INTRODUCTION

The White Diaspora

Edith wharton's "The Great American Novel," a review essay published in 1925, lauds the expansive "scenes and settings" of nineteenth-century American literature while it denounces the "narrow" "social and geographical limitations" of its modern counterpart.[1] Where, for example, the tropics had afforded Melville "the freest range to [his] invention" (653), twentieth-century novelists were imaginatively fettered by what she called the "Main Street" (647) phenomenon. For Wharton, "Main Street" signified American provincialism in general rather than the village ethos per se; that is, it expressed the literary privileging of "the common mean of American life anywhere" (649) in the United States, at the expense of more differentiated, international, and urbane sites of experience. But Wharton reserved harshest judgment for an environment that she initially excluded from her inventory of conventional literary settings: "its million cities and towns, its countless villages and immeasurable wildernesses" (649). She suggested that in seeking to create a "typical" (646) portrait of modern American life, novelists had developed a deplorable obsession with "the little suburban house at number one million and ten Volstead Avenue" (655), the essay's most pronounced icon of literary failure:

> Inheriting an old social organization which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence. . . . [S]he has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence, and the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one's neighbor's.
>
> Great as may be the material advantages of these diffused conveniences, the safe and uniform life resulting from them offers to the artist's imagination a surface as flat and monotonous as our own prairies. (650)

Wharton complained that "the whole of [American] life" had been reduced to the material artifacts of the good life; she further indicated that novelists who represented that diminishment were in fact participating in it. Contemporary writers had so confined their attention to national "baseness in the midst of plenty" (648) that they reproduced the very sterility they sought to critique and combat. The Main Street "theme" (648) had become "a canon, a first principle in the laws of American

fiction" (649), and the American novel would never be great so long as it
explored, and thus ensured, the absence of "*nuances*" (650), of "nicely
shaded degrees" and differences, a lack that is constitutive of a "mid-
dling," "middle class" (651) existence as embodied in the mundane ma-
chinery of the small suburban house.

   This book takes as its subject the suburban literary tradition that Edith
Wharton identified here and tried to thwart. Her failure to dislodge "the
little suburban house" from the twentieth-century American novel is evi-
dent from even a cursory glance at some of the writers who have turned
it to account: Sinclair Lewis, James M. Cain, Sloan Wilson, Richard Yates,
John Updike, Frederick Barthelme, and Richard Ford. The suburb has
remained uncharted literary territory only among critics, while for de-
cades the city has enjoyed, in Wharton's own novels among others, sig-
nificant scholarly favor as the complex generative location of realism,
modernism, and, more recently, ethnic and African American literatures.[2]
By contrast, "The Great American Novel" identified an emergent subur-
ban "canon," established its preoccupations as insuperable deficiencies,
and so undermined the possibility of canonical consideration by setting
the terms on which it could be ignored: its dedication to analysis and
critique over aesthetics, its tropes of typicality and "mediocrity" (651),
its focus on the "safe, shallow, and shadowless" (650). My aim is less
to refute or prove the charges against this literature than to analyze the
assumptions that sustain them and the kind of novels Wharton repudi-
ates: the suburb is the exemplary location, not only of middle-class advan-
tages, but of middle-class abasement; moreover, its abasement is a func-
tion of its advantages. The material benefits, however "great," are
cultural and spiritual handicaps. For Wharton, the fully loaded suburban
house is intrinsically inimical to meaningful literature because it precludes
a meaningful life.

