



Outside Endopolis: Notes from Contra Costa County

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This article remixes a classic Soja essay as a means of grappling with a series of overlapping phenomena that are causes and consequences of contemporary American metropolitan restructuring—the changing geographies of race and class, new/old core periphery relations, the current foreclosure crisis and American neoliberalism, and the reconceptualization of suburbia. While Soja used 1980s Orange County to examine our changing conception of the sub/urban and articulate a postmodern urbanism, this essay uses eastern Contra Costa County, on the edge of the San Francisco Bay region, to consider the meaning of a new set of demographic and discursive changes, and the challenges they pose to overarching theories of the metropolis.

This piece is dedicated to the memory of Iraj Imam, Ph.D. (Urban Planning, UCLA), a true student of Soja and a consummate intellectual.

Scene 1: Eastbound Highway Four

At least San Franciscans concede these places [Silicon Valley, Oakland, Marin, Sonoma, Napa] exist. That is not true for the land beyond the Berkeley and Oakland Hills.

-Joel Garreau, *Edge Cities*

Unlike Edward Soja's "Inside Exopolis: Scenes from Orange County," this story does not begin where it ends (Soja 1992). It begins on the western side of the hills, hard up against the gentrifying shores of the San Francisco Bay. While the communities on the Bay Area's eastern and northeastern fringe have been economically and politically part of the region since the outset, northern California's own Inland Empire has not factored heavily into most visitors' imaginations of the region. For most, Antioch is likely a college in Ohio or a city in Ancient Greece, while Pittsburg is an old steel town in Pennsylvania (albeit with an "h"), and Brentwood is a posh neighborhood in Los Angeles.

This limited imagination of the region extends to many who live in the Bay Area, especially those who come here seeking its social, cultural, pecuniary, and climatic charms. For them, the region is a tight circuit that rings the San Francisco Bay, from the City to Silicon Valley, back to Oakland and Berkeley, over to Marin and the Wine Country. Work or family may bring them to job centers and ethnic restaurants on the I-880

corridor or over the hill to the wealthy enclaves of LaMoRinda¹ and the northern simulacra of the San Fernando Valley: the confluence of the I-580 and I-680 corridors. The limited metropolitan imagination observed by Garreau holds true two decades later.

This mental map of the metropolis derives from (and reproduces) an *endopolis*, a “city within”—an amorphous center of capital, culture, power, and the urban imagination with deep historical roots—inside “exopolis,” Soja’s famed “city without”—a place not only “[p]erched beyond the vortex of the old agglomerative nodes,” but one which by its very existence destabilizes our concepts of core/periphery, city/suburb, urban/suburban (Soja 1992, 95). In a sense, *endopolis* is a sociocultural bubble, a pocket of space formed by the gentrified and gentrifying core of the region. It is a bubble not too unlike Tel Aviv’s Sheinkin Street in Eytan Fox’s film *The Bubble*, formed in part by a unique blend of culture and politics. Yet *endopolis* is not simply a cultural phenomenon; it is also reinforced by the importance of urban centers to global capitalism (Sassen 2000; Castells 2000)—the decentralization of industry and population having done little to sap the cultural, financial, and political capital of America’s global urban cores (Glaeser and Gottlieb 2006)—and reproduced by the self-congratulatory discourse of the creative class.² The continued centrality and interconnectivity of these cores—be they traditional centers of global capital like Manhattan or newer centers like Silicon Valley—result in a mental map more connected to other endopolises around the globe than to many everyday spaces and places in our own metropolis.

Recognizing the growing centrality of *endopolis* is critical if we are to grapple honestly with the ongoing

restructuring of *exopolis*, especially those outer portions of regions which Garreau argues so many people in the cores do not know exist. In what one commentator has called an “inversion,” and which the blogosphere has ratcheted up to a “great inversion,” the famed donut geography of race and class in America—the presupposition of an impoverished, inner core defined by working-class people of color and a suburban ring defined by middle-class whiteness—is slowly being turned inside out by gentrification and the suburbanization of poverty (Ehrenhalt 2008; *The Urbanophile* 2008). New luxury condos are ubiquitous in urban cores and multiplying rapidly, while the suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse and racially, as well as economically, differentiated. This is not a totalizing process; urban poverty and foreign in-migration to gateway cities persist, as well as white flight and exclusionary zoning in white suburbs, exemplified by minimum lot sizes and gates (instead of picket fences). In turn, the new “urban” crisis—a foreclosure catastrophe that has already taken 2.4 million homes, including more than 400,000 in the first *two months* of 2009 (Center for Responsible Lending)³—is affecting suburbs, exurbs, and small towns with a ferocity equal to (if not greater than) cities, especially in wealthy global metropolises where gentrification has been strong for decades (Glickman 2008).

The ways in which this restructuring is unfolding on the edge of the metropolis—*inside exopolis* but *outside endopolis*—is complex, uneven, and constituted by seemingly disparate stories: new phenomena merge with old patterns, new people with old ideas. As we watch the crisis unfold on the outer edges of the region, we can slowly see the consequences that have either been hidden from us by space (Soja 1992) or, following Baudrillard, which we have simply been

running from (Baudrillard 1989). Painting a picture of these outcomes is no simple task, and can easily devolve into aimless wandering, political play-by-play, or drive-by cultural commentary. Hence my second debt to Soja, this one turned right side up rather than inside out. Starting from his recognition that “it all comes together in Los Angeles,”⁴ few scholars have so deftly used space and place as a means of stitching together an understanding of the contemporary metropolis. Substituting eastern Contra Costa County for Orange County, and the late 2000s for the late 1980s, “Scenes from Orange County” seemed ripe for revisiting through an exploration of the Bay Area’s edge, where the waters of the Sierra turn brackish and visions of the Golden Gate bleed into the Central Valley.



Source: the author.

