

JAN08

NEWSLETTER OF THE
UCLA CENTER FOR THE
STUDY OF WOMEN

CSW update

by Stacy I. Macías

With panels covering sexuality, public health, performance, globalization, historiography, labor, and the media, this year's *Thinking Gender* conference guarantees to offer a critical, cutting-edge academic experience to all.

This year's plenary session, "Lesbian, Counter, and Queer: New Directions in the Study of Femininity," will be chaired by Lisa Duggan, Professor in American Studies, NYU. It will feature "Untimely Forgetting: Melancholia, Sexual Dispossession, and Queer Femininity" by Cathy Hannabach, UC Davis; "Lesbian 'Femininity' on Television" by Julia Himberg, USC, and "Aesthetic Rememberings: Counter-Femininities in the Art of Diane Gamboa" by Stacy I. Macías, UCLA.

I hope that you will join us for what will surely be an engaging and thoughtful set of panels and discussions.

Presented by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and the USC Center for Feminist Research on February 1, 2008, from 7:30 am to 6 pm, *Thinking Gender* is free and open to the public. Parking is available for \$8 in Structure 2. For more information on the program, visit <http://www.csw.ucla.edu/thinkinggender.html>.



JAN08

IN THIS ISSUE

DEPARTMENTS



Women and Television



This fall, before the writer's strike became the big news, something notable was happening on T.V., something that has carried over to the mid-season

replacements. Across the network and cable schedules, shows with women either as the stars or in women-centered ensemble casts seemed to predominate. A brief list will suffice to make my point:

Bionic Woman
Cashmere Mafia
The Closer
Damages
Gossip Girl
Grey's Anatomy
Lipstick Jungle

Private Practice
Samantha Who
Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles
Saving Grace
State of Mind
Ugly Betty
Women's Murder Club

In many of these shows, the central relationships are among the female characters, with romantic relationships with men providing mere conversational topics for them as they set out to save the world (*Bionic Woman*; *Sarah Connor Chronicles*), rule the world (*Cashmere Mafia*, *Damages*), solve a crime (*The Closer*; *Women's Murder Club*; *Saving Grace*), cure a patient (*Grey's Anatomy*; *Private Practice*; *State of Mind*), or score a fashion triumph (*Gossip Girl*; *Ugly Betty*). The edgier of the bunch are those shows whose casts are led by renowned movie actresses: Glenn Close (*Damages*) and Holly Hunter (*Saving Grace*).



So what's going on here, and why has it been largely overlooked? One answer has to do with the changing viewership for television and cable: in short, gender matters in a way that was not the case when the broadcast networks dominated the ratings. This development resonates with the changes brought about by the women's and civil rights movements – a change most notable in the current presidential primaries. Pundits and polls overlook this change and are left not having a clue about what's going on here. But you can see it on television every night.

– KATHLEEN MCHUGH

Contemporary Devadasis in Northern Karnataka, India



FRAGMENTED BODIES

by Rosemary Candelario

Sacred. Prostitute. Chaste. Dancer. Matriarch. Victim. Sex Worker. Devotee. Daughter. Auspicious. Slave of the God. Nun. Dancing Whore. Female Servant of the Deity.

THese are just some of the words used to define *devadasis* in South India over the last century. Recent scholars (Avanthi Meduri, Amrit Srinivasan, Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, Kay Jordan, to name a few) have attempted to locate historical devadasis (or traces of them) in the contemporary performance of Bharatanatyam, but rarely have they looked to the women who still call themselves by that name, many of whom live in the northern part of the state of Karnataka in south India.

As a Bharatanatyam dancer with a background in sex education and reproductive rights, I am interested in interrogating the disjuncture between the height of the concomitant temple dance reform and revival movements—which culminated on the one hand in devadasis being thrown out of the temples in 1947, and on the other



hand the establishment of the first major Bharatanatyam institute, Kalakshetra, in 1936—and the twenty-first-century devadasi, a figure universally described in public health literature as a sex worker, often in relationship to HIV/AIDS. This paper, which sits on the border between dance studies and public health, is uniquely positioned to ask the questions that other scholars have not. What are the series of displacements that moved the body of the devadasi from the temple to the HIV clinic? How did her sexuality, once creative and auspicious, come to be polluted and even diseased? Is there a throughline to be found between the dance and public health narratives of devadasis, or are the ruptures too great? Rather than reading the devadasi as a collection of texts, is it possible to experience her, in the words of Susan Foster, as corpo-real?

In response to the above questions, I will first outline the dance, legal, and public health discourses about the devadasi, which, when read collectively, demonstrate the displacements she has undergone. I will then describe my research, conducted in August and September 2007 with devadasis in northern Karnataka, which attempted to find a bridge across the rup-

■ ■ ■ *Devadasis in southern India were dedicated to temples as ritual specialists and performing artists who danced sadir. Though the devadasis filled an auspicious role in their communities, they were also decried in some circles as prostitutes because they were allowed to have sex outside of marriage.*

ture created by these competing discourses. Finally, I will analyze the fragments of the body(ies) of the devadasi in light of the many redemptive moves which have been carried out in her name.