   More generally, this study examines the tendency in twentieth-century
literary treatments of the American suburb to convert the rights and privi-
leges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of dis-
placement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as
much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance. I trace
two distinct but contingent narrative patterns. The first marks the system-
atic erosion of the suburban house as a privileged site of emotional con-
nection and stability. It undoes the colloquial substitution of the word
home for *house*, as though only one kind of residence possesses intrinsic
affective value, and presumes an almost automatic discrepancy between
material and spiritual shelter, structure and sentiment, suburban house
and home.[3] In a paradox that is fundamental to novels about the suburb,
white middle-class characters are homeowners, as the expression goes,
who are plagued by the problem of "homelessness." *Babbitt* (1922) be-

gins by comparing the protagonist's standardized bedroom to a room in a good hotel and Babbitt to a guest, as Sinclair Lewis laments that "there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home";[4] in *Mildred Pierce* (1941), James M. Cain furnishes his protagonists with a department-store living room that they use only for funerals; the first thing we learn about Tom and Betsy Rath in the opening sentence of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) is that they detest their development house that looks just like all the others; Peter Jernigan claims that he is "into the degradation" of his "God damn tract house" in David Gate's Pulitzer Prize–nominated *Jernigan* (1991).[5] Central to the logic of homelessness is the premise that as the suburban house becomes the primary locus and object of consumption for the white middle class, the artifacts and habits of domestic culture are seen to jeopardize or to destroy the home's emotional texture. Thus, even as an "indigenous ideal of suburban residence and home ownership" has become crucial to and equated with the achievement of the "American dream" in this century, an ongoing strain of the American novel has insisted instead that the suburb and suburban house cheat characters out of the very thing that is supposed to be their white, middle-class, property-owning due.[6]

Like the rise of great industrial cities in the nineteenth century, the dispersal of population to the suburbs in the twentieth century has been one of the most significant social and political facts of modern American life. The novel's intervention into the cultural meanings of this transformation is worth examining, not as it records the experience of actual suburban Americans, but, on the contrary, because it seems to diverge so palpably from that experience, as it has been documented and interpreted by social and cultural historians of American suburbs, housing, and the white middle class. Whether discussing transportation technologies, construction and real estate practices, architecture, or family and social life, these historians have tended to emphasize the traditional role of the suburb in *placing* its residents, physically and emotionally, within changing social and economic orders. According to feminist historians, in the last decades of the industrializing nineteenth century "the cult of home and motherhood . . . reached its pinnacle" in the freestanding, single-family suburban house, which fostered an ideal of the home as private, family-oriented, and nurturing as "an essential aspect of the identity and self-definition of the middle class."[7] The "suburban ideal" described a model of white middle-class community as well as of private domestic life. From the 1880s through World War I, planned suburbs for the affluent, which incorporated technological advances and the health and moral benefits of natural settings, enabled a newly consolidating professional and managerial class (the PMC) to "formalize its life-style and position in society in a suitable residential environment" of single-family houses inhabited by "socially

equal, like-minded" neighbors.[8] With the proliferation of attractive sub-urban houses and communities, comfortably removed from the city where the residents' wealth was produced and much of it spent, the PMC actively constructed a confident, prosperous "social identity" based on "consumption, location, homogeneity of family presentation, auton-omy"; in short, the suburb expressed the idea that "a new class" was literally and figuratively "at home with itself."[9]

By the 1920s the suburban home emerged as a crucial symbol of con-sumer prosperity and fulfillment in popular periodical articles, modern advertising, and a national "Own Your Own Home" campaign, spon-sored by the government and business interests. For the first time, popula-tion at the periphery of American cities grew at a faster rate than in the central core, as more middle-class families sought and found in the bur-geoning suburbs what came to be known as "the good life."[10] After the severe abatement of single-family house construction during the Depres-sion and war, mass-produced housing developments exploded in the fif-ties, and the suburban home life of housewives and commuter husbands has generally been regarded as the approximation of a Victorian ideal of domesticity, a "haven in a heartless world," to cite Christopher Lasch's famous and favorable title, or alternatively, an anachronistic "source of meaning and security in a world run amok."[11] In addition, suburban house ownership has provided white residents with substantial material benefits that have continued to place them at an economic and social advantage over nonwhites, whose participation in the housing market has been constrained by racist laws and practices.[12] Current scholarship and opinion polls discover both individual satisfaction and community ties in contemporary American suburbs. As John Stilgoe writes in the introduc-tion to a splendid landscape history of the farthest "borderland" suburbs, for those who live in them or who aspire to, suburbs in general "represent the good life, the life of the dream, the dream of happiness in a single-family house in an attractive, congenial community."[13]

