

## History 308: Gender and the Suburbs

Professor Jason Petruslis  
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Class hrs: Tu 7 PM-9 PM, King 121  
Office hrs: W 9:30AM-11:30AM, Rice 305

*Picture windows, patios and barbecues, power lawn mowers, the problems of commuting, and the armies of children manning their mechanized vehicles down the sidewalks, are only secondarily facts; primarily they are symbols whose function is to evoke an image of a way of life....Suburbia is the locus of gadgetry, shopping centers, and "station wagon culture"; its grass grows greener, its chrome shines brighter, its lines are clean and new and modern. Suburbia is America in its drip-dry Sunday clothes, standing before the bar of history fulfilled, waiting for its judgment.*

– Bennett Berger, *"The Myth of Suburbia"*

**Course description.** This seminar examines the history of the suburbs in the United States since the mid-19th century, with special attention to gender as it interacts with race, space, and class. Topics include domesticity, ranch houses, segregation, car culture, malls, soccer moms, and teenage boredom. Students will plan and complete a major research project using primary sources and recent secondary sources. Please note that this course counts as an elective for the Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies major.

### Objectives.

- Complete a 15-page independent research project based on original primary research.
  - Read and contextualize primary sources.
  - Analyze and use secondary sources.
  - Frame an inventive historical argument and support it convincingly.
- Communicate research ideas in written and spoken presentations.
- Contribute to the community of the classroom through discussion, posting, and feedback.
- Understand and problematize the suburbs, particularly as they interact with gender.
- Engage as citizens with contemporary and historical issues.

### Required texts.

- Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: Gender, Housing and Family Life* (Revised edition, 2002)
- Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*
- Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*

Additional readings will be posted to the course web site and are also available as library reserves. Please read all assigned reading carefully and critically, and come to class prepared for discussion. Since we will refer to specific examples in the monographs and texts, you must bring the required reading to class.

**Assignments.**

- *Active, thoughtful, and engaged participation* (determines borderline grades): including a weekly, two-paragraph reading response, posted to the course web site by Tuesday at noon.
- *Original research project*: A 15-page research paper on gender and the suburbs, topic subject to my approval. The following assignments are due as postings or emailed soft copies:
  - MON FEB 11, NOON: Suggest three possible paper topics (post)
  - MON FEB 18, NOON: Propose your research question (post)
  - SUN MAR 3, 8 PM: Share a primary document (post)
  - THU MAR 21, 5 PM: Primary and secondary source bibliography (email; 10% of grade)
  - THU APR 11, 5 PM: Introduction and detailed outline (email; 10% of grade)
  - SUN APR 21, 8 PM: Good rough draft for peer review (email; 10% of grade)
  - TUE APR 30 and TUE MAY 7: 10-minute student presentations (in class; 10% of grade)
  - MON MAY 13, 9 AM: Final project (email; 60% of grade)

**Additional details:**

- Academic honesty. Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty are unacceptable, and easy to avoid. Familiarize yourself with Oberlin's [Honor Code](#), and ask me to clarify if you have any questions; ignorance is not an excuse. Per Oberlin honor code requirements, I will refer all suspected academic dishonesty to the appropriate dean. Offenders will receive a zero on the assignment and an F in the class.
- Accommodations. Please let me know about any issues or accommodations (activities, disability, religious, etc) during the first two weeks of class.
- Attendance. You are expected to attend every class session. You must inform me in a timely way if you have an excused absence, including religious holidays or extended/severe illness, which requires a note from the appropriate dean's office. Unexcused absences will result in a penalty of 1/3 grade against your overall grade.
- Communicating with the professor. Office hours are Wednesday, 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM. I am also available to chat immediately after class on Tuesdays. I respond to emails as quickly as possible, and at least once a day during the week. I do not check email regularly on weekends, vacations, or holidays. Email should be treated as business correspondence and composed accordingly.
- Drafts. I am happy to meet with you at any stage of the paper writing process, and will review drafts until the first day of student presentations. I also encourage you to consult with peers and the Writing Center early and often!
- Sources. You may only use academic secondary sources, and may not use Wikipedia-like sources in your essays. Please consult with me if you have questions about a source.
- Technology. There is no "connecting" in class: no phone calls, texts, email or other internet use, or the like. The first infraction will cost 5 percentage points from your overall grade; the second costs an additional 10 percentage points; and so on. If you want to use a computer in class, please request permission from me.

Other policies, including assignment details, will be discussed in class.

## Course schedule

Week of Feb 3: The Suburbs: An American \_\_\_\_\_?

- Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, eds., *The Suburb Reader*, Introduction, pp 1-10
- *Mary and Russel Wright's Guide to Easier Living* (New Revised Edition), Ch 1, "Home Sweet Home" (pp 1-10); Ch 2, "Room to Relax" (pp 11-27); Ch 3, "The Vanishing Dining Room" (pp 28-49), Ch 7, "The Housewife-Engineer" (pp 124-26 and 136-45); "The New Hospitality" (pp 164-68)

Week of Feb 10: Roots of the Suburbs

- **Assignment due, MON FEB 11, Noon: Suggest three possible paper topics (post)**
- Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*

Week of Feb 17: Gendering the Suburbs

- **Assignment due, MON FEB 18, Noon: Propose your research question (post)**
- Dolores Hayden. *Redesigning the American Dream*