THE DANCING BODY

Devadasis in southern India were dedicated to temples as ritual specialists and performing artists who danced Sadir. Though the devadasis filled an auspicious role in their communities, they were also decried in some circles as prostitutes because they were allowed to have sex outside of marriage. In the late nineteenth century, reformers, comprised of British missionaries and doctors as well as

members of the lower caste “self-respect movement,” began a campaign to abolish temple dancing. At the same time, another movement sought to rescue what they regarded as the sacred dance from its soiled context; this “revived” dance was sanitized, codified, and re-named Bharatanatyam, which has since come to be hailed as the national dance of India. The revival movement, on the other hand, saw internationalists, such as the Theosophists, joining with Brahmins to call for the renewal of the ancient spiritual temple dance which they claimed had degenerated in the bodies of the devadasis. Rukmini Devi Arundale, a Brahmin, was anointed by the Theosophical Society as the person to restore the sacred dance

and make it respectable for middle-class women to practice. The establishment in 1936 of Devi's Kalakshetra Institution codified the rehabilitation of Sadir into Bharatanatyam. In the discourse of Bharatanatyam, devadasis disappeared at exactly the moment the dance was revived.

THE OUTLAWED BODY

As subalterns, devadasis created the foundations of what became Bharatanatyam, but this position also led to them being trampled on by reformers, revivalists, and nationalists alike. In the wake of these movements and as a consequence of a developing legal discourse in the newly independent India, legislation was passed in 1947 that banned the dedication of girls to temples and ordered the expulsion of dancers from the temples. Coupled with the move only a decade earlier to take the dance from under their feet to the (newly) respectable proscenium stage in cities like Madras, the legislation completed the fragmentation of the devadasi. The earlier liminal figure, belonging in multiple worlds, had been split into her component parts: the pure dance placed centrally on the stage in the bodies of

Brahmin women, and the polluted body pushed to the margins.

A 1982 state law, the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act was more far-reaching than any previous laws. It nullifies any and all dedications, whether consensual or not, and provides for stiff punishments of up to five years in jail and/or a penalty of 5000 RP. Anthropologist Treena Orchard (2005) has found that the 1982 law had a major impact on the devadasi system, largely through police intimidation. As a result, dedications have all but disappeared as public ceremonies at temples presided over by priests. Such practices have instead been relegated to private home-based affairs, effectively severing any official ties to the temples. Rather than stopping the dedication of devadasis, the 1982 law instead finalized the fragmentation of the sacred and sexual.

THE DISEASED BODY

Current public health research on devadasis in northern Karnataka is unequivocal in its claims that young women are dedicated into a life of sex work when they are dedicated to the goddess. Long-

term drought and famine in that region of India has left many families with few choices about how to make ends meet, and having a daughter dedicated as a devadasi has come to be a viable economic option for many families. Sources vary widely on the percentage of sex workers in Karnataka who come from the devadasi tradition. Jogan Shankar, in a widely quoted but weakly documented work, estimates 250,000 girls are dedicated to temples in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border region (17). Kay Jordan quotes a 1998 study of one *harijan*^t community where 98 percent of families participated in sacred prostitution (155). Because they have clearly outlined their methodology and data, I favor the statistics of the India-Canada Collaborative HIV/AIDS Project (Blanchard et al.) who found that 26 percent of the 1588 sex workers they interviewed were devadasis.

Karnataka is one of the six states in India with high prevalence rates of HIV. While it is difficult to know exactly how many devadasis are infected with the virus, an article in *The Hindu* at the end of 2006 claimed that 21.6 percent of all female sex workers in the state are HIV positive and a 1995 *Harvard HIV Review*

report found that over 9 percent of devadasis voluntarily tested in one district of Karnataka were infected with HIV.

SENT TO THE SYSTEM

I spent almost four weeks in Karnataka in August and September 2007. While there, I made connections with devadasi organizations (both community-based and non-governmental) as well as HIV/AIDS organizations who counted devadasis among their members. One organization, the Karnataka Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS (KNP+), took an interest in my project and invited me to travel with one of their staff members to northern Karnataka, a region where the devadasi population is concentrated, to meet and speak with the women there.²

The information I gathered in my short time in northern Karnataka presents a picture of a completely ruptured devadasi tradition. Of the sixteen women I interviewed, only four of them—just 25 percent—came from devadasi families, which means that the vast majority were dedicated by their parents for economic reasons. None of the women counted dance as part of their devadasi identity,

and while three of the women play instruments and sing songs unique to devadasis,³ the music seems to be more of an incidental way for them to earn money rather than an integral part of being a devadasi. Though a small sample, the statistics from my research match with those of a more extensive study recently conducted by Orchard (2005). In essence, the contemporary devadasi is a brand-new construct based solely on the sexual bodies of girls and women in northern Karnataka. It's no wonder then that most of the women I talked to, and most of Orchard's informants as well (2005, 8), want to see the system come to an end. These women are not the biological descendants of temple dancers, do not identify themselves as the bearers of a sacred dance tradition, and likely do not even know that a link between them and Bharatanatyam dancers even exists. In the wake of such an extreme rupture, how then can we make sense of the fragments of the devadasi claimed by the dance, legal, and public health discourses which still actively circulate?