And yet, beginning with *Babbitt*, American novels typically point to the downfall of that dream. Twentieth-century novelists who have written about the suburb present their work as a critique of its culture, and this oppositional gesture, much like Wharton's own attack, is predicated on their disavowal of the very real privileges that the suburb has offered those who live there. One effect of ubiquitous complaints about mass production, standardization, dullness, and conformity, which novelists have developed and refined in the context of a broad-based intellectual resistance to the suburb, is to generate a twentieth-century model of white middle-classness based counterintuitively and, indeed, incredibly on the experience of victimization. The suburban house and its contents are not associated in this literature with the consolations of ownership, with the

productive or scandalous function of property to mark, even constitute, identity that has been labeled *possessive individualism* and identified in this century with the ascendance of modern advertising and consumer culture; they signify instead what we might call, by way of reworking Gillian Brown's term for Harriet Beecher Stowe's sense of the proper emotional investment in property, "sentimental dispossession."[14] *Sentimental dispossession* refers to the affective dislocation by which white middle-class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity. Wharton's scorn for the suburban house came from a position of class and cultural authority far above that domestic establishment, but novels such as *Babbitt*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Barthelme's *Natural Selection* (1990), and Gates's *Jernigan* and *Preston Falls* (1998) consider a similar sort of resistance and contempt to be the inescapable outcome of the residents' self-reflection. Literary representations of the suburb propose that white middle-class identity is not grounded in safe havens or homes but in its alienation from the very environments, artifacts, and institutions that have generally been regarded as central to its affect and identity.

To this point my discussion of the novel has assumed the residential suburb's homogeneity, its achievement of racial and class uniformity. But obviously no story of the suburb would be complete without examining the processes by which such homogeneity is established and enforced. Contests over suburban space provide an important exception to the narrative of alienation. When the focus is on the separation of white suburbanites from people of different races and lower classes, the literary suburb is indeed identified with the placement and prerogatives attendant upon property ownership, the freedom to live where and how one pleases. The practice of self-segregation is not represented as unmotivated exclusion, however, but as a necessary retreat from and defense against a colonizing presence that is metonymically figured as the city. By seeking their own residential freedom, these invaders are imagined to interfere with the inhabitant's basic right to self-determination. Thus I read *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912), by future real estate subdivider Edgar Rice Burroughs, as deeply invested in the racial and class logic of the suburb insofar as the virtually aboriginal white hero is obsessed both with protecting the free-standing beach house that harbors the secret of his Anglo-Saxon heritage from aggressive African savages, and with finding a community of "other white people like himself."[15] In a chapter on *Native Son* (1940) I suggest that the principal site of racial contestation is less the white body of the landlord's daughter than the "quiet and spacious white neighborhood" of Hyde Park–Kenwood, an isolated, affluent suburban enclave on Chicago's South Side, which is, by the novel's publication, just one block from a porous "color line" that Bigger Thomas is driven to cross.[16] Whereas

Tarzan justified the racial and class restrictions of burgeoning suburbs as a defense of residential freedom on the part of besieged white inhabitants, *Native Son* brilliantly dramatized the relation of white flight and freedom to black homelessness and incarceration within the city. I include *Native Son* in this study, furthermore, as a kind of reality check, to gauge through Wright the real injuries inflicted on those who are denied the opportunity to become upwardly mobile in the suburbs.

As the relative eccentricity of this pairing suggests, to talk most explicitly about the dynamics of racial exclusion I have had to turn to novels that deal obliquely, but nonetheless quite powerfully, with the suburb. Most literature written before the 1960s and set in suburbs engages the topic of race only indirectly. The suburb's racial composition is so unremarkable to most white novelists that in general it is indistinguishable from the suburb's middle-classness. In the absence of direct threats to property from those who are kept out, especially through racist covenants and customs, the suburb is not experienced as the freedom to live how and where one pleases, nor is the suburban house considered a thing of value; the racial and class uniformity of the suburb functions instead as the condition of community in which questions about the alienation and insecurity of the white middle class can be safely raised. When suburban characters articulate their freedom, it is because they perceive that freedom to have come under assault. When that freedom seems assured, it is evacuated in favor of emotional and spiritual dispossession.