Week of Feb 24: Racing the Suburbs

- **In class: Source discussion with Jen Starkey, Oberlin Libraries**
- Andrew Wiese, Ch 3, "Places of Their Own: An African American Suburban Dream," pp 67-93, in *Places of Their Own*
- Arnold Hirsch, "Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War," *Journal of Urban History* (Jan 2000), pp 158-89
- James Wolfinger, "The American Dream – For All Americans?: Race, Politics, and the Campaign to Desegregate Levittown," *Journal of Urban History* 38:3 (May 2012), pp 430-51
- Timothy Fong, Ch 28, "The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California," pp 369-80 in Peter Kivisto and Georganne Rundblad, eds., *Multiculturalism in the United States*
- Optional: Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Ch 9, "Colorblind: Race Relations in the New Towns," pp 184-207, in *Suburban Alchemy*; Michael Jones-Correa, "Reshaping the American Dream: Immigrants, Ethnic Minorities, and the Politics of the New Suburbs," pp 183-204, in Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, *The New Suburban History*

Week of Mar 3: Making a Home

- **Assignment due, SUN MAR 3, 8 PM: Share a primary document (post)**
- Mary Anne O'Boyle, "Recollections" by the owner of a 1909 home, pp 8-9, in Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company*
- Dianne Harris, "Race, Class, and Privacy in the Ordinary Postwar House, 1945-1960," pp 127-56, in Richard Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States*
- Optional: Barbara L. Allen, "The Ranch-Style House in America: A Cultural and Environmental Discourse," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49:3 (Feb 1996), pp 156-65

## Week of Mar 10: Consuming the Suburbs

- Shelley Nickles, “More Is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America,” *American Quarterly* 54:4 (Dec 2002), pp 581-622
- Elizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” *American Historical Review* 101:4 (Oct 1996), 1050-81
- Shane Hamilton, “The Economies and Conveniences of Modern-Day Living: Frozen Foods and Mass Marketing, 1945-1965,” *Business History Review* 77:1 (Mar 2003), pp 33-60
- Walter Hixson, Ch 6, “From the Summit to the Model Kitchen: The Cultural Agreement and the Moscow Fair,” pp 151-184, in *Parting the Curtain*
- Optional: Christine Frederick, [\*Selling Mrs. Consumer\*](#), Sections I-III

## Week of March 17: Imagining the Suburbs

- **Assignment due, THU MAR 21, 5 PM: Primary and secondary source bibliography (email)**
- Eric Hodgins, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, “Possession”
- WD Wetherell, *The Man Who Loved Levittown*, excerpt
- John Cheever, “O Youth and Beauty!”
- Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, excerpt
- Gish Jen, *Typical American*, “The New House”
- JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, excerpt
- Stephanie Coontz, “‘Leave It to Beaver’ and ‘Ozzie and Harriet’: American Families in the 1950s,” in *The Way We Never Were*

## Week of Mar 24: SPRING BREAK

## Week of Mar 31: Classing the Suburbs

- James Duncan and Nancy Duncan, “Aesthetics, Abjection, and White Privilege in Suburban New York,” pp 157-76, in Richard Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States*
- James Duncan and David Lambert, “Landscape, aesthetics, and power,” pp 264-91 in John Agnew and Jonathan Smith, eds., *American Space/American Place*
- Dean Bakopoulos, *Please Don't Come Back from the Moon*, Ch 1 (pp 1-25), Ch 2 (pp 27-31), Ch 3 (pp 33-49), Ch 5 (pp 75-78)
- Mark Gillem, “Homeward Bound: Assessing the Geopolitical Ramifications of Sprawl,” pp 101-15, in Luis Nuno Rodrigues and Sergiy Glebov, eds., *Military Bases*

## Week of Apr 7: Critiquing the Suburbs

- **Assignment due, THU APR 11, 5 PM: Introduction and detailed outline (email)**
- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, pp 1-46 and pp 55-73
- From Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, eds., *The Suburb Reader*, pp 295-97 and 300-05:
  - William Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 1956 (excerpt)
  - Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963 (excerpt)
  - “The Trapped Suburban Mother,” 1961 (image)
  - Jean Pascoe, “Suburban Women’s Lib,” 1973 (excerpt)
- Bennett Berger, “The Myth of Suburbia,” *Journal of Social Issues* (Jan 1961), pp 38-49
- Adam Rome, Ch 3, “Septic-Tank Suburbia: The Problem of Waste Disposal at the Metropolitan Fringe,” pp 87-118, in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*
- David Brooks, “Patio Man and the Sprawl People,” *Weekly Standard* (12 Aug 2002), [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)
- Optional: William H. Whyte, Jr., “[A Plan To Save Vanishing U.S. Countryside](#),” *Life* 47 (17 Aug 1959); John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, pp 1-22

## Week of Apr 14: Politicizing the Suburbs

- Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, Ch 2, “‘A Sleeping Giant is Awakening’: Right-Wing Mobilization, 1960-63,” pp 54-110
- Matthew Lassiter, Ch 13, “Suburban Strategies: The Volatile Center in Postwar American Politics,” pp 327-49, in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment*
- Kevin Kruse, “The Politics of Race and Public Space: Desegregation, Privatization, and Tax Revolt in Atlanta,” *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 31:5 (July 2005), pp 610-33
- Mary Douglas Vavrus, “From Women of the Year to ‘Soccer Moms’: The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Women,” *Political Communication* 17 (2000), pp 193-213
- Optional: David Freund, “Marketing the Free Market: State Intervention and the Politics of Prosperity in Metropolitan America,” pp 11-32, in Kruse and Sugrue, *The New Suburban History*

## Week of Apr 21: LA Story

- **Assignment due, SUN APR 21, 8 PM: Good rough draft for peer review**
- Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*
- Oral history interview, W. Byron Rumford, “[The Fair Housing Bill and Proposition 14, 1963-1964](#)” and “[The Fair Housing Act](#)”; Text of Proposition 14.
- *Optional:* Guy Debord, “[The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy](#)”

## Week of Apr 28: Student presentations (in class)

## Week of May 5: Student presentations (in class)

## FINAL PROJECT DUE MON MAY 13, 9 AM (email)