REDEMPTIVE DESIRE

In writing a history of the development of Haitian dance,⁴ Kate Ramsey identifies a “redemptive desire” (356) that drove the mid-twentieth century staging of Vodou ritual as folkloric dance. In India, multiple redemptive desires have been at work on the body of the devadasi over the last 150 years, not the least of which was the revivalist desire, described previously to rescue the pure (sacred) dance from the polluted (sexual) body of the devadasi. The parallel reform and revival movements, while seemingly at odds, worked in tandem to fracture the delicate confluence of purity and pollution in the body of the devadasi, allowing the sanitized aesthetic to be removed and redeemed, leaving all the pollution behind in the body of the low-caste (former) dancer.

While reformers and revivalists stigmatized both the dancing and sexual bodies of the early twentieth-century devadasi, researchers such as Priyadarshini Vijaisri and Jogan Shankar have sought to intentionally place her within what they call a worldwide history of sacred prostitution which Vijaisri defines as “the intrinsic relationship between sexual rites and

religion” (21). This move is an attempt at a redemption of the (idea of) the sex worker. Vijaisri, for example, rejects the positioning of devadasis as sacred prostitutes as representative of some sort of fall from a previously “pure,” non-sexual state (as claimed by writers such as K. Sadasivan, 1993); instead, she insists that “the custom in its very foundation was based on the idea of sex as symbolic of spiritual union and sexual intercourse as a means to salvation” (Vijaisri 2004, 21). Shankar, while agreeing with Vijaisri that there is a larger context for sacred prostitution, sees the devadasi system (which he refers to as a cult) as both a system of religious oppression of women as well as exploitation of the lower class by the upper class (1990). Orchard, on the other hand, presents the devadasi system as a “culturally and economically valued form of sex work” (2381). Though Orchard mentions in passing that devadasis were once artists, she, like the other public health workers, still presents a picture of the women that limits them to their sexual bodies.


The moral redemption of the emptied-out body of the devadasi was attempted repeatedly through legislation. The state government backed up various bills crimi-

nalizing sex work and outlawing temple dedications with funds for the “rehabilitation” of devadasis through strategies such as the purchase of sewing machines or the payment of a stipend of 5000 RP (125 USD) to any man who would marry a devadasi (Jordan, 154). Not surprisingly, these projects, which were never directed at dislodging the material reasons families dedicate their daughters to a life of sex work, have been utterly unsuccessful. Likewise, police harassment and intimidation have only served to make a formerly public system more secretive. Now that the polluted body of the devadasi has (not coincidentally) become a body diseased with HIV, the redemptive efforts continue through interventions by the state, public health researchers, and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations).

Their history ruptured, their bodies displaced, fragmented, and continuously subjected to redemptive desires, devadasis have been subjected to a new textualization of their bodies as infected/contaminated and in need of rehabilitation and education. In some ways it is not such a different text at all: the corruption of old and the contamination of today both come as a result of the decidedly

sexed body of the devadasi. However, the new context also provides for the possibility of seeing devadasis as more than a series of texts. Newspaper articles with headlines reading “Devadasis Come Out to Fight HIV/AIDS,” “Devadasis Empowered,” “Devadasis Demand Government Help,” and “Devadasis Fight Bias” detail the work being done in northern Karnataka by devadasis for devadasis. Through organizations such as Chaitanya AIDS Prevention Mahila Sangha, with whom I met in Bagalkot district, devadasis are organizing themselves into collective self-help groups, learning about HIV prevention through peer education, organizing to stop further temple dedications, and, surpassing the myopic rehabilitation programs of the state government, they are building access to micro-credit loans. Public health research, in turn, has shown that HIV interventions that utilize collective structures such as the Sangha are more effective in promoting preventative measures such as condom usage (Halli et al.). Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin Jairazbhoy, ethnomusicologists at UCLA, have even recorded a song composed by devadasis about why women shouldn’t dedicate their daughters to the temple

anymore, showing that the fragments of the artist, the sex worker, and the activist can all co-exist within the body of the contemporary devadasi.

 **Rosemary Candelario** is a scholar, activist, and dancer currently in the Culture and Performance Studies Ph.D. program in the World Arts and Cultures Department at UCLA. Before attending graduate school, Rosemary spent 14 years as a community organizer, mainly in the reproductive rights movement. Inspired by interactions with artist activists such as *Urban Bush Women* and the *Liz Lerman Dance Exchange*, and spurred on by work as a sex educator and anti-war organizer, her research seeks to integrate her dance and activist backgrounds in order to contribute to the understanding of how performance relates to social change. Candelario recently received a CSW Travel Grant in Spring 2007.

