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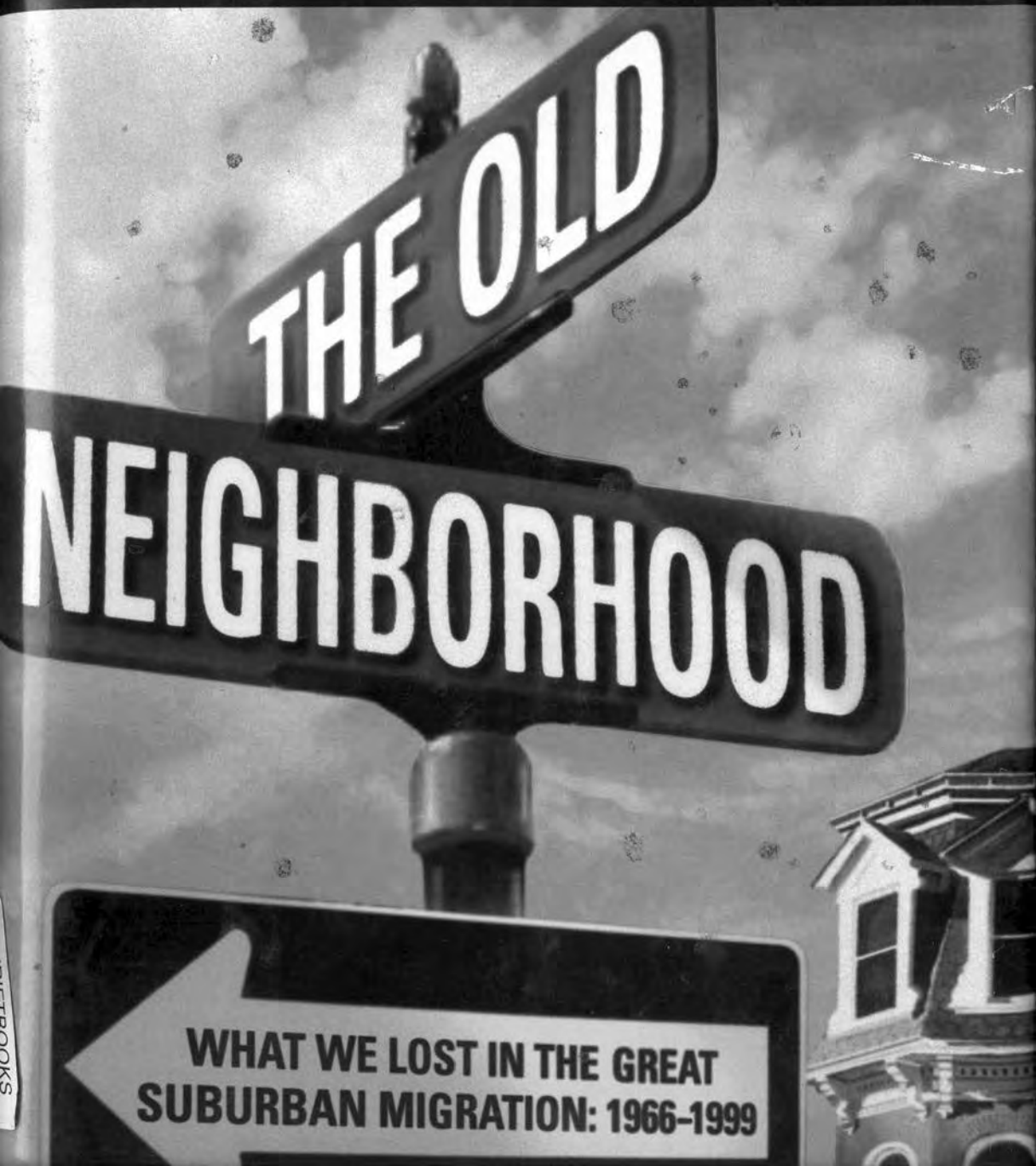

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

What We Lost in the Great Suburban Migration, 1966–1999

RAY SUAREZ

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One of the parts of being a reporter that is a constant surprise is the willingness of people to open their lives to a curious stranger. During the months of research and interviews, I was struck by the generosity, honesty, and willingness to share of people all around the country. I rang their bells, wandered into their yards, and joined them sitting on the front porch. People dropped what they were doing to give me rides. They took long lunches, skipped mornings at work, and introduced me to other people they felt I should know for my story.

The reminiscences from so many people who loved and lost their old neighborhoods were funny, touching, and sometimes painful. Thanks to the Manelli family, Chip Bromley, Bob Hartley, Bobbi Reichtell, the Wos family, David Shucker, Fr. David Baldwin, Bishop John Manz, Gary Schwab, Gregory Pitts, Jeanette Fields, Daniel Lauber, the Davis family, Tom O'Connell, Regina Lind, Rick Rosenfeld, Veronica Evans, the Petroff family, Art Atkinson, Joe Waters, Ferd Kramer, the Gallagher family, Felix Bartholomew, Auguretto Batiste, Elijah Anderson, Chakah Fattah, Helene Hoffman, the Zielinski family, Arnold Duncan, Dempsey Travis, Tom Bier, and so many others.

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Chapter 1

What We Lost

The fix was in. The whispers rasped over a million dinner tables and the numbers were crunched over a thousand conference tables as another family decided, "That's enough," and cities continued to slide down the population tables. Maybe you've heard of cities as the hole in the doughnut. Or maybe you've heard of chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs. Perhaps you've heard a recent speaker of the House denounce the cities as parasitic bodies living off their hardworking American host.

They now speak with an accent. Their plaster is shot. Their windows rattle in the sash. We eat in their restaurants, wondering if the car is safe. We listen to their symphonies and regret that long drive home. We remember a million years in ten million childhoods. We feel a mixture of sadness, nostalgia, and relief when we take that final turn and swing onto the freeway entrance ramp. We head home: to a place where we can choose our neighbors.

