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Suburban Nation: An Investigation of Suburban Ideology and Youth Culture

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Suburban Nation
An Investigation of Suburban Ideology & Youth Culture

by

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ABSTRACT

This written document is a supplementary accompaniment to the thesis production entitled *Suburban Nation.* This documentary film (and the written component) explores the ways in which scholars and cultural observers have addressed the historical development of suburban spaces in North America and how those spaces are experienced by residents - particularly youth - in the Canadian context. While the suburb has often been depicted as something that is either wholly good or wholly bad, this work seeks to complicate such understandings by examining some of the contradictory ways in which suburbia is experienced and interpreted by adults and youths.

DEDICATION

Mom, Dad, Brett, and Scott
For a lifetime of love, trust, and freedom.
Thank you for always supporting the paths I chose,
even though they were often the ones less traveled.

My family and friends
Thank you for all of your love and support.
Thank you for believing in what I do.

Geoff
My one and only spiritual advisor
who has taken each and every step of the way with me.
Thank you for keeping my feet on the ground when my head was in the clouds.
Thank you for every moment of friendship and love.
Your understanding has meant everything.
Your relentless patience and support overwhelm me daily.
I could not dream of any other partner in crime.

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Thank you to Susan Gold/Smith for serving as my external committee member.

The "Georgie" animation that appears in the documentary was created and produced by Danielle Sabelli.

Original music was composed and produced by Geoff Yunker.

All still photos that appear in the unabridged version of *Suburban Nation* were photographed by John Ganis (not for sole purpose of this documentary) and appear courtesy of the photographer.

All archival footage appears courtesy of the Prelinger Archives, public domain footage.

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INTRODUCTION

I began my research two years ago, looking to unravel some aspects of suburbia and suburban life. As a white female who grew up in the suburb of Whitby, Ontario in the 1980s and 1990s, I was profoundly interested in the ways in which suburbia has become much more than a word to denote a physical environment. While the suburb is a geographical location on the urban periphery – it also connotes an *ideology.* When one hears the term "suburbia," one conjures up certain images. Perhaps, an image of a coveted hideaway for families seeking a place to settle down, a "safe" environment to raise their children. Or perhaps, suburbia evokes the image of a banal landscape - the breeding ground for angst ridden youth. Such images are often reinscribed in media discourses and representations and while the suburb has traditionally been depicted as either wholly good or wholly bad, it is, as this documentary seeks to demonstrate, more complex than is often thought. There appears to be generational differences in how life in suburbia is experienced and interpreted by adults and youth.

From its inception as a post World War II space, the suburbs offered a way of life that was different from urban living, but it was by way of myth that these spaces came to symbolize an "American Dream" and how Canada and the United States came to be suburban nations. There was nothing naturally instilled within this invention that made it a "perfect place to live," rather, it was sold as such through advertising and socially constructed myth that targeted the desires of a

particular social group that emerged post World War II. “Suburbia, defined as an ideology, a faith in communities of limited size and a belief in the conditions of intimacy, is quite real” (Wood, 1958:18). These myths are largely responsible for creating a suburban ethos or ideology that asserted the suburb as simple, wholesome, successful, and moral. Robert Beauregard argues further that suburbia was fostered by ideologies specific to Cold War American national identity. As such, these spaces projected images and language associated with the “American Dream” to a global audience. The political economy of Canada and the United States post World War II is essential in understanding the motivations of the first mass suburbanization, and ultimately, the materiality that continues to define these spaces (Beauregard, 2006: ix-10). As noted by Dr. Matthew Durington, in *Suburban Nation*, looking into the suburban realm helps us to understand political economy, class issues, and racial politics because both Canada and the United States are largely, suburban nations.

I have worked this research and experience into a documentary video. As an audio - visual form of communication, my intent was to make this important research available in a more accessible format by appealing to those within and outside of academia. As a theoretically informed piece, presented as an edited construction, this research reflects what I believe to be representative of the culmination of my research. By virtue of form, this documentary also invites interpretation. It requires a viewing audience to understand the images presented in order for it to be meaningfully discussed.

The literature review and discussion of the methodological approach that follow are a rationale for; a response to; and reflection of; the research process and the materials that have been edited into the final video production.