NOTES

1. Untouchable.
2. I met with members of the organization MASS (Mahila Abhivrudhi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe), which loosely translates to Women's Development and Protection Association, in Belgaum district, and members of the Jeevan Jothi Positive Living Center in neighboring

Bagalkot district, home of the Bagalkot Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, which is related to KNP+.

3. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Nazir Jairazbhoy, Visiting Associate Professor and Professor Emeritus, respectively, at UCLA have conducted extensive research on devadasi music, including the *chaundke*, a one-stringed variable-tension "plucked drum" played nowhere else in India. Besides providing a fascinating portrait of contemporary devadasis as "musical ritualists," the Jairazbhoy's research, documented in an in-progress DVD entitled *Music for a Goddess*, gives voice to devadasis, and even to the goddess whom they serve.
4. Ramsey, Kate. "Vodou, Nationalism, and Performance: the Staging of Folklore in Mid-Twentieth Century Haiti." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Jane Desmond, ed. Durham (NC): Duke U Press, 2003. 345-378.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blanchard, James F., John O'Neil, B. M. Ramesh, Parinita Bharrcharjee, Treena Orchard, Stephen Moses. 2005. Understanding the Social and Cultural Contexts of Female Sex Workers in Karnataka, India: Implications for Prevention of HIV Infection. *Journal of Infections Diseases* 191 (Suppl 1): S139-S146.
- Brook, Barbara. *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*. London/New York: Longman, 1999.
- Carman, John B. and Frédérique Apffel Marglin, Eds. *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*. Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1985.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past." *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Eds. New Brunswick: Rutgers U Press, 1990. 27-87.

_____. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2003. http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=nLMDxv_L-U8C&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=uma+chakravarti+u-chakravarti&ots=3UoMF1eAIs&sig=JthkFxlVPvfPgW8O9oBuogWvhc#PPP1,M1

Chawla, Anil. *Devadasis – Sinners Or Sinned Against: An attempt to look at the myth and reality of history and present status of Devadasis*. <http://www.samarthbharat.com/files/devadasihistory.pdf>. 2002

Halli, S. S., B. M. Ramesh, J. O'Neil, S. Moses, J. F. Blanchard. The role of collectives in STI and HIV/AIDS prevention among female sex workers in Karnataka, India. *AIDS Care* 18.7 (2006): 739-749.

John, Mary E. and Janaki Nair, eds. *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.

Jordan, Kay. *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis in India, 1857-1947*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2003.

Kersenboom-Story, Saskia C. *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

Lamb, Sarah. *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, c2000 2000. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft458006co/>

Levinson, Pnina Nave. "Hindu perceptions of auspiciousness and sexuality." *Women, religion, and sexuality: studies on the impact of religious teachings on women*. Jeanne Becher, Ed. Geneva : WCC Publications, 1990.

McGirk, Tim. "Profaned dancing returns to the temple." *The Independent* (London). December 10, 1995. FindArticles.com. , 17 Nov. 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19951210/ai_n1402296

- Meduri, Avanthi. "Bharata Natyam – What Are You?" *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (1988):1-22.
- . Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and Her Dance. PhD diss., New York University, 1996.
- Mills, James H. and Satadru Sen. *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*. London: Anthem Press, 2004.
- Orchard, Treena. A painful power coming of age, sexuality and relationships, social reform, and HIV/AIDS among Devadasi sex workers in rural Karnataka, India. Diss. U of Manitoba, 2005.
- . "Girl, woman, lover, mother: Towards a new understanding of child prostitution among young Devadasis in rural Karnataka, India." *Social science & medicine* 64.12 (2007): 2379-90.
- Power, Carla. "Becoming A 'Servant Of God.' Devadasis are Dalit women sold into sexual slavery. Is this the end of a cruel tradition?" *Newsweek*, 25 Jun 2000 <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/52a/013.html>
- Ramberg, Lucinda. *Given to the Goddess: An Ethnography of Exchange, Morality, Ritual and Sexual Practice Among Dedicated Women in Karnataka, South India*. Diss U Berkeley, 2006.
- Rao, Anupama. *Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism: Gender & Caste*. London/New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2003.
- Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. 25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Srinivasan, Amrit. "The Hindu Temple Dancer: Prostitute or Nun?" *Cambridge Anthropology* 8.1 (1983): 73-99.
- . "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* XX.44 (1985): 1869-1876.
- Stephen, Kylie. "Sexualized Bodies." *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*. Mary Evans and Ellie Lee, Eds. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 29-45.