Scene 2: Both/And Urbanism

There are two main ways to traverse the geography of eastern Contra Costa County (or, as the locals call it, simply “East County”): by coming in from the outside or out from the inside. Driving out from San Francisco through the Caldecott Tunnel and into Joel Garreau territory is a grand tour of mid to late 20th-century urban development. The I-680 corridor is home to not one but four of Garreau’s “edge cities,” clusters of office parks, corporate headquarters, and shopping malls that grew up around an available labor pool of middle-class white women in the 1960s and 1970s (Garreau 1991).⁵ The hills change dramatically from green to beige on Highway Four, which takes you through a pass before dropping into West Pittsburg. Bay views are replaced by river views. Towering Mt. Diablo, with its views of the Central Valley and the Sierra Nevadas, replaces San Francisco’s

fog-shrouded Sutro Tower as the central reference point.

If you get off the highway and drive north towards the water, the development clock begins to tick backward. First are the postwar working-class suburbs, a bit of Robert Self’s “industrial garden” growing on the south shore of the Sacramento River rather than the east shore of the Bay.⁶ Next come the downtowns, pieces of semi-preserved historic preservation sitting in the shadow of factory life. To drive south off the freeway is to continue in the historically proper manner, off the numerical grid and into the curlicued street grid of post(Gulf)war America. Subdivisions are stacked neatly against each other, rolling up and down with the hills and flowing along the main arterial, which is stocked with shopping centers and the occasional school. The landscape could easily be San Dimas or



Downtown Pittsburg, CA. Summer 2008. Photograph by the author.

Riverside. Advertisements for new subdivisions are arrayed on road signs, much like tourism signs promoting local merchants. The houses seem permanently for sale. The road soon flattens out amid the rectilinear platting of agricultural land use. Here, the sense of separation between city and country is reinforced (at least for a city dweller)—the sight of crop lines and the smell of manure signaling the sudden shift.

Driving in from the outside, this dualism breaks apart. Coming up Byron Road through Brentwood onto Lone Tree Way and into downtown Antioch and Pittsburg, you get a better sense of both the “urbanized countryside” and the “ruralized city”—components of the less than smooth urban/rural dichotomy undone in Richard Walker’s *Country in the city* (2007). Downtown Pittsburg epitomizes the broken dichotomies of the postmodern metropolis. Wedged between the still functioning chemical plants and the inland suburban empire of a massive metropolitan region is a small historic downtown trying to repopulate itself through condo development.

Pittsburg is a diverse multicultural suburb, blue-collar mill town, and gentrifying historic district all at once.

This ex/sub/urban schizophrenia makes Pittsburg, the former New York-on-the-Pacific,⁷ an excellent place to contemplate the meta-pattern of the changing geographies of race and class in 21st-century America. Gentrification is now omnipresent and “generalized” in urban cores, with luxury condo development extending into San Francisco’s Rincon Hill, Chicago’s South of the Loop and Millennium Park, Baltimore’s Federal Hill, and the Brooklyn and Queens waterfronts.⁸ Growth in downtown cores is bringing in upwardly mobile young singles and empty nesters, gradually remaking space for more affluent users (Smith 2002; Berube and Katz 2006).⁹ Similarly, the growth of racial, ethnic, and class diversity in the suburbs is undeniable. From direct immigration to the suburbs, to the formation of “ethnoburbs,” to fractured patterns of racial agglomeration, to black suburbanization, to an almost doubling of suburban tracts with poverty rates above 30% between 1980

and 2000, there is a growing body of literature documenting the slow undoing of the iconic center-periphery dichotomy of race and class (cf. Frey 2000; Singer 2003; Wiese 2004; Lin and Robinson 2005; Briggs 2005; Hanlon, Vicino, and Short 2006).

This great inversion should not be confused with normative arguments about “regeneration,” “renaissance,” or “decline” that contain explicit value judgments and surreptitiously advocate an ecology of the proper place. Moreover, the undoing of previous models does not necessitate the creation of new ones, in contrast to Hanlon et al.’s (2006) argument. This inversion is not a new model of metropolitan form but rather a new paradigm interwoven with older and newer patterns, one that must be considered deeply but not taken as a totalizing force. Hence Pittsburg, where seemingly contrary processes occur simultaneously, and demographic and economic change are both linked and decoupled.

It is unfortunate that Flusty and Dear could not hold on to a true postmodern orientation a decade ago. Although they state quite clearly that their model should not become a “hegemonic vision of the urban” because “to do so would violate the rejection of master narratives critical to a postmodern ontology,” not three paragraphs later they argue that, “traditional, center-driven agglomeration economies that have guided urban development no longer apply” (Flusty and Dear 1999). Perhaps, as Ananya Roy has suggested, theirs is truly a modernist vision of the postmodern city, and they cannot help but join Fishman in declaring the “very concept of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’” obsolete, even when it is not (Fishman 1990, 54).

Scene 3: Where’s that Confounded Edge?

As you drive east on Lone Tree Road, past the Antioch city line and into the farming community/exurb of Brentwood, the road narrows from a four-lane, divided arterial lined with shopping centers to an old-time, two-lane, Central Valley farm road. The point of interchange occurs just as you cross the freight rail line coming up from Byron and the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, at the beautifully named Double K road. It appears as if you have reached that magical urban-rural edge, a legible point where the metropolis ends and the rural begins.

Yet, if you keep driving, it does not take long to recognize that this scene is chimerical, for suburban tract homes pop up soon enough amidst the rectangularity of agricultural land. A bit of Google Maps™ and Google Earth™ shows the temporality of this edge—both show the edge as being earlier, farther west and north—even their vaunted technology cannot keep pace with the paving.

Urbanists have long struggled with defining the limits of the modern urban agglomeration.¹⁰ In many ways, this is a shift from the days of Louis Wirth, who struggled to define the core during the heady and uncomfortable days at the height of early 20th-century industrial urbanization. Now we struggle to define the limits of our “exploding metropolis” (Whyte 1993 [1958]), understand and quantify the spaces and places on the edge, and name the larger beast. Robert Lang recently riffed off Jean Gottman’s famed “megapolis” by calling for an understanding of “megapolitan regions”—megaregions where multiple, previously separate, metropolitan regions now

link together, often sharing suburban and exurban commuter sheds (Lang and Knox 2008).¹¹ Lone Tree Way sits smack dab in the middle of one such region, the NorCal megaregion, formed by the slow fusing of the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento along the greater I-80/Sacramento Delta corridor.