The elements of this video will be dissected in the sections that follow.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to inform this piece, I have consulted literature pertaining to suburban history in Europe and North America since the eighteenth century; the commodification of suburban spaces in North America post World War II; suburban mythology; the environmental impacts of suburbia; cultural diversity in suburbia; and suburban youth culture.

I have also looked to documentary films as a way of framing my own production. Currently, there are several noteworthy documentary films that examine various suburban themes. *Gimme Green* (Brown & Flagg, 2006) looks at the suburban fascination with front lawns and gardening in connection to suburban mythology and environmental awareness, or lack thereof. *The End of Suburbia* (Silverthorn, 2004) takes viewers through the suburban space, warning of its unsustainability during an impending oil crisis and daunting environmental concerns. *Radiant City* (Vercruysse, 2006) explores a 'typical' nuclear family in an Alberta suburb via an experimental narrative. This family personifies many critiques of suburban life, examining social apathy, commuting, affluence, and conformity. While all of these documentaries are extremely useful and important

contributions to the non-traditional literature on contemporary suburbia as a physical space, none have specifically highlighted the contradictions between how adults and youth interpret suburbia, nor have they highlighted contradictions between youth negotiating the suburb independently versus discussing it amongst their peers.

In addition to these more popular documentaries, I examined several archival films produced between the years 1936 - 1969. These films served two functions in terms of contextualizing my own film. Some of them endorsed suburban spaces and were driven by commercialization and profit, as in the case of *In the Suburbs*, produced by *Redbook* magazine. This film simultaneously sells the suburban space to its readers while expanding readership amongst those who used this film to find a home in the suburbs.

> There's no romance in its presentation, nor is there much mystification about suburbs and suburbanites. It was intended for an audience of realists that believed in market research and kept its eyes on the bottom line (Prelinger Archives, *In the Suburbs*).

On the other hand, the second group of films made rather harsh critiques that focused on the ways in which the suburbs were destroying civic life. *Changing City* is an example of the common criticisms associated with the move to the suburbs, including a decrease in social interaction, environmental concerns, and the denigration of the inner city due to highway construction (Prelinger Archives, *Changing City)*. While all of these arguments are extremely vital in understanding these spaces on a critical level, they do simplify the move to the suburbs as

something that should either be done en masse, or as something that should come to a complete halt. This dichotomy is useful when comparing the opposing views of suburban spaces, however it is limiting when trying to recognize important historical, social, political, and economic moments that present both the rationale for the development of suburbs, *and* the drawbacks of these spaces. While there is room for tales of caution, there must also be reasonable and intelligent understanding that recognizes the suburb as complex rather than as a black or white issue.

It was also useful to look to contemporary literature regarding the "Millennial Generation" as this group currently takes up residence in suburbia and its characteristics greatly reflect the youth that I interviewed for this piece.

> Now Millennials are entering young adulthood with a sense of confidence and commitment that reflects their sheltered and yet, at the same time, pressured childhood...Whether they are texting the person sitting next to them in the backseat of a car or IMing a buddy across the globe, Millennials are always in touch with their friends. The Millennial Generation is larger than any that has come before it. It is the most ethnically diverse generation in American history. Because of the way in which they have been reared, Millennials are more positive than older generations, both about the present and future state of their own lives and about the future of their country. Recent survey research on the political attitudes of this generation shows a high tolerance for lifestyle and ethnic differences and support for an activist approach by government to societal and economic issues...(Winograd & Hais, 2008: 2).

Beale and Adballa also suggest that the Millennial Generation can be defined by five major influences, one of which is acceptance of diversity, beyond race

and class (2003:1-3). Winograd and Hais argue that this acceptance of diversity is why Millennials have been deemed the “civic” generation and American scholars directly link its core values to how President Barack Obama was able to gain their overwhelming support and win the 2008 election in the United States (April 2008: 1).