WINTER 08

FACULTY CURATOR LECTURE SERIES

FEBRUARY

12 TUES ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN
The Sexual Politics of the 'New Abolitionism'
 IMAGERY AND ACTIVISM
 IN CONTEMPORARY
 ANTI-TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGNS
 ROYCE 314, 4 PM

27 WED KEITH HAIGHT
Detective, LAPD
 ROYCE 314, 4 PM

MARCH

4 TUES KATHLEEN C. KIM
Re-conceptualizing Human Trafficking
 A CRITIQUE OF U.S.
 ANTI-TRAFFICKING
 POLICIES AND PRACTICES
 ROYCE 314, 4 PM

TRAFFICKING, GENDER, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND HEALTH

CURATORS

Lara Stemple
 Gail Kligman

Suburbia and Community

UNTANGLING A HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM

In our manner of building since the end of World War II, we have managed to fill our land with things that are unworthy of our affection, and these add up to thousands of places that are not worth caring about. In the process of filling our landscape with these loveless and unlovable structures, we have thrown our civic life into the garbage can. And as a final consequence of all this, we are putting ourselves out of business as a civilization.

— JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER,
“A Crisis in Landscape and Townscape”

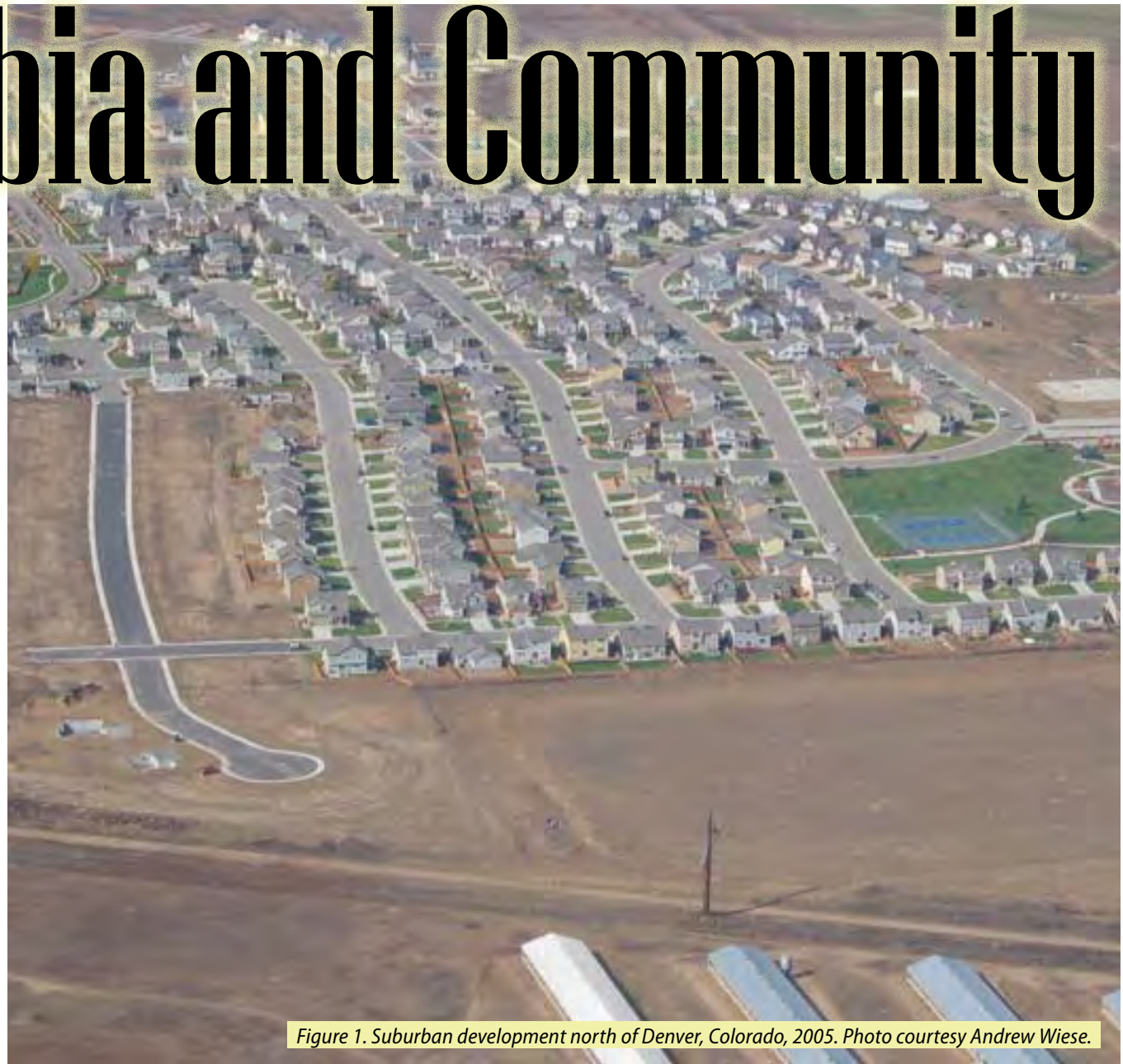


Figure 1. Suburban development north of Denver, Colorado, 2005. Photo courtesy Andrew Wiese.