When you talk about the city, the conversation ends with an exasperated litany. In the city, the kids don't learn to read and still want more and more of our taxes to pay for their crumbling buildings, and to pay the salaries of the members of the teacher's unions. Violent young men com-

mit random acts of mayhem. The cities satisfy America's craving for drugs, cheap labor, and expensive entertainment. In front of the late TV news we shake our heads in disgust over their comically corrupt politics, goofball racial agitators, and the parade of black and brown suspects into the back of squad cars.

Starting in 1945, one of the Great Migrations of American history took place, and it continues to shape the country to this day, politically, economically, and socially. Unlike the nineteenth-century flow of Conestoga wagons through the Cumberland Gap and on to the West, and unlike the early-twentieth-century black migration from the Jim Crow South to the urban North, this was a choreographed combination of mini-migrations: white migrants left the old neighborhood behind and left the very idea of "neighborhoods" behind. They left the old giants–New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit–and the industrial centers–Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Buffalo, and St. Louis. While the settlers a century ago, and blacks earlier this century, left all that was familiar to start again in a strange new world, these modern migrants sometimes headed just a little past the city line. Their old world was not "gone" but now just a car ride away. But the force of each small journey combined to slam the old cities of America like a hurricane. While those earlier migrations survive in family stories and fading photographs, this last one lives vividly in present memory. Maybe you or your parents were part of it. . . .

Nostalgia, mixed with geographic proximity and racial resentment, creates a toxic potion. The pioneers of the postwar urban migration are convinced there was once a better city than the one we see today. We know there was because we used to live there. The old city lives on in the speeches of politicians and in flickering black-and-white reruns on a hundred cable channels. There's Chester Riley. And Ralph Kramden. And Lucy Ricardo. And Lou Costello. And Mrs. Goldberg. Urbanites all. They walk to the grocery store. They know their neighbors. They may have even walked to church (or shul).

It's not hard to get people to tell the stories of that good, gone life. In Cleveland's Buckeye neighborhood. In Philadelphia's Mantua on the west bank of the Schuylkill River. In Miami's Opa-Locka and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Back on Ninety-first Street in Chicago. Maybe you

lived there. You may even drive by every now and then. Or maybe you find you want to less and less. It doesn't look like the place where you stood after your first Holy Communion, hair slicked into place, smiling through the gaps in your teeth.

> *There was constant talk during those years: Who was going? Who was staying? I think it made me cynical beyond my years. People would say, "We are not moving! We are not going! We are staying here forever!" Then they'd move at night! When the chips were down they would leave.*
>
> Bob Hartley, on Chicago's Austin neighborhood in the 1970s

Everybody's got a story. Some are bathed in sepia, others filled with "begats," like an Old Testament book. The alibis are short, starting with, "Well, you know," and ending with "the schools," "the crime," or "the neighborhood." Where does folktale stop and reality begin? Now that the damage is done, and the cities are hollowed out, it still matters enough to you to point fingers, though you may not always be sure you're pointing them in the right directions. Can you assign culpability to a crime with ten million accomplices?

The year 1950 was the last full cry of urban America, at least on the surface. It was the year many of the cities visited in this book reached their historic peaks in population. Everybody was working, in folk memory, and in fact. Armies clad in overalls poured out of plants at quitting time or watched as the next shift filed in. Houses cost a couple of thousand bucks, or in high-cost cities some fifteen thousand. The mortgage was often less than a hundred a month. The teeming ethnic ghettos of the early century had given way to a more comfortable life, with religion and ethnicity, race and class still used as organizing principles for the neighborhood. The rough edges of the immigrant "greenhorns" were worn smooth, and a confident younger generation now entered a fuller, richer American life. Grandma and Grandpa had their accents and old ways intact, and still mumbled sayings in the language your parents used when they didn't want you to understand. You could still find *Il Progresso, Freiheit, Norske Tidende,* and *Polish Daily Zgoda* on the newsstands, but the

neighborhoods themselves were no longer alien places. It was the ghetto, yes, but made benign by assimilation.

It was this world that the first surge tide into the suburbs left behind. They were people for whom the city had done its work, making Americans out of families from Dublin to Donetsk. America had given the urban young educations, and expectations. For many, those expectations had been nurtured through world war and economic depression. Something better was needed for the baby boomers.

Charles and Anne Marie Manelli both grew up in St. Louis neighborhoods. When they came back to the Midwest from a stint in Denver, young son in tow, they headed right back to Anne Marie's neighborhood on the far north side, not far from the city line, and now found something lacking. "I don't think we would have stayed in the city even if we could have found a big enough house on the same block where we were living," Anne Manelli says. "We wanted change. The neighborhood was getting older, though I guess at that time it wasn't really that old, maybe twenty-five years old or so."

Charles Manelli recalls the spirit of the times. "People our age at that time all wanted to buy houses, and there just weren't any houses available in the city of St. Louis. So they all moved, and bought homes out in the county. The city was really emptying out quickly at that time. So sure, there were houses, but they were not the houses that the young people would have wanted. There was a lot of old real estate in the city, and the new subdivisions was where the young people wanted to go.

"We bought our first home on the GI Bill, that's the way everyone was going then. You had two bathrooms, three bedrooms, it was different. And you could buy these houses for twenty thousand dollars, eighteen thousand dollars. That's what the young people wanted. They didn't want the big brick bungalows."

The Manellis were not alone. Millions moved from central cities to newly created suburbs, and from the northeast quarter of the country to the south and west. In 1950, the populations of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, Cleveland, St. Louis, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore reached their historic highs. Some, like Detroit, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Cleveland, would soon enter free fall, shrinking by 50 percent or more. Others, like Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia,

had simply grown as much as the economic realities of the day would allow, and entered a phase of slow and steady population decline, while the suburbs around them grew.