Lang’s work, drawing on Hackworth’s, explicitly challenges the postmodernism of Soja’s “exopolis.”¹² Both authors use empirical data to show a general maintenance of core/periphery patterns over the past four decades. Existing centers not only still hold but also are growing, even as webs of tract housing, office parks, and shopping centers radiate in interstitial spaces along the interstate. “NorCal” is not being formed by the emptying out of Sacramento or San Francisco, or by the creation of new centers on open farmland; rather, the two regions are simply weaving together their outer fringes, much as two bushes grow together to form a hedge.

As Lang also points out, this weaving occurs often in “mid-exurban realms,” farm towns-*cum*-bedroom communities like Brentwood or Dixon, which

lie in between central nodes. “It is in these places where commuters go in both directions and provide the linkages—based on a shared economy—that join metropolitan areas” (Lang and Knox 2008, 5). If this edge of eastern Contra Costa County is clearly exurban, then what exactly is “exurbia?”

Coined by Spektorsky (1955) to refer to a certain class of suburbanites who were pushing out farther and farther to escape an urbanizing suburbia, the term “exurban” has grown in relevance and use in recent decades, assuming a neat position between suburban and rural in the lexicon of metropolitan space. Scholars have worked to define “this amorphous concept and its land use in a way that can be quantified and mapped” (Travis 2007, 114; Berube et al. 2006). A common working definition is one that has touches of Wirth’s urbanism—economic relation to a metropolitan region, low population density, and population growth. Ecological connotations aside, it is a definition that recognizes exurbia as a liminal space, one that can only be such as long as it is both low-density and growing. If it stops growing, it can return to rural; if it continues, it becomes suburban.

This liminality is palpable in a place like Brentwood or Oakley, old farm towns making the transition from hinterland to suburb in less than a generation. Yet, as much as exurbia defines a process, we must not lose sight of the fact that it implies distance. Physical geography still matters, for there are consequences. Consider the changes in average commute times for East County residents over the past three decades (Table 1). Moving to the edge does not simply mean living in a rapidly changing place, but also living in a slow-moving vehicle burning expensive gasoline.

Table 1: Average Commute Time (minutes)

City/ Year	Antioch	Pittsburg	Brentwood	Oakley
1980	23.2	26.2	21.5	29
1990	29.4	31.5	32.7	36.5
2000	41.6	37.3	43.8	44

Source: US Census, SF 3 Sample Data.

Scene 4: Waldie Plaza

The urbanism gods have a sense of humor, or at least a sense of irony. Otherwise, they would have placed Waldie Plaza deep in Antioch's developer paradise south of Highway Four, as opposed to at the heart of its historic waterfront downtown. Although for many, Antioch might appear to be the epitome of sprawl, a closer examination of classic Bay Area histories by Mel Scott (1959) and James Vance (1964) shows how the regional structure was largely established by the turn of the century. Rail lines laid out before World War I charted a path for future freeways and residential development, connecting many existing towns along the region's ample waterways. The region did not sprawl so much as fill out.

During the days and immediate aftermath of the Gold Rush, Anglo settlers established New York-on-the-Pacific (1839, later to become Pittsburg) and Antioch (1850) as way stations on the waterways to the Gold Country, as railroads were still more than a decade away. They also served as small port towns for agricultural products beginning to come up from the nearby Central Valley and as coal towns during the late 19th-century heyday of the Black Diamond mines, when the town of Somersville, in the hills above Antioch and Pittsburg, was the largest settlement in Contra Costa County and one of the most productive coal mining regions in the country (Elms Publishing 1917).

A second phase came following the establishment of Baghdad by the Bay as the Rome of the Pacific, as the "inverted minescape" that was San Francisco capital sunk its teeth deeper into not only the hinterland of the Sierras and the Central Valley but also the immediate vicinity of the Bay Area (Brechin 2006).¹³



Photograph by the author.

San Francisco was penned in by physical geography on three sides and the geography of power on the fourth. After an initial beachhead in South San Francisco, wealthy capitalists prevented the further expansion of industry south into San Mateo, where it would potentially tarnish their tony weekend retreats in Burlingame and Hillsborough. In the context of a growing rail and port infrastructure and weaker union environment, the East Bay became attractive to industry, and Contra Costa County, with its relatively empty landscape and good rail/water access, became the site of dirty industries rejected even by Oakland and San Leandro: dynamite factories in Hercules, oil refineries in Port Costa, and steel in the now renamed Pittsburg. This gave the county's settlements a company town flavor, a "string of industrial colonies" distinct from the interlocking "industrial garden" of Alameda County (Self 2003; Walker 2004).

The industrial suburb, with its strong, working-class flavor and sometimes racial and ethnic diversity, flies in the face of our trite notions of suburbia as white and middle-class. Classic suburban scholarship largely ignored the strong manufacturing base and working-class inhabitants outside the central city (Fishman 1987; Jackson 1985).¹⁴ Further critiques tended to

deepen our sense of suburbia as either purely exclusive or a cultural wasteland, destructive of both human and built environments (Kunstler 1993; Hayden 2003). Place hatred, which is a tendency that has a deep and honored history in the canon of American writing about space and place, began with the city before it moved to the suburbs. As Becky Nicolaides recounts, the anti-urban sentiment of famed urbanists Louis Wirth and Lewis Mumford quickly morphed into the beginnings of our anti-suburban philosophy, epitomized by Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, and Mumford himself.¹⁵ “Hell,” according to Nicolaides, “moved from the city to the suburbs” (Nicolaides 2006, 80).¹⁶

Not only are suburbs no longer exclusively the monochrome habitat of the organizational man—they never truly were. Industry was present in suburban locations virtually from the onset of American urbanization, not, as we tend to imagine it, beginning after World War II. Revisionist historians have begun unpacking the history of prewar blue-collar suburbs, which were created by pre-New Deal, working-class migrants rather than the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and interstate system (Walker 2004; cf. Walker and Lewis 2001; Nicolaides 2002; Lewis 2004).