Without him naming it, most of us can easily identify what Kunstler is referring to in this passage. The suburbs. For years now, social critics and urban planners have maligned this built landscape in critiques that have become familiar to many of us. The suburbs are chastised for destroying the environment, diminishing the quality of life as commuting times increase, sullyng the air, promoting political and economic inequality, destroying aesthetic vistas, and worst of all, killing community and civic life.

As destructive as the suburban trend seems to many, it is a phenomenon we need to better understand. The suburbs, for better or worse, are here to stay, at least for our lifetimes and those of the next few generations. The fact is, we have become a suburban nation. In 2000, the

U.S. Census reported that 50 percent of Americans live in suburban areas, outnumbering urban and rural dwellers. Suburbia not only dominates our demographics, but it has become an influential force in political, social, and economic relations. This suburban takeover began after World War II, when the federal government encouraged powerful developer-builders to build fast and furious. The result was decade after decade of development, with subdivisions spreading like wild mushrooms in every metropolitan area.

To suburbia's critics, one particularly alarming concern has been suburbia's impact on community and civic life. Kunstler himself refers to the "loss of community" that people sense about suburbia. Robert Putnam, in his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, implicates suburbanization in the decline of community

and social capital since the 1970s. Because people spend more time commuting alone in their cars, they have less time "for friends and neighbors, for meetings, for community projects, and so on."² Moreover, social homogeneity – common in suburbia – dampens the tendency toward civic participation, while suburban sprawl blurs a sense of community boundedness – that is, a sense that people belong to a clearly recognizable neighborhood. Without this feeling, Putnam argues, civic and social engagement diminishes.

Proponents of the New Urbanism, a movement of urban planners that has blossomed since the 1980s, share similar assumptions. Their core philosophy is, at heart, a reaction against suburbanization. In planning communities that are compact, mixed use, walkable, and mixed economically, New Urban-

**...as a historian, I
remain deeply puzzled by
one simple question: How
did a built environment
that purportedly kills
community once support
some of the most vibrant
socializing in American
history?**

ists seek to reverse what they perceive as suburbia's worst tendencies. In their credo, *Suburban Nation*, they convey their sense of suburbia's social damage in their list of "the victims of sprawl" – cul-de-sac kids suffering from a lack of autonomy because they lack mobility, soccer moms burdened by the incessant chauffeuring of kids, teenagers bored senseless by the sterility of suburban life, and the elderly isolated by an inability to drive. Suburbia disconnects people. Through a design solution, they believe, community and connectedness can be revived and rejuvenated.³

Although I agree with many of these criticisms, partly based on my own lived experiences as well as my scholarly read of these debates, as a historian, I remain deeply puzzled by one simple question: How did a built environment that purportedly kills community once sup-

port some of the most vibrant socializing in American history? If we line up the social scientific evidence chronologically, it appears that from 1950 to 1980 a sea change in suburban community experience took place. Something radical shifted. Yet the built environment stayed the same. A brief glimpse at this evidence is both suggestive and provocative.

In the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists and social scientists conducted a number of studies documenting social life in what was then perceived as the new American residential frontier—the suburbs. Their findings pointed overwhelmingly to neighborhoods with solid social ties, even excessive by the standards of some. One of the most famous of these studies is *The Organization Man*, by William H. Whyte, Jr. In this widely read book, Whyte documented a striking profile of com-

munity life in his case study town of Park Forest, Illinois, a mass-produced suburb south of Chicago built in the late 1940s. He found neighbors who not only knew one another, but were connected intimately in the rhythms of daily life.

He illustrated the feel of this social web in a profile of newcomers, "a couple we shall call Dot and Charlie Adams," as he wrote. "Charlie, a corporate trainee, is uprooted from the Newark office, arrives at Apartment 8, Court M-12. It's a hell of a day – the kids are crying, Dot is half sick with exhaustion, and the movers won't be finished till late."

But soon... the neighbors will come over to introduce themselves. In an almost inordinate display of decency, some will help them unpack, and around suppertime two of the girls will come over with a hot casserole and another with a percolator full of hot coffee.

Within a few days the children will have found playmates, Dot will be *Kaffeeklatsching* and sunbathing with the girls like an old-timer, and Charlie, who finds that Ed Robey in Apartment 5 went through officers' training school with him, will be enrolled in the Court Poker Club. The Adamses are, in a word, *in*—someday soon, when another new couple, dazed and hungry, moves in, the Adamses will make their thanks by helping them to be likewise.⁴

Whyte goes on to describe a neighborhood culture of borrowing and lending, of eager participation in local clubs and civic groups, and of social intimacy. Kids and housewives were often at the heart of these connections:

The neighborliness... fills a void in the life of the young wife that is not always filled elsewhere... 'You don't find as many frustrated women in a place like this,' says one young wife. 'We gals have each other. A young girl who would get to brooding if she was in an apartment all by herself on the outside can talk things over with us. She's just too busy to

get neurotic. Kitty, for example. She's married to a real creep—pardon me, but that's what he is—but when she's disturbed she comes over here for coffee and a little chat, and we have a fine old time yakking away.