1.	New York	7,891,957	11.	San Francisco	775,357
2.	Chicago	3,620,962	12.	Pittsburgh	676,806
3.	Philadelphia	2,071,605	13.	Milwaukee	632,392
4.	Los Angeles	1,970,358	14.	Houston	596,163
5.	Detroit	2,000,398	15.	Buffalo	580,132
6.	Baltimore	949,708	16.	New Orleans	570,445
7.	Cleveland	914,808	17.	Minneapolis	521,718
8.	St. Louis	856,796	18.	Cincinnati	503,998
9.	Washington, D.C.	802,178	19.	Seattle	468,000
10.	Boston	800,000	20.	Kansas City, Mo.	457,000

Take a look at the list of America's twenty largest cities in 1950, shown above. With the exception of Los Angeles, every city in the top ten is on, or east of, the Mississippi River. Among the top twenty, only Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and Seattle fall out of the nation's northeast quadrant, running from Minneapolis in the north, along the Mississippi, to St. Louis in the south, east to the Atlantic Coast and north to Boston. Almost half of the top twenty had been sizable cities by the middle of the nineteenth century. Only five cities had populations of over a million, and only one city west of the Mississippi had reached that plateau.

These were the top twenty cities for 1960:

1.	New York	7,781,984	11.	San Francisco	740,316
2.	Chicago	3,550,404	12.	Milwaukee	741,324
3.	Los Angeles	2,479,015	13.	Boston	697,197
4.	Philadelphia	2,002,512	14.	Dallas	679,684
5.	Detroit	1,670,000	15.	New Orleans	627,525
6.	Baltimore	939,024	16.	Pittsburgh	604,332
7.	Houston	938,219	17.	San Antonio	587,718
8.	Cleveland	876,000	18.	San Diego	573,224
9.	Washington, D.C.	763,956	19.	Seattle	557,087
10.	St. Louis	750,026	20.	Buffalo	532,759

By 1960, Los Angeles had surged ahead of Philadelphia, growing by almost a third in size. Houston, through rapid growth and significantly, by annexation (it more than doubled from 160 to 328 square miles in area), jumped seven places. San Antonio and San Diego joined the top twenty, giving Texas and California three cities each on the list. The exodus from "old" urban America to the suburbs and the new cities of the Sun Belt was on.

Cities like Philadelphia and Detroit were shrinking in overall population, but the urban cores of metropolitan areas were still growing. Washington and St. Louis were already showing the early signs of their long, slow declines, while their metropolitan areas grew, and towns once little more than names on a map began to grow with increasing speed. By 1960 it is clear that the axis of growth in the country was moving away from the North and East toward the South and West.

The twenty largest cities in 1970:

1.	New York	7,894,862	11.	Indianapolis	744,624
2.	Chicago	3,366,957	12.	Milwaukee	717,099
3.	Los Angeles	2,816,061	13.	San Francisco	715,674
4.	Philadelphia	1,950,098	14.	San Diego	696,769
5.	Detroit	1,511,482	15.	San Antonio	654,153
6.	Houston	1,232,802	16.	Boston	641,071
7.	Baltimore	905,759	17.	Memphis	623,530
8.	Dallas	844,401	18.	St. Louis	622,236
9.	Washington, D.C.	756,510	19.	New Orleans	593,471
10.	Cleveland	750,903	20.	Phoenix	581,562

By 1970, as your late-night local news weatherman would say, the map is really in motion. Houston nearly doubled in size since 1960, again through annexation, but also through robust population growth. The populations of Philadelphia, Detroit, Washington, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Boston are heading to the new suburbs surrounding those old cities. Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, San Diego, and San Antonio continue their steady growth. Indianapolis (another product of suburban annexation) jumped from nowhere to eleventh on the list.

Here's 1980:

1.	New York	7,071,639	11.	San Antonio	685,809
2.	Chicago	3,005,078	12.	Indianapolis	700,719
3.	Los Angeles	2,966,848	13.	San Francisco	678,974
4.	Philadelphia	1,688,210	14.	Memphis	646,356
5.	Houston	1,595,167	15.	Washington	638,333
6.	Detroit	1,203,339	16.	Milwaukee	636,212
7.	Dallas	904,074	17.	San Jose	629,442
8.	San Diego	875,538	18.	Cleveland	573,822
9.	Phoenix	789,704	19.	Columbus	564,866
10.	Baltimore	786,775	20.	Boston	562,904

The dynamic we saw at work in 1970 had taken hold more fully by 1980. New York City lost more than eight hundred thousand people in the 1970s. Think of it: a loss larger than the entire city of Phoenix at that time. Factories continued to close. Fortune 500 corporate headquarters continued their steady flight from the city. New Yorkers left for other regions of the country and for the burgeoning suburbs of northern New Jersey, Westchester County, and Nassau and Suffolk counties, which the census bureau would soon classify as a separate metropolitan statistical area—no longer an appendage of the city. The economic decline of New York's bread-and-butter industries, like clothing, printing, and shipping, landed heavily on all New Yorkers. The poor saw themselves as stuck. The rich could surround themselves with physical barriers, continuing to live a charmed life in a declining city. The middle class lacked the cash to insulate themselves from the diminishing quality of services, but they had one thing the poor did not: mobility.

In the 1970s, large-scale population loss continued in Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Baltimore, while the metropolitan areas of all these shrinking big cities continued to grow. Columbus, its economy built on state government and insurance, was on its way to becoming the largest city in Ohio, while metal-bashing, blue-collar Cleveland continued its decline. In just ten years, Phoenix jumped from twentieth place to ninth on the list. San Jose, a small city of just ninety-five thousand in 1950, living in the shadow of nearby San Francisco, was now nipping at its heels (in part by growing from 17 to 171 square miles). This was Cleve-

land's last appearance in the top twenty, and St. Louis had already dropped from it, never to be seen again.