While there are many positive attributes that this generation brings to North American society, including unprecedented tolerance and social consciousness, this generation also brings a new sense of self-entitlement, a “get mine” attitude, and a fear of failure. They are a group of youth who feel entitled to opportunity, affluence, and success regardless of their merit or work ethic. When adding suburbia to this equation, there is a great deal of pressure felt by youth who believe they will replicate the success of their environments, despite the fact that the current economic landscape does not guarantee this as a foregone conclusion. These traits also suggest that they may not be equipped to deal with failure because they have been brought up in a physical environment that visually and ideologically represents financial success as automatic to children who have not had to do the work necessary for the benefits they have received and feel entitled to. Over the course of their upbringing, they have been witness to an over-saturated mediascape that idolizes instant celebrity, game show winners, and reality shows featuring lifelong socialites. Suburban youth have been padded with social conditionings and cultural representations that attempt to completely contain failure by emphasizing and embellishing an idea of easy success. This new

generation in suburbia sees large scale homes and countless strip malls as *normal* and expected in their everyday visual world. They have the authority and means by which to obtain instantaneous answers and information despite space and time, and they are privileged as consumers of cultural forms, texts, and technologies that enable them to access the world at their finger tips. There are countless contradictions that together, create a complicated web defining youth within suburbia.

Trying to pinpoint a suburban identity has been noted as something rather simple and banal in much of the traditional literature. One cannot deny the images of "things" associated with life in the suburbs: cars, lawn mowers, dishwashers, garage door openers - the list is endless:

> 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 (Haar, 1972: 41).

However, fundamental to this is the understanding that "it is not the desire to conform that is driving the consumption process, but rather the quest for distinction" (Heath & Potter, 2004: 126). "[I]t is rebellion, not conformity, that has for decades been the driving force of the marketplace" (Heath & Potter, 2004: 99). It should be noted that this quest for distinction has always been a part of suburban ideology and this characteristic is an attributing factor to the massive exodus from major cities, and into the protective dwellings built in the "country." From its inception as an idea that forged a new North American frontier, suburbia

has always contained residents wanting to be “separate” while paradoxically maintaining many characteristics of mass society. On the surface it may seem like a simple task to define and discuss suburbia, however, this proves to be a dense subject when carefully examined.

METHODOLOGY

i. Video Production

I came into this project with many assumptions. Some of them based on my own personal experiences growing up in suburbia, others bounded by the literature I spent so much time digesting. Other assumptions came from media depictions of what goes on in the suburbs, and predictions as to what certain people would say or how others would react. What I ended up finding is something far more interesting and complex than I could have imagined. It is refreshing to discover that there is more to know about suburbia and the people that live there.

Suburbs are not homogenous. One cannot claim that all suburbs everywhere are the same. Histories vary, populations differ and there are always exceptions to the concepts we sometimes tend to essentialise. However, there are in fact characteristics that most suburbs share, hence we can have a relevant body of literature that can definitively locate these spaces *a*s suburban - geographically as well as culturally.

I did not limit my research to one suburban community. Rather, I looked at several geographic locales that share many characteristics that lend to a

commonsense understanding of suburban ideology. In some sense, this is essentialising these spaces, however the fact that I could easily find suburbs, that not only replicated each other, but followed the same historical trajectory as the first American suburbs post World War II, speaks to the ways in which these spaces can be discussed on common ground.

Suburbs were selected based on the following characteristics:

i. Socioeconomic status
ii. Racial demographics
iii. Geographical relationship to an urban centre
iv. A definitive historical development that occurs post World War II
v. Accessibility for conducting interviews

Based on personal experience, research, and conversations with residents and academics; both Whitby, Ontario and Tecumseh, Ontario share these characteristics and will be discussed below (P. Frawley, J. Ganis, K. Bardwell, M. Durington personal communication, 2009).

i. Socioeconomic Status

As post World War II spaces, these suburbs remain fairly affluent. In 2005 the province of Ontario claimed a median income of $87,960 for "couple households with children," while in the same year the median income for "couple households with children" in Whitby and Tecumseh was $107,436 and $115,849 respectively (Statistics Canada, 2006). However, after speaking with residents, these spaces are currently suffering from ongoing economic hardships given that both towns have large populations employed by the failing automobile industry. With Whitby

situated near General Motors in Oshawa, Ontario and many Tecumseh residents relying on employment from the “Big Three” in Windsor, Ontario, these suburbs historically depend on manufacturing as a subset of their economic stability. As such, there will be inevitable changes to the ways in which both of these spaces operate as towns located in close proximity to obsolete manufacturing hubs. Sentiments of fear are clear among many residents of Whitby and Tecumseh, as an increasing number of them are losing their jobs and the pressure to maintain affluence is felt among most, including youth (M. Bardwell, M. Durington and P. Frawley, personal communication, 2009).