Finally, we come back to Waldie (D.J. Waldie, the author of *Holy land*, a sparse, yet pointed memoir that has quickly inserted itself into the canon of modern suburban and cultural landscape studies). *Holy land* grapples with race, class, and the contradictions of suburban production while simultaneously demanding that suburbs—and suburbanites—be treated with a sense of compassion and respect (Waldie 1996). This is particularly relevant in the case of rapidly diversifying and developing suburbs like Antioch and Brentwood, where critique, especially when

written from “endopolis,” walks a very fine line between exposing the injustices of capitalist suburbanization and demonizing millions of suburbanites through compassionless and poorly aimed critiques.

Scene 5: Look Ma, Neoliberalism!

If you look for something hard enough, you will undoubtedly find it, especially if what you look for is not actually real, say, the way an orange is real. This is particularly true of neoliberalism, which, as Peck and Tickell point out, “seems to be everywhere” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 33). The omnipresence of Hayek, Friedman, and the Chicago Boys’ ideological love child is aided by the fact that we are somewhere in the middle (or perhaps at the end?) of the *neoliberal era*, making it difficult to separate out what Brenner and Theodore call “actually existing neoliberalism”—specific policies and actions that promote a neoliberal agenda—from the greater period of post-Fordism, late capitalism, and the regimes of Thatcher and Reagan (Brenner and Theodore 2002).¹⁷ This is particularly the case in Latin America, where neoliberalization and democratization have gone hand in hand, leading to confusing mixtures at the grassroots level.

As if responding to some sick pedagogical Bat-signal, we here in the United States have produced a wicked good example of neoliberalism *par excellence*. For those who wish to isolate and understand it, the mortgage/foreclosure crisis is a prime lesson in how neoliberalism works and what it does. The crisis has two key components: (1) the issuance of massive quantities of subprime, risky, and often predatory mortgages, generally to middle- and low-income households and

specifically to Latinos and African Americans; and (2) the packaging of this debt into a series of mortgage-backed securities that could then be bandied about in global financial markets.¹⁸ The former has wreaked havoc in neighborhoods and cities across the nation, as financially strapped homeowners default, while the latter practice has spread the pain up the financial ladder, bringing down companies like Bear Stearns and sending jitters throughout the global economy.

Subprime loans have long been an issue; community-based organizations and community development corporations (CDCs) have fought the practice for years. Newman and Wyly (2004) questioned the rampant expansion of credit into low-income neighborhoods before the crisis hit and when the pain was isolated in poor communities, calling the practice “exploitative greenlining.” States have responded more recently by regulating subprime and predatory products. North Carolina, for instance, passed the first subprime regulation in 1994.

But while these early instances of subprime lending affected individual households, it took the securitization of this bad debt to transform it into a truly national scourge. Subprime lenders could now quickly and easily sell the debt upriver, where Wall Street packed it into mortgage-backed securities and even second-level securities like collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) or third-order securities known as “CDO squared” (Lowenstein 2008). This upstream market enabled lenders to minimize their risk exposure, and the practice exploded. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and other Federal actors did not regulate these practices, rather they were “regulated” by credit ratings agencies like Moody’s and Standard and Poor’s (S&P), which put millions of homes at

risk and threatened both struggling cities and newly built suburbs. Thus, Washington pulled the classic neoliberal move of, in the words of Roger Lowenstein, “outsourc[ing] its regulatory function to three private companies” (ibid., online source).¹⁹ It was the bond ratings companies—companies that are paid by their clients (i.e., lenders)—who effectively oversaw the system, rating each security according to the rate of default predicted by mathematical modeling.

Yet, this process is not simply *neoliberalism as absence*, whereby the state fails to act in a way it might be expected to act under an alternative ideology, but rather *neoliberalism as creation*, since the government helped to create the bond rating agencies in their current form and hence primed the markets to issue this particular type of debt. Following the collapse of the Penn Central railroad company in 1970, Wall Street clamored for a better way to assess debt. Washington responded by formally licensing the credit agencies, grandfathering in the big three: Moody’s, S&P, and Fitch. Banks, pension funds, mutual funds, and other large investment vehicles soon established rules restricting investments to “investment grade” securities (i.e., debt that had a minimum rating from one of the credit agencies).²⁰ In one fell swoop, Washington helped create a non-governmental regulatory apparatus *and* a new market for debt-backed securities.

That latter point is critical, both to our understanding of the crisis and to our comprehension of neoliberalism. Most definitions of neoliberalism revolve to some extent around the prioritization of the market over the state, and many, including Harvey, characterize the phenomenon as the “financialization of everything” (Harvey 2005). But markets and the economy are not “natural” elements; they are created (Mitchell 2002).

The question becomes: for whom, at what cost, and for whose benefit are they created? Neoliberalism specializes in creating specific markets in specific places that tend to push wealth up rather than down, thus primarily benefiting those at the top of the socioeconomic food chain. In this case, buoyed by the federal push to raise homeownership rates to historic levels and developers who were building tempting but overvalued housing on the urban fringe, lenders created a market for costly credit where there was none, temporarily fostering the “illusion of homeownership through the reality of debt” (Stone 2006, 83).

The foreclosure crisis also links to a third component of neoliberalism, *neoliberalism as removal*.²¹ This is arguably the most common conception of neoliberalism, whereby the welfare state is slowly dismantled, and assets and responsibilities are privatized, forcing both cities and citizens to become entrepreneurs. This component is manifested within the foreclosure crisis in two ways. First, cities and counties, especially in predominantly low-income areas, have struggled to provide services in the aftermath of Reagan-era devolution and retrenchment. Service provision is particularly difficult in post-Proposition 13 California,²² where cities like Antioch and Pittsburg are severely hamstrung by their inability to raise property taxes, their primary source of revenue. Now Contra Costa faces a \$40 million loss in property tax revenue as a result of having to reassess more than 65,000 properties (Roman 2008).²³ Thus, the foreclosure crisis is the ultimate neoliberal two-step: (1) federal rollbacks a generation ago left cities vulnerable to a crisis enabled by a lack of federal oversight, and (2) the willful collaboration of the state with capital created markets that did not exist.