By 1990, America's urban future is more clearly visible. The 1990 census is the last time any city with fewer than one million inhabitants will appear on the list of the largest American cities. But at a time when magazine covers and conferences bemoan the "decline of urban America," not all of urban America is in decline. Just the old one. Los Angeles, Houston, San Diego, Dallas, Phoenix, San Jose, and San Antonio continued their rapid growth in the 1980s. Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Washington, and Boston continued to shrink. From an urban population concentrated in the northeast quadrant of the country in 1950, America's biggest cities have become a far more diverse group, now straddling the coasts and the southern tier of states. The Metropolis of the Prairie–Chicago–will be the only city of the ten largest cities outside the Old South and the coasts in 2000, but it will have lost nearly one million people since 1950. Philadelphia, according to census estimates, will have shrunk by a third. Detroit's population will have dropped in half, that of St. Louis by almost two-thirds. Washington continues its rapid decline and may be down to half a million people by the turn of the century. In other words, the capital of the world's remaining superpower will be home to fewer people than the capital of Ohio. Sparks, smells, the hum of the mill, and the clank of the machine are *out*. "Clean" industry, government employment, retirees, and service industries are *in*.

The twenty largest American cities in 1990:

1.	New York	7,322,564	11.	San Jose	782,248
2.	Los Angeles	3,485,498	12.	Baltimore	736,014
3.	Chicago	2,783,726	13.	Indianapolis	731,327
4.	Houston	1,630,553	14.	San Francisco	723,959
5.	Philadelphia	1,585,577	15.	Jacksonville	635,230
6.	San Diego	1,110,549	16.	Columbus	652,910
7.	Detroit	1,027,974	17.	Milwaukee	628,088
8.	Dallas	1,006,877	18.	Memphis	610,337
9.	Phoenix	983,403	19.	Washington	606,900
10.	San Antonio	935,933	20.	Boston	574,283

Hidden in the raw numbers, there is another math at work dictating the fates and fortunes of the country's big cities: Race. As the cities that have become the home to the largest minority populations are consistently described as places of "blight" and "decay," the largest and fastest-growing cities, with few exceptions, are inhabited by whites in percentages higher than that of white people in the overall national population.

Some cities now face declines in their overall black population as well: In Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Cleveland, for example, middle-class blacks can use the same mobility wielded by their white counterparts twenty and thirty years ago to head for the suburbs.

I felt kind of threatened that my neighborhood was being invaded by these people. It proved difficult for one kid, that moved in that was a new pupil, and his name was Andre Baker. I really made it rough. We had a big fight, it came to blows. I really beat the crap out of him, and that was it. And then, as time went on, we became best friends. We got together, we were friends all the way through high school.

As the neighborhood started to change the first black families moved away just like the white families did, and they started to be replaced by a lower class of black people, and it started to get rough. I really got beat up a lot. Then the reverse happens. They become very aggressive, and I was the little white kid. I was really intimidated. And all my friends were gone. I felt very alone. My only friends were at high school. It was really rough. I had to ride that bus and walk from the bus every day.

Walt Zielinski, Cleveland

American Latinos, too, are a highly urbanized people. Their presence has grown markedly in the obvious places, like Southern California and Florida, and in the not-so-obvious places, like Milwaukee, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. When you compare the gross population data from the census counts, from 1950 to 1990, and break down those figures by racial composition, a striking number of figures emerges. Cities that appear to have maintained their populations end up occupying a very different place in the imaginations of the largest single population group in the country, the white middle class. While population plateaus or gentle decline from

historic highs give the appearance of a certain viability, another look at the statistics illustrates a verdict pronounced by the white middle class:

	white	black	Latinos	% white
New York				
1950	7,116,441	747,608	n.a.*	90
1990	3,827,088	2,102,512	1,783,511	52
Chicago				
1950	3,111,525	492,265	n.a.	85
1990	1,263,524	1,087,711	545,852	45
Philadelphia				
1950	1,692,637	376,041	n.a.	81
1990	848,586	631,936	89,193	53
Los Angeles				
1950	1,758,773	171,209	n.a.	89
1990	1,841,182	487,674	1,391,411	52
Washington				
1950	517,865	280,803	n.a.	64
1990	179,667	399,604	32,710	29
Baltimore				
1950	723,655	225,099	n.a.	76
1990	287,753	435,768	7,602	39

*In 1950, the census did not count this group.

Between 1950 and 1990, the population of New York stayed roughly level, the white population halved, and the black population doubled. As Chicago lost almost one million people from the overall count, it lost almost two million whites. As the population of Los Angeles almost doubled, the number of whites living there grew by fewer than ninety thousand. Baltimore went from a city of three times as many whites as blacks in 1950 to a city that will have twice as many blacks as whites in the year 2000. All this has happened while the number of blacks in the United States has stayed a roughly constant percentage, between 11 and 13 percent.

By contrast, here are the breakdowns for some of the fastest-growing cities in the country during those same forty years:

	whites	blacks	Latino	% white
Houston				
1950	470,503	124,766	n.a.*	78
1990	859,069	457,990	450,483	52
San Diego				
1960	528,512	34,435	n.a.	92
1990	745,406	104,261	229,519	67
San Jose				
1960	197,403	1,955	n.a.	96
1990	491,280	36,790	208,388	62

*In 1950, the census did not count this group.

The population of whites declined as these cities moved in the years after the war from small and midsized regional population centers to major national players. Though the overall percentage of white population has declined in all of them, the number of whites has more than doubled in San Jose and grew by almost four hundred thousand in Houston. Latinos in large numbers–almost half a million in Houston–don't yet seem to scare off a growing and stable white middle class.

It's no longer worthwhile to ask, "What do Americans want?" There are too many of them who want too many different things and are simply too different from one another to get an answer that makes any sense. But it is valid to say tens of millions of Americans–tens of millions of white middle-class Americans–don't want to live in cities at all. Millions more don't want to live in cities with large minority populations.

Scott Thomas, author of *The Rating Guide to Life in America's Small Cities,* found that many of the fastest-growing small cities, where the residents report a very high quality of life, are also some of the whitest places in America.

"I was looking at 219 different areas, and only about a quarter of them had the proportion of black population comparable to what you find in the country as a whole. With the Hispanic population, there are very few small towns, most of them near the Mexican border, with anywhere near even the national average."