ii. Racial Demographics

While these suburbs are changing in terms of demographics, the majority of these populations currently remain white. According to Statistics Canada’s results from the 2006 census, Whitby had a total of 110,455 residents, 91,720 of whom were listed as “not a visible minority.” Tecumseh had a population of 24,200 people, with 22,805 of them listed as “not a visible minority” (Statistics Canada, 2006).[1] However, in conversation with high school teacher Paul Frawley, the closer the suburbs are to the city of Toronto, the more culturally diverse the populations are, and as seen in public schools; have an almost “a fifty - fifty ratio between white students and other visible minority groups” (personal communication, March 21, 2009).

[1] Visible minority, according to Statistics Canada, are those people who identify themselves as Aboriginal, Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, Multiple visible minority, or visible minority not included elsewhere.

iii. Geographical relationship to an urban centre

Both of these suburbs are in reasonable driving distance to an urban area, with many adults commuting to and from workplaces in the city. This is a very common characteristic of suburban life, often contributing to a weakened parent-child relationship due to the amount of time parents spend away from the home, the mental and financial anxiety of driving to and from work, and the pressure to maintain the level of affluence required to ensure their continued living within that suburb (P. Frawley and M. Durington, personal communication, 2009).

iv. A definitive historical development that occurs post World War II

While many acknowledge that suburbs are not homogenous, because of a shared historical development post World War II in North America, many scholars and much of the literature describes a common suburban ethos or identity by virtue of the fact that they developed out of similar political, social, and economic contexts.[2] While we should not ignore the fact that modern suburbs can be examined individually, their similarities cannot be ignored either. The things they share are extremely important in understanding the profound impact of suburban ideology. While not all suburban residents seek to participate in the suburban ideologies so often discussed in media discourse, residents cannot remove themselves from these ideologies completely, because they are living within an environment that subscribes to, and is governed by, these ideologies (if nothing else, as they are perceived in mass media representations). In addition, we must acknowledge that

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[2] While this is extremely important in understanding "suburbia," this historical trajectory cannot be summed up within the context of this paper. The immediately relevant issues of a post World War II housing crisis, racial segregation, and Cold War anxieties are outlined in *Suburban Nation.*

while there are exceptions to every rule, especially when it comes to cultural classification, we must realise that people cannot completely remove themselves from the society in which they are embedded.

After examining both Canadian and American suburban literature, both countries share many characteristics. The most significant to this investigation is that of their historical and ideological development as post World War II spaces. In addition, it is useful to examine the language and imagery that sold the myths of suburbia. The differences between Canadian and American suburban advertisements are so minimal that the specific national location of these spaces is often difficult to point out.[3] In Richard Harris' quintessential account of suburban development in Canada, the first few pages introduce concepts that are nearly identical to the ways in which Kenneth Jackson discusses the historical development of the American suburb in the authoritative book*, Crabgrass Frontier*. While these prolific works begin their analysis at different time periods, they suggest that suburban ideology and suburban myth, whether Canadian or American, are very similar (Jackson, 1985 & Harris, 2004).[4]

Subsequently, I focus on two suburbs in Southern Ontario, a region that is in geographic proximity to the American-Canadian border. As such, these two suburbs receive more American media than other Canadian cities and are thus

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[3] In *Suburban Nation* the evidence of strip malls, fast food chains, and "corporate continuity" makes it difficult to differentiate between American and Canadian locales, as suburbs from both countries appear in the documentary.