The second component of *neoliberalism as removal* is the slow dismantling of anything resembling a national housing program. Not that what we had was anything to write home about: Catherine Bauer’s dream quickly devolved into a “two-tiered system,” underwritten homes for white middle-class suburbs and substandard housing for the urban poor (Radford 2000). In turn, rent protections steadily eroded in major American cities during the 1990s: California passed the anti-rent control Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act in 1995, which prevented municipalities from passing additional rent protections and mandated vacancy decontrol. These processes created the necessary space for new markets in risky credit and overpriced housing.

Some would argue that the foreclosure crisis, at its heart, is the logical result of a society entranced by individual entrepreneurialism, the proliferation of people who risked financial ruin to ride the wave of inflated real estate prices and high-calorie debt. Of course, the entrepreneurial self lives on, even under a mountain of foreclosures. All over the Internet you can now find sites like foreclosures.com, foreclosure-radar.com, and any number of others encouraging you to buy foreclosed properties to make a quick buck. There is no sense of irony in the fact that this same entrepreneurialism, fed by endless ads from Donald Trump and fellow entrepreneurs of entrepreneurship, encouraged novice investors to get in on the flipping game. No wonder investor-owned, one-to-four-unit buildings account for 20% of the nation’s foreclosures (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2008).

Many have also questioned the viability of homeownership for all Americans, and particularly the extent to which we have oversold the American dream.

There is a limit to which one can create markets that do not exist, pet rocks notwithstanding. Subprime mortgages not only exploit those who are duped into interest-only loans, adjustable-rate mortgages, land contracts, and any number of other shady products, but also those who desperately want those loans and the hopes for home ownership that come with them. For though we may question homeownership in policy circles on the Left, it still fundamentally represents a piece of something Americans collectively hold up as the ticket to true citizenship—in our tradition handed down from Locke and Jefferson, it is the deed to your house or land, more than a passport or birth certificate or participation in the body politic, which marks you as belonging.

When you drive through the quiet and leafy streets of Antioch, Brentwood, or Pittsburg, it is hard to blame people for overextending themselves, especially if it meant a ticket out of the violence and dysfunctional schools that persist in portions of the inner core. For as the center slowly is being remade for a wealthier consumer class, reinforcing the centrality of endopolis, predatory lending and racialized urban poverty share space with gentrification and revitalization (Newman and Wyly 2004; Squires 2003; Wyly and Hammel 2004). This process is a clear reminder that this crisis is not only about neoliberalism, but also about the persistently uneven geography of capitalism and America's long legacy of segregation.

Scene 6: A Different Shade of Suburb

Brentwood: the poster child for housing bust
-Front page headline, *San Francisco Chronicle*,
Sunday, May 11, 2008

There is, of course, a numerical side to the story. The number of households and homes, the number of people of color, the number of foreclosures, the number of laid-off public employees, the number of acres of converted farmland. The difficulty arises when trying to make sense of the numbers collectively, assign causal linkages, and avoid blaming one number for another. This leap to explanation is a particular challenge in “overcomplex spaces,” to borrow a phrase from Ackbar Abbas, for the more confusing something is, the greater the desire to go beyond understanding to explanation. One can also borrow Abbas' solution to the dilemma, following a Wittgensteinian emphasis on description rather than explanation, resisting the “urge to misunderstand” the workings of space, and the perhaps foolhardy attempt “to make smooth connections between disparate series” of explanations (Abbas 2000, 773).

The sheer growth of East County over the past twenty years is staggering. While Pittsburg has only seen its population grow by a third since 1990, Antioch has almost doubled in size, making it the third largest city in the county. Brentwood has grown almost *sixfold* in less than two decades, and at twenty times its 1970 population, this former Central Valley farm hamlet is now the seventh largest city in Contra Costa County. Only next door, Oakley, which is twenty-five times its 1970s incarnation, can match that pace of growth.²⁵ The county, meanwhile, has lost 30% of its prime farmland in less than fifteen years (Table 2).

Table 2: Contra Costa County Acres of Agricultural Land

	1992	2006	Change
Agricultural Land	286,981	262,362	-24,629 (-9%)
Prime Farmland	42,459	299,358	-12,521 (-30%)

Source: California Department of Conservation, in Temple (2008).

Table 3: Black & Latino Composition of East County Communities, 1970-2006

% Black	Antioch	Pittsburg	Brentwood	Oakley
1970	0.1%	22.0%	0.1%	0.2%
1980	1.4%	20.2%	0.2%	0.1%
1990	2.7%	17.7%	0.8%	1.3%
2000	9.7%	18.9%	2.5%	3.4%
2006	16.0%	-	-	-
% Latino	Antioch	Pittsburg	Brentwood	Oakley
1970	11.0%	15.9%	n/a	n/a
1980	13.9%	18.4%	39.5%	41.7%
1990	16.1%	23.3%	31.3%	21.8%
2000	22.1%	32.2%	28.2%	25.0%
2006	28.8%	-	-	-

Source: US Census, SFI; 2006 Data is ACS, and is not available in jurisdictions smaller than 100,000. Data access through bayareacensus.org.