Thomas says that looking at these "micropolitan" areas demands a

wider set of variables when assessing people and the way they live. "Diversity is something that goes beyond some of the simple racial categories. I think adults are generally less educated in the communities I profiled. You're going to find less depth of experience or fewer adults who have gone beyond college degrees, and if that's something that's important to you you're not going to find it except in the college towns like Pullman, Washington, or Ames, Iowa, or Ithaca, New York." Thomas points out that the populations of these small cities, many now enjoying robust growth, are almost entirely native-born. New York and Los Angeles, meanwhile, the two largest cities in the United States, are now home to millions of foreign-born and first-generation Americans.

When discussing their own family's history in America, many people plead "not guilty" to the charge of being an accessory to the postwar meltdown of many older cities. "We just wanted a better life," they say, "and this was the only way to get it." It is easy to forget how many people made their first class adjustment by moving up, but not out: the west side of Cleveland, the neighborhoods along City Line Road in Philadelphia, a string of neighborhoods at the south end of Brooklyn. For hundreds of thousands of families, these neighborhoods became the waiting room for getting out. Getting out didn't have to be the only choice facing a family, since many cities offered a wide range of housing stock and a wide range of lifestyle options. When your family's fortunes began to improve, you could live with people at roughly your own income, without leaving the city.

There was crime in the old neighborhood, but not the kind of crime that's launched ten thousand nightly reports "live, from the scene," on your eleven o'clock news. The unlocked door is a potent symbol in the collective memory of the white-flight generation. As if you've never heard it before, or perhaps knowing you've heard it a million times, as a rhythm of ritual and truth builds during your second decade on the rosary. "We *never* had to lock our doors. Everybody knew everybody. We weren't afraid." Afraid was later. Afraid was coming.

Schools were far from perfect back then. Before 1940, only a minority of the fresh-faced ninth graders who walked in one end walked out as eighteen-year-olds with a high school diploma in their hands. There was

teenage pregnancy, but it ended in marriage more often, which helped camouflage its presence in the neighborhood scene.

For all its shortcomings, life worked. Millions in the American middle class stand on the shoulders of urban America and its public institutional life. The parks and their leagues and summer camps. Varsity teams and school bands. Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts, and Brownies, in units sponsored by public schools and PTAs. Public libraries. Public schools. Public universities that extended the privilege of higher education to an academic elite rather than one created by "good" families and fat bank accounts.

Today, at the other end of the migration, the change is palpable. The era of American urban decline tracks nicely with the decline of a consensus culture. There was a time when the broad American masses all "knew" the same things. *Colliers, Life, Look,* and the *Saturday Evening Post* didn't deliver wildly different versions of America in their pages, nor did any of those magazines drop a very different America into the mailbox from the one you heard about on the big radio and television networks. There was a widely shared set of norms in the 1940s, 1950s, and even the wildly oversold "counter culture" 1960s that gave Americans very definite instructions about what to think. These instructions could be a straitjacket, and they could be merciless to those who colored outside the lines; but the broad consensus culture for white, economically active Americans made community life more reassuring than confining.

For all the wild racial mythology that marked these same decades–the deep separation that actually existed between Americans–those outside the white mainstream bought into the same bourgeois dreams as their distant neighbors. Black workforce participation, marriage, divorce, single parenthood, and other rates far more closely resembled that of the national average than they do today.

I've spoken to hundreds of white city residents who see their lives as conditional, temporary, and fragile. "We can only stay until Jenny hits third grade, then we're out of here," says one. "As long as my son is small, and I can keep an eye out, we're fine. Once he starts moving around by himself more, we can't really stay," says another. The examples are legion: we're

staying as long as . . . , we can only stay if . . . , we're only here until . . . , if we couldn't afford private school, we'd be gone. Implied in each qualifier is the assumption of mobility, the understanding that the moment a family wants to pull the plug on urban life, it can. It's an option not as easily invoked across the racial divide or lower down the economic scale.

Eventually, goes the story for today's urban sojourners, "compensation fatigue" sets in. The strain of having eyes in the back of your head, higher insurance, rotten local services, and the day-upon-day-upon-day stream of bad news finally carries you across a line you were inclined to cross one day anyway. Your parents are already "out there"; so are your brothers and sisters and your friends from high school. The bragging rights of the hardy urbanite are trumped by the brownie points of "doing the right thing."

Back in the city, choices for thousands of other families were already narrow and kept on narrowing. The white working class could head to the new blue-collar suburbs just over the city line, but those new communities would be effectively closed to black home buyers for years to come. In the cities being abandoned, lower-middle-income and poor city dwellers lost the political clout of their middle-class neighbors, who had held institutions like public schools to an acceptable baseline of quality; at the same time, they were losing the kind of economic opportunities that might have allowed them to choose private or parochial education for their children, as businesses followed their owners and their middle managers to the suburbs.

There was a period early on, when it was mixed half-and-half maybe, and you could see that it was working, and it was fine. Then all of a sudden there was a big rush and it was totally changed. But there were so many things . . . the principal at my old school, at Louella, he was a bastard! He had been kicked out of another school, I think by the community, in a black area. I remember him saying to us at meetings, "There's a monster out there waiting to devour you and you better stick together." He was talking about the changes in the community!

Metta Davis, on the Chicago public schools in the early 1970s

After taking a ferocious pounding in the 1960s, the bottom was dropping out of America's shared assumptions in the 1970s. We no longer "all knew" the same things. The further we moved from each other in distance, in racial segregation, and in class stratification, the more different our various Americas became. By the 1980s, along with the steady erosion of the consensus culture there came a lack of affinity and empathy for all those who couldn't share our assumptions. That lack of affinity for those over the line dovetailed nicely with the fiscal realities of new suburban life. The suburban homeowner could target his spending in a way no urban taxpayer ever could: he could decide to send his money to the things that mattered to him–his own kid's school, his local public park–and deny money to things he wanted no part of–urban school systems and public libraries.