[4] There are clear differences between people living within the United States and Canada. However, when discussing suburban ethos and ideology within these terms, it is appropriate to look at individual spaces as some of them have more similarities than differences despite the fact that they are located in different countries.

exposed to similar representations, ideologies, and mediated messages. In the case of Tecumseh, residents receive signals from Detroit, Michigan and the surrounding area, and in the case of Whitby, residents receive signals from Buffalo, New York and the surrounding area.

v. Accessibility for conducting interviews

Living in Windsor enabled me easy access to Tecumseh by car due to its close proximity. Traveling back and forth in order to conduct interviews, collect footage from suburban youth, and record b-reel was within my means. While Whitby was not as easily accessible due to its distance from Windsor, I did grow up in that area and I do have connections to people and places there. This made it an ideal subject because I was able to solidify accommodations, contacts, and locations.

ii. Aesthetics

Digital video calls attention to the multitude of tangible connotations associated with the prevalent visual signs of suburbia. Suburbia, the space, has a definite visual identity, making it a recognizable culture. These visual signs not only represent a multitude of meanings, they are a language with which to articulate suburban ideology without the use of words. The structured rows of houses reinforce notions of organization and containment. The sight of individual basketball nets on each driveway is a striking visual that suggests children play alone on small pavement pads, rather than as a team in a communal gathering space. Strip malls and plazas are also a common feature that make suburbs

seem uniform through what Matthew Durington calls “corporate continuity” (personal communication February 2009) and nearly indistinguishable from one to another. Fences, gates, and hedges suggest that these spaces are organized with security in mind and the size of schools, houses, and businesses suggest the level of affluence one may have as a resident and consumer.

Aesthetics can often affect the content. Using juxtaposition, manipulating time, and adding a soundtrack can drastically alter the content of the research. These things can enhance the overall quality of a documentary or reduce what is being said into something trivial. Editing is an ethical undertaking where every single cut can mean a complete change to the message that was intended. While aesthetics are seemingly purely stylistic, they are also integral to the communication process itself. A discussion of the ways in which major aesthetic features are used in *Suburban Nation* is included in the following pages.

As a relatively new field, visual culture is a way of understanding and observing suburban spaces and people:

> Visual culture is new precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and contested...even literary studies have been forced to conclude that the world-as-a-text has been replaced by the world-as-a-picture. Such world-pictures cannot be purely visual, but by the same token, the visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms (Mirzoeff, 2001: 6-8).

The way in which suburbia is expressed in space, is largely dependent on that which is visual and thus, it is appropriate that this project incorporate insights from this scholarly area of investigation.

Historical Footage:

Viewing mediated messages from a specific time period helps to place some of the issues at hand in context. I used archival films to frame some of the ideas I wished to highlight via an aesthetically pleasing medium. These clips hold a sense of irony as we watch, and at times condemn, what was considered popular, what was socially acceptable, or even what was relevant enough to capture on film. The irony in these films can lead us to make connections between outdated ideologies and contemporary society. Just because styles and trends appear different, problematic ideas may remain intact. As such, these films hold a very important historical memory. As North Americans, we can watch these ephemeral films with a sense of irony, because we can collectively 'remember' what they are trying to communicate, as a present society viewing the past.

In addition, this footage simply fills in the holes when addressing the history of the suburbs themselves, while contextualizing the contemporary suburban space and the people who live there. These films are about suburban life when the suburbs were first appearing on the North American landscape. They reveal that suburbs have been a topic of thoughtful discussion and concern, since their inception. Whether it be a public service announcement, a way to sell building materials, or a condemnation of the ways in which suburbs were established, these films reveal that there have *always* been competing interests and concerns regarding these spaces. It is appropriate to highlight these diverging historical voices as a way to place the contemporary paradoxes into context.

B-reel:

Collecting images for this kind of research is a highly artistic process in that these images take the place of a traditional, written format. As such, these images and corresponding sounds leave aspects of the research open to interpretation. This interpretation then, becomes a way in which the audience is actively involved in the study. The nature of documentary film allows the viewer to engage with the intended message of the director while incorporating their own framework in which to understand and digest research (Steven, 1993: 77-96). For some, an image of rows and rows of identical houses is repulsively restricting and representative of conformity. While for others, this same image is one that ignites a sense of organization, safety, and well-being. As such, part of the way in which we come to this project is as active participants in helping to establish its meaning.