With pure growth has come racial and ethnic change. Table 3 shows that while Pittsburg has long had a significant black population, Antioch's has exploded over the past two decades, and there is now a noticeable community in Brentwood and Oakley.²⁶ At the same time, Latino population geographies have morphed in the opposite way. While Pittsburg and Antioch have become increasingly Latino, the farm communities of Brentwood and Oakley have seen the proportion of their population that is Latino drop.²⁷

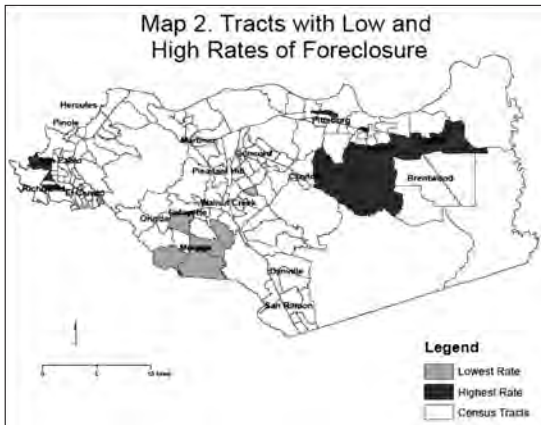
The former development must be considered in light of the larger process of African American exodus from the region's core, a process noted by Godfrey as early as the mid 1980s but which has only recently garnered significant attention (Godfrey 1988). San Francisco has lost half its black population since 1970, down from 96,000 (13.4%), to approximately 47,000 (6.5%) in 2005. A 2001 *San Francisco Chronicle* story estimates that the historically black core of the Bay Area—San Francisco's Bayview/Hunters Point and Western Addition, as well as Berkeley/Oakland and East Palo Alto—lost 29% of its African American population between 1990 and 2000 (Hendrix 2001; McCormick 2001; Fulbright 2007). One quote from the story captures the phenomenon at its most extreme: "One woman told me recently that if you walk down Main Street in Stockton, you think you're in East Palo Alto" (Hendrix 2001). In response to these shifts, the Mayor's Office of Community Development in San Francisco convened a task force to examine the exodus, in part driven by concern over the political implications of demographic change and possible involuntary displacement.

Changing and uneven geographies of race are nothing new, nor are they an issue of automatic concern.

Some of the dangers in tackling the subject are knee-jerk value judgments and representations that insinuate a proper place for people of color.²⁷ Where concern arises is when uneven human geographies overlap with uneven geographies of abandonment or crisis, much as they have in the foreclosure crisis.

From a county-by-county viewpoint, foreclosures have reached ridiculous proportions across California. From the first quarter of 2007 to the first quarter of 2008, the *lowest* rate of increase in Notices of Default for any county in the state was 80%; the Bay Area *average* was 143.7% (Dqnews.com). But a closer look reveals that the pain disproportionately affects minorities and minority communities.²⁸ According to a 2007 Federal Reserve Report on 2006 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) data, about 55% and 45% of outstanding home loans to African American and Latino households respectively were subprime; African Americans and Latinos are three to four times more likely to acquire subprime loans than non-Hispanic whites (Avery, Brevoort, and Canner 2007). A 2008 United for a Fair Economy report indicates that "the foreclosure crisis will result in the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in recent U.S. history ... black borrowers will lose between \$71 billion and \$122 billion, while Hispanic borrowers will lose between \$76 billion and \$129 billion" (Rivera and United for a Fair Economy 2008, v).

The story holds true locally as well. Recent research by Kristin Perkins shows that African American and Latino neighborhoods in Contra Costa County are disproportionately affected by foreclosures (Perkins 2008; Lanzerotti 2006; Immergluck and Smith 2004). In findings consistent with previous studies (Lanzerotti 2006; Immergluck and Smith 2004),



Source: Perkins 2008.

she found over 20% more Latino and African American residents living in high-foreclosure-rate census tracts compared to tracts with low rates, and 27% fewer African American homeowners in low-foreclosure tracts compared to high-foreclosure tracts. Not surprisingly, similar correlations were found between foreclosure and poverty rates. Map 2, which shows the tracts with the highest and lowest rates of foreclosure, mirrors a rough map of the racial and class geography of the county. There are particularly stark differences in lending practices across racial lines in eastern Contra Costa County. While only 6.4% of home purchase loans were made to blacks in Brentwood (compared to 46.3% to whites), blacks represented almost twice the total rate of conventional loan denials and twice the number of subprime refinance loans (www.dataplace.org).²⁹

All of these processes occurring in the same time and space culminate in headlines like the above one from the front page of the Mother's Day edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a story filled with the

realities of abandonment and real concerns about the loss of tax dollars and government jobs, or a *West County Times* story a few days later, complaining about the bad rap Antioch has developed in the Bay Area due to high foreclosure rates and the perception of crime (Temple 2008; Read 2008). Much as they did in the “urban crisis” of a generation ago, and as they have been made to do for almost two centuries of American urbanism (Beauregard 1993; White and White 1977 [1962]), race, space, crisis, and decline become conflated, leading people and pundits to confuse one number for another.

This conflation is epitomized by residents’ reaction against Antioch’s representation in the local media, a hubbub that began when *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Mark Morford referred to Antioch as “the finest slum this side of Stockton” (Morford 2008). Residents defended Antioch by arguing that not only is it really nice, but also that it is “not as bad” as Richmond or Oakland (code in Bay Area-speak for places with large black populations). As the consequences for our actions emerge in space, people sadly look to blame those unfortunate to call it home.

Scene 7: The New/Old Reality

The image of the boarded up suburban tract home is poised to become iconic of the American urban fringe, as journalists and scholars alike delve into the deepening morass of suburban “decline,” armed with ideas about the “next slum” and lovely neologisms like “slumburbia” (Lloyd 2008; Glaister 2008).

Christopher Leinberger is arguably at the forefront

of this new suburban imagination. “Strange days are upon the residents of many a suburban cul-de-sac. Once-tidy yards have become overgrown, as the houses they front have gone vacant. Signs of physical and social disorder are spreading” (Leinberger 2008, online source). So opens his recent *Atlantic Monthly* article that has been burning up the blogosphere. The piece, entitled simply “The Next Slum?” comes with a subheading that leaves little doubt as to the broader discourse into which Leinberger is inserting his argument. “The subprime crisis is just the tip of the iceberg. Fundamental changes in American life may turn today’s McMansions into tomorrow’s tenements” (ibid.).