It might have been a comforting illusion to believe there was once an America where we were "all in it together." To the extent that it was ever true, the myth was shattered in the thirty years from 1950 to 1980. By the 1980s, not only was it crystal clear that we weren't "all in it together," nobody even had the desire or the energy to pretend it was true.

A feedback loop was established that destroyed the heart of some of America's great cities: Those Americans given a leg up in the new economy–arbitrageurs and software writers, intellectual property lawyers and plastic surgeons–pulled up stakes from shared institutions, weakening them, and took their presence, influence, and money elsewhere. For each family that decided to stick it out, the decision to stay became harder and harder to make as the quality of common life sagged. The migrants were the Americans most likely to demand solutions for municipal problems, most likely to vote, and most likely to get attention. The more this group left its fellow Clevelanders, Philadelphians, New Yorkers, and St. Louisans behind, the more those left behind needed them.

When we no longer lived and worked in proximity to one another, we no longer knew the same things. Once we no longer knew the same things, we no longer had a need for cultural cohesion. Once we no longer had cultural cohesion, it was easier and easier to draw circles of concern more and more narrowly around one's own doorstep. . . .

Let me explain what was happening in Louisville at the time. Urban renewal had come and torn down half of downtown, and blacks started moving west. The minute that happened you could hear people saying it, adults, children repeating what they had heard at home, "The niggers are coming. The niggers are coming," as if it was the plague or something. The questions people asked revolved around it: "When are they going to get here? What does it mean for me?"

Regina Lind, on Louisville in the 1960s

This latest Great Migration has left deep, unacknowledged scars in the lives of millions of families. They were obeying the American siren call to mobility; they were only doing the best thing for their children; they were spending new money in search of space–but the scars were still there. Not all the changes were for the better; not all the motivations were unsullied.

Millions of us feared, fled, and hated. Today we look back on it all in hurt and wonder. How did this happen? Where did that good life go? When an accidental detour or a missed expressway exit brings us into contact with the world we left behind, we can still place all the blame firmly and squarely elsewhere. The shuttered factories and collapsing row houses, the vacant storefronts and rutted streets are regarded with the same awe reserved for the scenes of natural disasters. We look out on a world that somehow, in the American collective memory, destroyed itself.

When we left in '76 there were still houses there. The grammar school is right down here. . . . I got seven kids through that school, I raised seven kids here . . . we had one more after that. Seven sons and a daughter. The Furmans lived here . . . can't remember all their names . . . Scotty and his brother. One of the things you've got to consider in all this is the upward mobility, the desire to be in a better place than your mom and dad were, to want more for yourself and your kids, too. So the upward mobility might not be hinged on what the racial makeup of a neighborhood is, but the desire to improve themselves.

And then there are the senior citizens, what with the constant barrage from kids who had either moved out early and moved to the suburbs or simply moved into some other white sections, saying all the time, you better get out of there. It's not safe for you to be there.

Tom O'Connell, touring his old block in Chicago

It wasn't all the desire for a bigger kitchen and a parking space for the car the family could finally afford that had families in their tens of thousands loading up the moving vans and heading out. What is quite apparent, and what no one wants to admit, is that the forces behind white flight were in part malign: redliners, panic peddlers, and blockbusters.

Mary Gallagher recalled the struggles she joined with her husband, Phil, during the 1970s and 1980s to shore up a Brooklyn neighborhood targeted by business interests. "One of the battles, there was a plague of real estate people who descended on us, in all these little storefronts there'd be another Realtor moving into this area. One of the fights we had in our street was over a house diagonally across from us which was put up for sale and one of those Century 21 signs went up and people were afraid there would be, suddenly, twenty signs on their street, that property values would plummet because of that. We tried to get the guy to remove that sign, he didn't want to take it down so we went to the Realtor."

Phil Gallagher remembers trying a less confrontational approach at first. "We tried talking to Realtors for about a year, and that turned out to be completely nonproductive I'd say. We began to realize that there was an enormous difference between dealing with bankers, who didn't take what we did, the pressure we were bringing, personally, and dealing with real estate brokers who always took it personally. We chickened out when we started to be threatened with having our legs broken and things like that. We decided to play it more institutionally and we began writing these somewhat amateurish legal briefs; we're not trained as attorneys in any way [but we] started going after the banks."

Real estate agents hoped to contain racial change by writing off marginal neighborhoods, the way crews in the Rockies set new fires to put ex-

isting fires out. Banks redlined. Builders didn't build where the demand was and instead set off to create new demand elsewhere. Churches were silent from the pulpit. Industries fled from unions, minorities, work rules, and high wages. First the federal government subsidized "greenfield" housing, then built the highways to get you there. After waving its magic wand to create acres of mind-numbingly banal new towns in rings around the city, the Feds developed the black arts in the core city, with badly conceived and administered loan programs, bringing chaos and destruction to previously stable areas.

Older neighborhoods did not suddenly fill up with black renters and aspiring home buyers by accident. A couple of generations of racial inequality came roaring back to bite us. GIs getting married had to choose between overcrowded urban housing and new suburban construction. Mayors tried to straddle the desires of middle-class whites who were offended by suddenly not winning every argument, and underserved black and Latino residents who were bursting out of the ghettos.

Even good intentions can end up leaving scars. The impulse to start over that once got millions of our families here in the first place, and sent people streaming out of the exhausted farm areas of New England and the stinking tanneries, rendering pits, and sewers of the big cities of the East, has allowed Americans to sever more completely the connection between place and well-being than any other people on earth.

The creation myths of people the world over, not to mention American Indians, feature first-men and -women who are products of the very soil that is still their home. This is potent stuff, the starting point for a narrative that follows the life of a place and the people who live on it from a time before memory until today. Americans are missing that gene. One place, we've told ourselves, is interchangeable with another, and the landscape we've built in the last fifty years seems to bear that out.

If you were to be kidnapped in Southern California, your captors might not even have to blindfold you. You could drive for hours and not think you had gone anywhere. If you were to break away and reach a phone, your surroundings–a 76 gas station, a Taco Bell, a Pep Boys, a used-car lot, and mountains in the smoggy distance–would be of no use at all to the police.