The b-reel footage included in this documentary was gathered from visits to Whitby, Ontario; New Haven, Michigan; Columbia, Maryland, and Tecumseh, Ontario. While I came to this project envisioning a very stale and grey terrain, I came to realise that there is colour and life within these spaces that cannot be ignored or removed from the frame without completely manipulating the reality. While trees may be young and growing in an unnatural pattern, they do add green space to the streets. While ponds may be dug by human hands, they bring wildlife to these manmade communities. While there is in fact an over abundance of concrete and buildings that lack architectural flare, to ignore the beauty would be a disservice to these communities and the life that exists there.

This documentary film is heavily invested in the audio-visual, both as a means by which to communicate the subject matter, as well as being a part of the subject matter itself. However, “visual culture, like any other means of sign analysis, must engage with historical research” (Mirzoeff, 2001: 14). In order to theoretically inform this visual exploration, I conducted research that included, but was not limited to, historical research and digitally recorded structured and unstructured qualitative interviews with residents of, and professionals who have done research on, suburbia. By employing empathetic, creative, and active interviewing techniques, the interviews were intended to contribute a very personal approach to suburbia.

iii. Interviews:

As a reaction against “robot like” interviewing, in the 1980s interviewers became increasingly concerned with understanding “informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words” (Platt, 2002: 40). These “in-depth” interviews [are] born out of the ‘unstructured’ predecessor and “entail not merely obtaining answers, but learning what questions to ask and how to ask them” (Platt, 2002: 39). The importance of interviewing “in-depth” [is] realised as a way to avoid deception and distortion through direct observation of the interviewee and the context of his or her words. This involve[s] relating to the issues at hand, being personable, and “getting to know people well

enough to understand what they mean and creating an atmosphere in which they are likely to talk freely" (Platt, 2002: 40).

While I did script many of the questions that I asked the interviewees, there were questions that were generated based on conversation during the interview. I stressed to each interviewee that I was more interested in having a conversation than I was in surveying them about their opinions. In addition, preparation for the interviews proved to be limited to what research was available about that person. Writing questions before an interview is also indicative of the fact that you have an expected response, of some kind. After conducting the first interview, I realised that I had to throw all expectations out of this research in order to get to the meat of this subject. Only drawing on my own experiences and the questions based on my own understanding would have sold this story short. I had to be spontaneous and open to questioning outside the box.

However, I did try to craft some questions so as to learn more about these people upon meeting them. For example, I always asked if they had any memorable suburban moments or experiences that they wished to share. Interviewees were then able to tell a personal story which would always allow me access to an aspect of their personality, their past, and their feelings toward suburban spaces. I found that this helped take them out of the rigid interview mode and it also provided some new insights into these regions, based on oral history. By using this technique to engage the subject - by evoking something that was interesting and memorable to them - it appeared as though they enjoyed sharing these experiences more openly. In asking this question, I relinquished

control of the interview. It enabled the interviewee to assert their authority in what they knew and how they wished to craft their own stories, sharing something personal on their own terms.

Unstructured interviewing "can provide greater breadth than do the other types given its qualitative nature" (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 705). This type of interview attempts to understand the complexities of human behaviour by taking many elements of the interview process into consideration. While the degree of (un)structure varies from interview to interview, unstructured interviews leave room for interpretation of answers, body language, and speech while also taking social and historical context into account. There is room to ask questions that have not been pre-established, and interacting with the interviewee is encouraged. This entails "the establishment of a human-to-human relation[s] with the respondent and the desire to *understand* rather than to *explain*" (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 706) is the goal. It was not until I met these individuals, face-to-face, that I could expand on their experiences and draw on their perspectives. This far more personal approach, coupled with being open minded in terms of the directionality of the conversation, was far more engaging than I could have hoped to gain from a list of pre-determined questions on its own.

In addition, I tried to word questions so they were appropriate for each individual interviee, rather than wording all questions exactly the same. The anthropology professor had a different way of conversing from the photographer, who spoke differently than the teacher, who spoke differently than the suburban

youth. I tried to be very mindful of this when addressing each person and how I treated them during the interview. I also asked each interviewee, including the suburban youth, how they would like their name to appear in the on-screen titles so that their name and title would be representative on their own terms.