Leinberger is a long-time chronicler of the changing urban environment, a real estate developer, and a scholar whom Joel Garreau credits with coining the term “edge city” (Garreau 1991). The article, which was followed quickly by a lengthy exposé on suburban decline in *The Guardian* and the Carol Lloyd “slumburbia” column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, details the potential long-term ramifications of the perfect storm that is foreclosure and peak oil (Lloyd 2008). Among the handful of conditions that make this phenomenon potentially more troubling for impacted residents than inner-city abandonment a generation ago are: greater distances between exurbs and jobs, and a housing stock built so shoddily it cannot withstand the impacts of even temporary abandonment.

Leinberger’s concerns about suburban poverty are not new. There is a growing literature that documents both an uptick in poverty indicators and concerns about the aging and declining physical plant of America’s postwar expansion.³⁰ But what concerns me is not the validity of the argument—we should be concerned about increasing suburban

differentiation—but the language that is used and the people who are caught up in processes of representation.

Amidst scholarly efforts to quantify suburban “decline,” is both a genuine concern about increasing poverty in the suburbs and an explicit desire that America not repeat the mistakes of the first “urban crisis:” abandonment, disinvestment, and ghettoization. Since we have the data and the analytical tools to see poverty growing, and we saw what happened forty years ago, we can learn from history and not repeat the same mistakes twice.

Yet both the metrics and language used are virtually identical to those wielded by urban scholars and pundits a generation ago. “Decline” is often measured by increasing rates of poverty, yet it is difficult to differentiate whether increasing poverty rates reflect trends of people becoming poorer (which I would argue is “decline”) or merely an influx of lower-income people. Thus, poor people who move into suburbs are discursively implicated in their decline, and poor people in general are made *synonymous with decline*, just like during an earlier era (Beauregard 1993).³¹ They become the problem, rather than the segregated socio-spatial system, the national or regional economy, neoliberalism, or institutionalized racism. Thus, their removal or exclusion can easily become the solution.

The linguistic recidivism is equally troubling. We know full well how “slum” and “blight” became lightning rods for urban renewal policy, merging age-old concerns about inadequate housing and the deplorable living conditions with urban boosterism, concerns about the impacts of suburbanization on inner-city real estate, the need for a renewed urban tax base, and an utter disregard

for the rights of African Americans (Beauregard 1993). As Rebecca Solnit notes, “Blight was the magical word of urban renewal” (Solnit 2002, 43).

Inasmuch as Americans were unwilling or unable to separate poor people and people of color from ideas of slums and blight a generation ago, why should we assume they will do so during this go “round of abandonment?”³² Although it may seem far-fetched right now, I can envision a future where the representation of suburbs as slums reaches the point where we see policies of “suburban renewal,” which remove people and not problems. One can stand on top of rooftops shouting, “It’s not black people! It’s neoliberalism, dammit!” but without paying attention to how the new suburban reality is represented; no matter how bad it may become, we risk making the same mistakes that scholars and writers made a generation ago.

Opening / Closing

Sitting on the ridge of Black Diamond Mines



Photograph by the author.

Regional Park, what you see is the edge of Brentwood and Oakley and the haze of the Central Valley, that other burgeoning urban agglomeration of which East County is also a part. The San Francisco Bay and “The City”—Silicon Valley and the Bay Area’s various “geographies of buzz”—that amorphous yet highly confined space of endopolis, are obscured by a succession of rolling hills.

The veiling provided by the region’s wondrously diverse landscape at times allows us to escape the monotony of urban life, to find nooks and crannies that may have disappeared in other regions, or to experience microclimates or a sense of smallness in the fourth largest metropolis in the nation. Yet there is a doubleness to veiling, and the problem lies less with the fact that those in exopolis cannot see endopolis, but that those in endopolis do not see exopolis.

For though we can easily chart how the confluence of numerous phenomena—neoliberalism and a foreclosure crisis, increasing race and class diversity in suburbia, a hardening core and an expanding periphery, a never-ending struggle over representation—are

slowly making it impossible for space to “[hide] consequences from us” (Soja 1992, 122), one can only perceive space and consequences if one takes the time to look. This means not only leaving endopolis from time to time to explore what lies beyond, but acknowledging that for the time-being, much of what gets written about exopolis is written fundamentally from endopolis. To borrow both the postcolonial language and spirit of Jennifer Robinson (2002), it is high time that American urbanists examine our own internal maps, our own unconscious notions of centrality, and begin to find ways of understanding how places “off the map” relate to places “on the map.”

As we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we are confronted with a foreclosure crisis that has brought the global economy to its knees and wreaked havoc not simply on the segregated urban spaces of crises past but on increasingly diverse suburbs and ex-urbs, especially in the cities of the American West that helped define exopolis in the first place. This is truly an urban crisis—a crisis not only *in* the urban (defined in this case in its larger sense to include the suburban) but *of* the urban. Unlike the “urban crisis” of the 1960s and 1970s, whose roots lay primarily in deindustrialization and racial discrimination (Sugrue 1996), this crisis is fundamentally about where, how, and for whom we produce space, and for what purpose.

The urban nature of this crisis makes the issue of space and its tendency to hide consequences especially pertinent. As boarded-up homes and abandoned subdivisions force us to reconsider our image and understanding of the outer metropolis, it becomes even more crucial that we do not allow space, including the growing space between center and periphery, to obscure the consequences of our actions. Perhaps at the height of

American empire we once could, allowing us to leave problems behind rather than solve them. No longer.

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Lead Photograph

Antioch, CA. Summer 2008. Photograph by the author.

Notes

¹ “LaMoRinda” is a semi-affectionate localism for the towns of Lafayette, Moraga, and Orinda.

² Hence the “geography of buzz,” the newest salvo on creative cities, not only pinpoints the geographic heart of Los Angeles’ and New York’s respective bubbles but emphasizes their difference (and the value of this difference) from the metropolis writ large (Ryzik 2009). For a brilliant and agonistic critique of creative class discourse, see Peck (2005).

³ The Center for Responsible Lending estimates more than 80,000 foreclosures in California alone in January and February 2009.

⁴ Soja’s (1989) fascination with LA is as a container of stories, a container that in the 1980s, seemed to possess examples of most relevant metropolitan phenomenon.