Making a home in America today is nothing more than the exercise of options, a bewildering array of appliances, bathroom towels, sofa sets, local schools, and bus, train, and car routes to work. We choose–pick a life off the shelf. We act on desire and personal decision, consuming our way into little customized worlds, as individual as a thumbprint, yet as interchangeable as shoes in a shoe store.

But that would mean that millions of Americans happily "choose" to sit in crawling traffic, or freely opt to make cathedral ceilings the chic home builders' accessory of 1990, or request a life that forces women to drive their children from place to place to place, since *no place* is within walking distance.

The Manellis, even after thirty-five years in their St. Louis County subdivision, yearn for the closeness, the coherence, that an old urban neighborhood gave their lives.

ANNE: There's no place around here to walk to. Not even a grocery store.
CHUCK: There's an area downtown called Columbus Square, and I'd love to live there, but the surrounding area is just terrible. It would be great for us, we could walk right downtown. It would be nice, but I wouldn't move there because the surrounding area's bad. No way you could walk around there at night. Downtown St. Louis closes up at night. Unless there's a ball game or something down there, but now, after the ball game, everyone leaves.
ANNE: I found out within the last three or four years that I had cataracts, and I couldn't drive. So I was stuck here, in this house, waiting for Chuck to take me any place and every place I wanted to go. That I was not prepared for. I got the eyes operated on, so now I can see and I can drive.
CHUCK: It was just a wonderful place. These kids are missing so much now. I just can't believe . . . I know it will never go back to the way it was, but that's a shame because it was great. It's the reason for a lot of the problems we have now.

Life has increasingly become a string of pearls, incidents and encounters staged in a wide range of almost random physical locations, strung together by the automobile. We get in our cars and watch the passing urban scene, not realizing the ride is poisoning the very landscape we

watched through its windows. The automobile, that ultimate isolator, turned life into a TV show, a mediated set of images seen through the "screen" of our windshields. The deadening touch of the automobile created empty, uninviting streets. Those now auto-mobile dictated a world built for their infernal combustion convenience, a bad fit for the chock-a-block life of an old-style city. Then the migrants lit out for the "built to suit" wide-open spaces of Auto Suburbanalia.

The dense space of the city, built for an age of easy economic intercourse, was eventually infected and weakened by the automobile. It couldn't beat 'em, so it joined 'em . . . and lost anyway. The downtowns of city after city–Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis–peter out, ending in a raggedy edge of parking lots. It is a symptom of terrible rot when the space once occupied by offices and stores now becomes yet another lot. Sitting with a few tons of paying customers from nine to five has become the highest and best use for these pieces of land. But the unraveling of urban life, when married with wasteful suburban-style land use, isn't simply confined to the blight of lots.

What does five o'clock look like on Ashland Avenue in Chicago? Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn? Euclid Avenue in Cleveland? Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles? Five or six lanes of slowly moving traffic and near-empty sidewalks. Try selling furniture with no foot traffic. Or men's clothing. Or kid's shoes. Merchants once courted success by going where the customers lived. To survive they got off the neighborhood streets in search of where the cars go. When neighborhood commercial life erodes, other uses evolve for the space. Into the linear vacuum moves other, less desirable uses. They are often uses that continue to fuel the desire for the holdouts to surrender, and go.

The most serious decline and loss of population has come in the quadrant of the country east of Saint Louis and north of Washington, D.C., the home of America's oldest big cities. But the Sun Belt has not escaped the telltale signs of urban planned obsolescence either.

Crime has gotten worse. The number one concern we get when we're talking to potential buyers up north, or prospects for our communities, their number one concern is security.

Jerry Schwartzwelder develops retirement communities near Tampa, a fast-growing area of Florida far from the white-hot negative publicity of Miami. He told NPR that doesn't make that much difference.

It used to be, go do a seminar up north, which is what I do, and they'd ask you a question, "Well, what about the bugs in Florida?" and all this other stuff, or "What's the weather like?" or "What kind of terrain do you have, et cetera, et cetera, in your part of Florida?"

First question I get today is, "What's the crime like in your area? Is it as bad as they say on television?"

Life in the city, for the millions who lived it, was once something less than the sum of their lifestyle choices: they woke up, they ate, they shoveled coal, loved, hated, prayed, mated, reproduced, died. For most, the home was not a display object but a place to keep the few things they had managed to hold on to from the surpluses produced by their labor. Their material life was made of the things they didn't have to eat, wear, or burn *right this minute.* A concertina maybe? A family Bible? A hunting rifle?

This world, of tiny accumulation, of life lived *very* close to the edge, is not a remote part of our national past. Many people in our midst still remember it. For some it was such a terrifying experience that the rest of their lives has been marked by an odd relationship to money and things. Our *Masterpiece Theatre* social class swoons over the portraits of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century existence brought to fussy, golden-lit life from the pages of Edith Wharton novels. The real-life mass class of new Americans who lived in New York, Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Newark, and Pittsburgh through the early years of this century would more quickly recognize their own lives in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* than in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,* or a TV season's worth of miniseries draped in antimacassars and fringed in bric-a-brac.

The streets and parks and skylines of the early-twentieth-century American city are built on the bones of a worker's army put into harness by the new men of the country's commerce. The moneyed boys made big plans, paid little wages, and built the wonders of their age. Central Park is

a beautiful place, but it's also an example of the transformative spirit of American capitalism wrought in boulders and meadows, ponds and promenades. Carnegie's Pittsburgh, Field's Chicago, Busch's St. Louis, Morgan's Manhattan were not yet the mature machines for living they would eventually become for millions of Americans in the new middle class. They were still home to desperate families living by piecework, child laborer's photographed by Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis.