Qualitative research interviews attempt to address the "historically, politically, and contextually bound[edness]" (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 695) through self reflexivity and acknowledging emotional, behavioural and other such elements as being inseparable from the interview process. Interviews, then, are not merely about asking questions and getting answers. They are complex communication processes by which information can only be understood in relation to the interviewee, interviewer, and the interview context as a whole.

Unstructured interviews have served as a viable and effective way in which to gather research. This contemporary form of interviewing works well with the method of videotape as subtle nuances of ones behaviour can be caught by the camera and serve to provide a deeper understanding of the subject, the visual cues, and the words being spoken. This was particularly useful in viewing the clips of suburban youth, as their body language, appearance, and accessories contribute to how the viewer internalizes these images. Rationale for the use of qualitative interviews comes from the desire to understand as well as acknowledge my own self reflexivity and be open to more creative forms of gathering research. Finally, active interviewing enabled me to focus on exploring alternative perspectives. "Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the

aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing - the possible answers - that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be" (Holstein & Gubrium,1995: 37). This type of interview assumes that the ways in which a respondent interacts with an interviewer is as much a part of the research as the answers being given. This technique was important in how I was able to make sense of conflicting opinions amongst youth, and include these in the documentary. Depending on who youth were with at the time of questioning, answers were often contradictory. While at the beginning of the video, Meaghan Bardwell asserts that she likes living in suburbia, later in the documentary when she is with her male skateboarder friends, she states that she wants to move, echoing the sentiments of her immediate peers. In addition, I attempted to be flexible with tangent oriented discussions, and to get involved with the interview process by interacting *with* the interviewee rather than talking *at* them. I encouraged feedback rather than maintaining a separation between interviewee and interviewer, as more traditional methods would call for.

Empowering the subjects:

I encouraged my young suburban interviewees to videotape themselves in order to empower their own voices and validate their own experiences through their own making. Giving them the power to show what they wanted to show and say what they wanted to say seemed to make them more comfortable with participating and proved to be much more insightful than simply asking them questions. They provided a more honest and pure point of view when they turned

the camera on themselves because they were in control of what we saw, without the pressure of a crew, the confines of a location, or the boundaries of scripted questions. Their personalities and speech were noticeably different when filming themselves versus being interviewed. They seemed more relaxed, more confident, and more outgoing in the absence of adult crew members. Motivated by the creative potential that interviews hold in gathering research that is multi-dimensional and interpretive, creative Interviewing allows the interviewer and interview to engage in conversation. The goal is not to obtain statistical data of yes and no answers, rather it is to observe experience and recognize this as a relevant form of research.

This method of collecting research is also in line with social justice interviewing techniques in that the interviewer relinquishes their power and in turn, empowers the interviewee. While I did edit the footage for the final product, this approach also enabled the interviewees to interrogate their own lives. By working on a daily video dairy, the interviewees were able to articulate their day to day thoughts and feelings about their own environment. Their experiences are thus validated by way of research that seeks to present their lives as something relevant and meaningful.

CONCLUSION
Through the Looking Glass: Reflecting on the Production Process

This type of research has been quite liberating. While I had prepared interview questions, there was never any way to predict what an interviewee would say, how they would react, or what they would look like on videotape. While this

unpredictability can be challenging when attempting to work within the framework of existing literature, it opens up new possibilities and allows for new conversations to take place. Giving the interviewee the freedom to say what they want, and to discuss rather than give 'answers,' challenges older, more traditional methodological frameworks in order to reveal alternative realities. After conducting interviews, my research and analysis took completely new directions. Had I not gone into the field in order to interview people, my research and analysis would have been quite stale and would have most likely followed in direct line with pre-existing literature, some of which proved to be extremely useful in informing ideas but outdated when thinking about immediate cultural relationships. One of the most striking features of this documentary was the differences between how youth and adults think about, and discuss, life in suburbia. While Mr. Paul Frawley commented on how the suburban space was one of safety and opportunity for his children, some of the youth I interviewed lamented that "there was nothing to do" and that they very much disliked living in the suburb. As well, suburban youth, as a group, expressed a varying range of opinions regarding the suburb, and often these opinions changed depending on who they were speaking in front of. The sentiments they vocalized on camera suggested that they do not always share a collective attitude regarding suburban life. When real people are engaged in documented conversation, something that would have been reduced to paper becomes something multi-dimensional, fluid, and unbounded. Making predictions or planning how I wanted people to respond was impossible, as body language and location added so much density to the content. This is not a black or white

issue and delving into the world of contemporary suburbia involves making the varying shades of grey visible.