As Whyte concluded, the consensus that these neighbors created in overcoming differences of religion, background, and expectations “bespeaks a pretty high quotient of kindness and fundamental decency.”⁵

Although Whyte went on to critique this way of life, symptomatic in his eyes of the troubling post-WWII social trend of “group think,” what he described despite himself was vibrant community existing in suburbia. Neighbors were not merely acquainted. They were intimately connected on multiple levels—in the minutiae of the everyday demands of child raising and running homes, in mutual concerns about local civic issues, and even in intel-

lectual and spiritual life. As Whyte described the bustle in a community building on a typical night:

I saw: on the top floor, the church choir rehearsing; the Explorer Scouts (waiting for a quorum to plan next week's hike); world politics discussion group (to discuss what causes war; a second discussion group was to meet on a different evening to take up American foreign policy).⁶

This was a neighborhood where residents lived an ethic of mutuality and sociability. And it was in the heart of suburbia.

Flash forward to the late 1970s. By this time, just one generation removed, suburbia had become a place of deep social disconnection. Ethnographer M.P. Baumgartner documented this phenomenon in a case study of a suburb outside of New York City. The town was populated mostly by white European Americans, both middle and working class.

Baumgartner, who conducted her field work in 1978-79, was interested in exploring how people handled conflict in their suburb. What she found was that they contained it with tolerance, avoidance, and restraint in pursuing justice through the courts. A kind of “moral minimalism” prevailed, where people preferred the least extreme reaction to offenses, which in turn created a sense of social tranquility. The most common strategy for handling problems was avoidance. As she writes, “It is even possible to speak of the suburb as a culture of avoidance.”⁷

When Baumgartner turned to explaining this, she pointed squarely to the lack of community connection. This suburb lacked “social integration,” but instead was defined by a sense of indifference between neighbors. Avoidance as a strategy was thus logical: “It is easy to

end a relationship that hardly exists.”⁸ What contributed to this lack of community? The very attributes that she believed characterized suburban living: the privatism that kept families to themselves; the high mobility of homeowners, making it hard for them to form lasting bonds; and the compartmentalizing of social life (at work, at church, at school, etc.).

The contrasts revealed by the two books are striking, even as the built environment and its culture were purportedly the same. In Whyte's Park Forest, there was also high mobility. Social life was compartmentalized somewhat for men, less for women. Family privatism existed to a degree. Yet families overcame these factors to connect with one another. The question arises, then, if the built environment remained constant, how do we explain the change? And why do we

continue to blame suburbs for causing this change?⁹

Both Whyte's and Baumgartner's studies are representative of others that recorded similar findings and waged similar arguments for their respective time periods. Indeed, if we look at the broad trajectory of suburban studies, those conducted in the 1950s and 1960s found moderate to excessive community connections in suburbia, while those after 1970 portray community disengagement. A powerful theme in urban and social science writings has emphasized an emergent culture of fear in suburbia since the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by the rise of privatized, gated neighborhoods, built environments of fear and security, and the "secession of the successful" into independently governed and financed communities.¹⁰

This comparison suggests that we cannot blame

Figure 2. Gated community of Vezelay, north San Diego County, 2005. Photo courtesy Andrew Wiese.



the built environment itself for these changes in lived experience—and for the same reason, we cannot necessarily rely on a “spatial fix” to solve the perceived problem of community decline. As much as I agree with many of the concepts and ideas of the New Urbanism (heck, I’d even like to live in one of those developments one day), I’m skeptical that a nicely designed, compact, mixed-use neighborhood will promote social cohesion.

A historical perspective on the relationship between suburbia and community poses many exciting and fruitful possibilities for better understanding these phenomena. By asking these questions and sustaining their analysis over a broad span of time, we can better untangle the forces that are changing the ways we relate to one another—or don’t. Much of what we know about social life in postwar

suburbia is based on research conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and urban scholars, who have taken “snapshots” of particular places at a given point in time. Historians are just beginning to weigh in on these issues, to bring the valuable long view onto these changing lifeways and patterns of social existence. As a historian, my sense is that the story is more nuanced and complex than these broad outlines would suggest. By following multiple trajectories of suburban social history to explore these complexities, it is my belief that we can clarify two key issues. First, whether we can really speak accurately about a broad social shift from active community involvement to social isolation in suburbia over the years 1945 to 2000. My sense is that social connectedness has survived in different types of suburbs over time—

the challenge is identifying where, how, and why. Second, the growing ethnic, racial, and social diversity of suburbia points to a multiplicity of social experiences that must be considered in their particularities.