After World War II, the bosses were making so much money that even the workers were in for a taste. Unions, growing along with the employment options created by the enormous concentration of productive capital in the fast-growing cities, made peace for the price of a fatter paycheck. Labor peace created more prosperity, and sowed the seeds for destruction later. The high cost of urban labor became the justification when manufacturing fled the cities. Not just labor's cost, but the inflexibility of work rules, the costs of shedding and hiring workers–all the humanizing guarantees hammered out with management to buy peace–now had a greater cost than anyone had contemplated.

The urban interplay between home and workplace, conceived and nurtured for its efficiencies and unquestioned economic benefits, was now, we were told by the 1950s and 1960s, the city's greatest weakness. Drive around Detroit, and see the twisted skeletons of factory buildings no one can afford to pull down. These derelict factories are often surrounded by neighborhoods similarly emptied of life. Detroit has been left to the poor. The corporations with monstrous piles of capital already invested there are stuck, and try to make the best of it. A walk through the deserted downtown, the sight of large, boarded-up office buildings on block after block, closed hotels, and shuttered stores is a shock. This is where the disease you can see in its early stages in so many other downtowns finally leads.

Today a lot of homeowners will tell you they have bought exactly the life they want, and I have no doubt they believe it. Talk with people about how they once lived, how they grew up, and how they live today. Many people have performed a fascinating sleight of mind. They say life was

better "back then," as many remember their own urban past. Because the good urban life is placed in a no-longer-retrievable past, suburban exile is thus made "necessary," and unavoidable. But that former life so precious to them in memory and story is not one they would choose to live today. Making it unobtainable helps sustain the fantasy that the suburban present is an unsought "necessity." The people who made this modern, less satisfying life necessary are always offstage, the blacks, the blockbusters, the developers.

Charles Manelli, more than forty-five years after leaving the neighborhood of his youth around Blessed Sacrament Parish on St. Louis's north side, was still poking around his old neighborhood in the car. He would drive by his house and take the car up the alleys where he played ball as a boy before the war.

CHUCK: It was pretty scary. I just went because I loved it so much, for sentimental reasons. I wanted to look at the old house and the old neighborhood, and reminisce. I don't do it anymore but I did it up until a few years ago. Now I'm afraid to go there.

I have mixed feelings. I'd love to live in St. Louis now, in the same atmosphere we had then. But I know it can't be done. It happened so fast, I mean, my gosh . . . overnight. It was like an exodus . . . zoom, everybody was gone! I'd say it was a five-year period, the whole city of St. Louis changed. And I think it was because of panic. The whole atmosphere of the city changed, and everybody just panicked, and left. Oh, I'd love to live there now, in the same atmosphere as it was, but back then it was just panic.

We don't have that neighborhood life here.

ANNE: It was like living in a small town. We're Catholic, so we lived in a parish. That parish was everything to us. You were like in a small town and everybody knew everybody else, everybody in the whole parish.

CHUCK: You had a parochial school on one corner, and down the street was the public school. It was a neighborhood, and it was like that all over the city. And everybody knew everybody, whether you went to parochial or public school, it was just a big neighborhood; you could walk anyplace in the whole area and you knew everybody. You had places to go . . . drugstores, hamburger places, school grounds. It was unbelievable.

My son's growing up was completely different. He had to take a bus everywhere. It was great. Kids today don't know what they're missing.

In this neighborhood . . . we've been here thirty-five years and we hardly know anybody.

ANNE: The people on the block we know, but the people on the next block we don't know. But, in Mt. Carmel Parish, where I lived, way down, you knew the people who lived in every house on every block . . . you may have lived seven or eight blocks away, but you knew them, I don't know why.

CHUCK: Because you walked those streets. You played with the kids. You knew them. The summer playgrounds were all in the public schools. That's another thing they don't have today . . . everything's organized now. And you've got to drive to it. And you've got to wear uniforms. We just played. We made up our own games. We played ball in the alleys and the vacant lots. We didn't need any supervision.

ANNE: Right now we live right across the street from the parish grounds, and they have this huge park across the street. A ballpark. A soccer field. You'll never see any one person just playing by themselves. When they're there, they're with an organized team, with coaches and the whole thing, everybody's there.

To just go over there . . . a bunch of kids getting together to just hit the ball around, or kick a soccer ball around . . . no. They don't do that.

We lost plenty in those years after World War II. People talk about the closeness, the intimacy of the old urban neighborhood. People talk about their friendships found and lost, the adventures of city life, waiting for the old man to come home from work. We knew each other then. We saw our own faces plainly, in the mirror and in each other's eyes.

Today, with bookstores crowded with new books on the search for lost community, with a whole "communitarian movement" dedicated to reclaiming these lost values, are we ready to be honest with each other about what we've lost? Apparently not yet. We assign to that long list of the differences in daily life in the recent past a particularity that can't survive close inspection. Look at a picture of people today, and compare it with one from "back then." People are people. We were not so different forty years ago. The basic furniture of life was very similar . . . school,

jobs, commerce, church and synagogue. We had two arms. Two eyes. Two legs.

So to write this book, I headed out to American cities with a tape recorder and a notebook, and started to gather the stories of families loading and unloading the moving trucks. Often, what people thought. believed, and *felt* simply didn't match what was actually happening on the ground. But an examination of both the interior landscape and the world waiting outside the doorstep is necessary to understand this latest Great Migration.

This is a tour of the places people lived in, loved, and left. These are the places left to face the consequences of postwar America's choice: to run away from home.

The fictional retelling of recent American history as a move toward a color-blind society, the venomous tirades against immigration and affirmative action, the paradoxical urgings of the white middle class to others–be like us, just don't try to be like us and move into our neighborhoods–all call for a dry-eyed accounting of white flight and the hollowing out of the American city.

I have spoken to hundreds of people who mourn the loss of a sense of place tied to block, school, and neighborhood church. When you talk to them further, you may also find that they were busily helping to create the new rootlessness during the years of urban change. Many conclude there was no other way for things to end up. I'll insist until the day they're tossing spadefuls of city soil on my casket that we gave up far too easily, driven by a range of forces in the society we did not recognize.