I acknowledge that this is but one version of suburban reality, however; it is a reality and a marginalized one at that. This prompted me to ask all of the interviewees the same question at the end of every interview. I shared with them the sentiment that "suburbia is not worth caring about" as stated by James Howard Kunstler [5] (February 2004) and asked them to tell me what they thought about the statement. Each response was slightly different but each interviewee rejected this notion, despite the critiques they may have made about these spaces earlier in the interview. All of those I interviewed believed, quite strongly, that these spaces are integral in our North American landscape, and whether we agree with the reigning ideologies or not, real people live and work within these realms. John Ganis said "of course we have to care, we have to care about people" (personal communication January 24, 2009). Matthew Durington argued that these are the spaces that represent American society - the spaces where we can realise how our political economy functions and how racial identity is formed (personal communication, February 21, 2009). The suburban youth showed concern because these are the spaces that protect and shelter them; the places where they can gather with friends; and in many cases, the only space they know (personal communication April 2009). All of these are reasons to continue

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[5] James Howard Kunstler's work should not be reduced to this statement. He has an incredibly progressive way of understanding and dealing with the suburbs by advocating and offering alternatives to the confined, consumerist based, mundane landscapes. While he makes very provocative statements regarding his disgust for these "architectural wastelands" in public lecture, documentaries, and in his books *The Geography of Nowhere* and *The Long Emergency,* Kunstler believes that North Americans' can "do better" in an effort to produce more meaningful living spaces (Kunstler, Feb 2004).

analysis, questioning, understanding, and of course, they are reasons to care about suburbia.

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APPENDIX

Note: These are applicable to the unabridged version of *Suburban Nation.*

i. Permission to use John Ganis' photography

Delivery Memo/Agreement

From: John Ganis
44 Fairwood
Pleasant Ridge MI 48069

To: Sara Hines
3801 Riverside Drive East
Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1B2

John Ganis is providing digital files of 14 images listed below to Sara Hines for inclusion in her film (video) on Sprawl. All images are copyright John Ganis and are released for one time use in the film only. Full credit will be given in the film to John Ganis for the usage of the images. There will be no monetary fee for this one time use.

Sara Hines agrees not to duplicate the image files except for the inclusion in her video or print them into 2 dimensional form and further agrees to return the original CD of the files to John Ganis at the above address.

04. High Point Subdivision Site, near Denver International Airport, Colorado, 2008
6. Subdivision Development, South Carolina 1987
10. Plastic Cows, Buckhorn, Pennsylvania 1986
11. Earth Roller, Buckhorn , Pennsylvania 1985
12. Burning Tires & Trees, Highway Construction, Tennessee 1990
13. Chrysler Tech Center Construction, Michigan 1987
53. High Meadows Subdivision Near Columbus, Ohio 1989
59. Housing Development in Cholla Forest, Sonora Desert, Arizona 1999
60. Suburban Sprawl, Park City, Utah 1998
61. Housing Development, Southern California 1989
62. Sun City Development, Oro Valley, Arizona 1992
63. Golf Course, Sonora Desert, Arizona 1989
64. Golf Course With Housing Development In Distance, Oro Valley, Arizona 1996
Rockrimmon Subdivisions and Pike View Aggregate Mine, Colorado Springs, 2008

John Ganis, Photographer — Date: 2/27/09

Sara Hines, Filmmaker — Date: 3/07/2009

VITA AUCTORIS

Sara Hines was born in 1982 in Ajax, Ontario. She graduated from the University of Windsor in 2006 where she obtained a BA[H] in Communication Studies. She successfully defended this MA Thesis on Friday June 5th, 2009.