground of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).
12. See Elaine Lewinnek, Gustavo Arellano, Thuy Vo Dang, and Michael Steiner, *A People's Guide to Orange County* (Berkeley: U of California Press, under review).
13. Carey McWilliams, "The Citrus Belt," in *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1946) and "The Rise of Farm Fascism," in *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1935).
14. Paul Kinney, *Planned-Unit Development in Orange County* (Fullerton, CA: California State College, 1968), 5. See also Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowners Association and the Rise of Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

15. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Planned-Unit Development with a Homes Association* (GPO, 1965), 52.
16. Irvine advertising booklet, UC Irvine Special Collections.
17. See Laura Gottesdeiner, *A Dream Foreclosed: Black America and the Fight for a Place to Call Home* (Westfield, NJ: Zucotti Park Press, 2013), which identifies subprime as “almost a demographic group.”
18. Chris Isidore, “Welcome to Subprime Ghost Town,” *CNN Money*, March 27, 2008, http://money.cnn.com/2008/03/27/news/economy/irvine_subprime/index.htm?section=money_topstories.
19. The two areas also share high rates of segregation. According to the 2010 census, Saint Louis was the 9th-most segregated metropolitan area in the U.S. Los Angeles was fourteenth on that list, and Orange County did not even count as a metropolitan area. John R. Logan and Brian Stults, “The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis: New Findings from the 2010 Census,” Census Brief Prepared for Project US2010, <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report2.pdf>, 6.
20. See <http://www.iloveferguson.com/ferguson-faqs/>, the reinvest-in- Ferguson nonprofit group founded by Ferguson’s former mayor.

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