At this very early stage of my research, some preliminary ideas have emerged. First, I believe gender, race, ethnicity, and class all figure largely in these transformations. Race is a field that has been well interrogated by historians to date. While most of the documentation on suburban social life in the 1950s and 1960s comes from sociologists, when historians have looked at this period, they have tended to emphasize racial politics. Indeed, in a number of case studies, historians have documented suburban community engagement and activism in the service of segregation. They too have seen an ac-

tive, engaged citizenry, but one directing its energies toward the goal of neighborhood defense. My own study of South Gate found this to be true, as have others.²¹ In thinking more broadly about this issue, I’ve come to realize that these efforts were often done in the name of community integrity—in a sense, the ways that postwar suburbanites deployed community precipitated a kind of destructive redefinition of the concept. In producing racial and economic inequality and doing so in a context of *community vitality*, suburbanites worked to transform the community ideal from a positive source of human fulfillment and acceptance into a destructive tool of exclusivity and inequality.

Race emerges again after the 1970s, when the eradication of state-sanctioned barriers of segregation (that is, the outlawing of race restrictive

covenants and the rise of fair housing laws) played a role in the dual-pronged development of suburbs after this point. Some moved toward the gated, segregated type. Others moved consciously toward integration and diversity. The racial and ethnic diversification of suburbia after the 1970s certainly complicates the picture. From 1970 to 2000, the proportion of all suburbanites who were African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans rose from just under 10 percent to 28 percent. Suburbia also became home to young singles, one-parent families, gay and lesbians, empty-nesters, and retirees. This demography suggests a multiplicity of community experiences that belie the image of fear and loathing in suburbia.

Gender is vitally important as well. The image of the suburban housewife is one deeply ingrained in our

collective psyche. A slew of writings (not to mention films and novels) portray suburban women as alternately the victims and rulers of the suburban domain, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* foremost among them. While many share Friedan's bleak assessment of the emptiness of suburban housewifery, Whyte and others portray suburban women—and their children—as the social glue of community. Stay-at-home mothers had the opportunity to build social ties and mutual aid for one another, sometimes by virtue of their car-less isolation. The ways in which women's increasing turn to wage work impacted local community life is a topic awaiting exploration,

Figure 3. This depiction of a suburban mother's social claustrophobia appeared in *Readers Digest* in 1961, two years before *The Feminine Mystique* was published. Source: *Readers Digest* 78 (January 1961), 99.



as are the effects of changing school conditions after initial desegregation.

Are we right to blame the suburbs for all the ills they usually get blasted for these days? For some of these problems, absolutely yes. Have the suburbs killed community, and should urban planners follow upon this logic accordingly? My answer is no. The jury is still out on this question. Until we look systematically at the social history of suburbia, in its many and diverse incarnations over the past several decades, we will continue to fall into the trap of spatial determinism, of blaming spatial form for the successes or failures of our society that emanate from forces that reach well beyond the built environment.

Becky Nicolaides is a CSW Research Scholar for 2007–08. She received her Ph.D. in American history from Columbia University in 1993. Formerly Associate Professor of History and Urban Studies and Planning at UC San Diego, she departed in 2006 after commuting between LA and San Diego for 9 years. She lives in Los Angeles with her actor husband and two high-energy kids.

NOTES

1. James Howard Kunstler, “A Crisis in Landscape and Townscape,” in *Moving to Corn Fields: A Reader on Urban Sprawl and the Regional Future of Northeast Ohio*, ed. David Beach (Cleveland: EcoCity Cleveland, 1996).
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 214.
3. Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff

- Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), especially chapter 7.
4. William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 286.
5. Whyte, *Organization Man*, 356–57.
6. Whyte, *Organization Man*, 287.
7. M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11.
8. Baumgartner, *Moral Order*, 13.
9. While I don’t consider the latter question here, I do explore it in another article. See Becky Nicolaides, “How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community,” *The New Suburban History*, eds. Kevin Kruse and Tom Sugrue (University of Chicago Press, 2006).
10. The literature on this is enormous. A few examples include Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).
11. Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Matt Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2005); Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, 1998).

CSW Update is a monthly PDF/web publication of the UCLA Center for the Study of Women.

EDITOR/DESIGNER

Brenda Johnson-Grau

UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN

DIRECTOR

Kathleen McHugh

PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH AND
CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Purnima Mankekar

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENTS OF ASIAN
AMERICAN STUDIES AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

April de Stefano

FINANCIAL MANAGER

Van DoNguyen

MANAGING EDITOR

Brenda Johnson-Grau

ADMINISTRATIVE SPECIALIST

Jessie Babiarz

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Andrew Miller

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

*Amy Chen, Sarah Cho, Vivian Davis,
Katie Shields, and Andrew Bliss*

BOX 957222

1500 PUBLIC AFFAIRS BUILDING

LOS ANGELES, CA 90095-7222

CAMPUS MAILCODE: 722203

310-825-0590

310-825-0456 (FAX)

csw@csw.ucla.edu

cswpubs@women.ucla.edu