⁵ Although Garreau puts the office park cart before the housing horse, Nelson (1984) argues the reverse is true.

⁶ Self (2003, 28) uses the concept of the “industrial garden” to refer to the mixture of single-family homes, small fac-

tories, and larger industrial plants that collectively formed a “middle landscape which joined economic progress and social stability” during the postwar era.

⁷ Pittsburgh went through many name changes during its earliest years. “New York-on-the-Pacific” was clearly an attempt to envision the city as *the* center of the metropolis, rather than San Francisco.

⁸ For example, plans call for the construction of 25,000 – 30,000 new units in the region south of Market in San Francisco (Tannenbaum 2007). The Williamsburg-Greenpoint rezoning in Brooklyn will add more than 7,000 new units at full build-out. Source: Greenpoint-Williamsburg Rezoning EIS, http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/greenpointwill/feis_exec_sum.pdf.

⁹ “The production of space for progressively affluent users,” is Hackworth’s (2002) definition of gentrification. There is endless debate about the definition of gentrification, let alone the cause and effect—far too much to consider here. A good primer on the issue is Lees (2007).

¹⁰ Debates include the argument that the struggle against urbanization is futile, a category in which Soja likely would fall.

¹¹ Megapolitan regions are opposed to multi-centered metropolitan areas like the Bay Area, which are formed by multiple Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA), constituting a Combined MSA (CMSA).

¹² The ideas of exurbia, edge cities, postsuburbia, metro-urbia, and other components of the “name game,” as Greg Hise (1999, 12) calls it, have been challenged by numerous scholars in addition to Lang, including Hise in his own work on Los Angeles (Hise 1999).

¹³ “Baghdad by the Bay” is a common name for San Francisco coined by famed *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist, Herb Caen. “Rome of the Pacific” is the term Brechin uses to describe San Francisco as an imperial city. In many ways, the two different names epitomize the differences between Caen, who remains the city’s most famous celebrant a decade after his death, and Brechin, who is now one of its

most noted critics.

¹⁴ This critique is flushed out in Lewis (2004) and Nicolaidis (2002). In Jackson’s defense, he noted in a recent foreword that he originally intended to include a chapter on working-class and industrial suburbs in *Crabgrass Frontier*, but the sudden and tragic death of his son in the days leading up to the completion of the book led him to submit what he had to his publishers (Nicolaidis 2006).

¹⁵ Mumford reserved praise primarily for the medieval city that was, or the utopian garden city of Ebenezer Howard (Mumford 1989 [1961]).

¹⁶ This is not to argue that critical examinations of either cities or suburbs are not necessary or possible, simply that critiques must, as John Archer reminds, account for the overt and latent elitism of much suburban discourse, which generally ignores the position of the author (Archer 2005).

¹⁷ Although the term “Chicago Boys” is often reserved exclusively for the Pinochet-era Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago, it is increasingly used to denote Chicago School economists of all nationalities and eras. See for example Klein (2008).

¹⁸ Good primers on the crisis are Carr (2007) and Insight (2008).

¹⁹ Hackworth (2007) also makes the explicit connection between neoliberalism and the credit-rating agencies, this time in regards to bonds and municipal financing.

²⁰ Ratings systems vary slightly, but most use a scale from AAA to C or D, with Ba or BB generally being the lowest level of investment grade.

²¹ Both Peck and Tickell (2002) and Brenner and Theodore (2002) use the concept of “roll-back” neoliberalism to refer to forms of neoliberalism aimed at eroding the welfare state, and “roll-out” neoliberalism to indicate more proactive, creative forms. As removal and failure to act are not the same thing, I have parsed the latter category in two and created my own set of three terms (neoliberalism as *absence*, *creation*, and *removal*) which I feel are a bit clearer. The two sets of authors also identify each form with a particular era:

“roll-back” coming first in the immediate aftermath of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes, and “roll-out” coming later with public-private partnerships and the true establishment of the entrepreneurial city (Harvey 1989).

²² Proposition 13, passed in 1978 during California’s famous “tax revolt,” severely limits the ability of municipalities to raise property taxes, caps assessed value at the purchase price, and channels property tax revenue through state government. On the suburban origins of Proposition 13, see Self (2006) and Davis (1990). There is now a significant literature on the impacts of the measure and its role in the larger context of fiscal constraints. O’Sullivan (1995) and Danziger (2006) are good resources on the issue.

²³ Admittedly, a significant portion of the reassessment comes from declining property values, which likely would have dropped at some point regardless of the foreclosure crisis. But as research has shown, the crisis is impacting property values (Immergluck and Smith 2005).

²⁴ 1970 – 2000 data is from the US Census, courtesy of the Bay Area Census, a joint project of ABAG and MTC to gather local data in one place. Current data is from the California Department of Finance estimates. Calculations are by the author.

²⁵ More recent data on race are not available for the smaller jurisdictions in the American Community Survey (ACS), so more up-to-date figures are not available. It is reasonable, based on media reports, to assume that the African American population of Oakley and Brentwood has continued to grow.

²⁶ African Americans and Latinos are the focus of this section, in part because research on the subject focuses on these two groups more than other underrepresented groups like Southeast Asians. Future work on East County will include more in-depth analysis on Southeast Asian (and specifically Filipino) communities.

²⁷ The same could be said for low-income communities.

²⁸ Jim Carr’s (2007) scathing and erudite critique provided a much-needed primer on the racialization of foreclosure and

is an important guide to the vast and complex literature.

²⁹ See Table 3 for the percentages of the black and Latino population in Brentwood.

³⁰ See for example Lucy and Phillips 2001; Madden 2003; Murphy 2007. Interestingly enough, this work parallels the rediscovery of a much older, working-class suburbia.

³¹ For this reason, some argued for a definition of decline independent of the human factor, based solely on the age of the housing stock. Yet, this does not account for the condition of the stock.

³² For instance, research by Charles (2005), still shows linkages between white flight, crime, and poor schools and the perception that crime and poor schools are linked to the presence of blacks.

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