In describing a population of "homeless" suburbanites as *diasporic*, I invoke the term in an ironic sense and with the intention of exposing the cognitive and rhetorical chicanery by which the privileged come to be seen and to see themselves as the disadvantaged and dispossessed. The diaspora signifies a spatial and sometimes even a temporal disparity between the place one inhabits and that place somewhere else where one imagines one's real home or homeland to be. Displacement is dependent upon a prior fact of physical dispersal, of one's self or one's ancestors. If the psychical dimension of the geopolitical diaspora is about imagining and forging spiritual and cultural connections to the place that you are not, the white diaspora of the suburb is instead about the failure to produce such connections to the place that you are.[17] And given that the places of the white middle class are houses filled with comforts and conveniences, in communities of their own making and choosing, I draw from this literature its conviction that the white middle class is the preeminent casualty of the suburb's affluence and advantages. To put it crudely, this study highlights the ways in which Babbitts begin to think of themselves as Biggers, and suburban novelists come to regard such perceptions as reasonable points of view. The term *white diaspora* is designed to emphasize and lay bare the role of the novel in promoting a fantasy of victimiza-

tion that reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee, turns material advantages into artifacts of spiritual and cultural oppression, and sympathetically treats affluent house owners as the emotionally dispossessed. Such fraudulent identifications are treated as the birthright of the suburbanite and are the hallmark of the suburb's luxury and privilege.

Sentimental Dispossession

The suburb is a valuable thematic framework for analyzing the novel because it requires us to revise our current understanding of the home as a gendered fixture in American literature and literary criticism and to rethink the cultural phenomenon of whiteness, particularly as it relates to class; more generally, it affords an opportunity to expand the conventional ways of organizing studies of twentieth-century American literature. Literary scholarship on the home has continued to be confined almost exclusively to nineteenth-century texts and contexts and to the experience of women. Brown's *Domestic Individualism*, to which I have already alluded, represents an important shift in the analysis of the home in the nineteenth-century American novel, from an alternative value system and separate sphere of women's culture within a rapidly industrializing society to an integral site in the development and triumph of an industrial-commercial economy. Brown attends to the role of the home in securing a stable identity for men that enabled them to participate in the market and retain an interiorized or "domesticated" self that was withdrawn from it, but the relation of men to the domestic in her account is more intimately connected with this model of selfhood than with the interior space and routines of the home as such. And Brown's study, like Nina Baym's earlier examination of women's sentimental literature, ends with the late-nineteenth-century transformation of private women into public women, as though the home ceased immediately to be a primary site of either feminine influence and identity or of masculine selfhood.[18]

Further challenges to the spatial and social binaries implied by the concept of separate spheres, which include essays in *The Culture of Sentiment* and a September 1998 special issue of *American Literature*, have focused on the explanatory inadequacy of distinct gendered domains for the complex identifications and experiences of women, who may be divided, even as they are aligned with men, by a host of other factors such as race, class, sexuality, and region. This work has complicated the relation between public and private identities for women of all classes and colors, especially, once again, in the nineteenth century, while it still generally neglects to remap the social and affective geographies of men. The interesting exception that proves the rule is recent literary scholarship on the nine-

teenth-century domestic culture of bachelors. The relation of men to the emotional and material space of the home is worth considering only when middle-class wives and mothers are gone from it, when, that is, women have in effect been replaced by men who occupy an implicitly feminized, sexually problematic position by virtue of their anomalous domesticity.[19]

My project demonstrates the durability of the home in the twentieth century as an idealized, because also frequently unactualized, refuge of security and fulfillment, whose attractions cut across race and class as well as gender. The home continues to be an insistent object of literary attention, but more often for its regrettable absence than its proximity or plenitude, not only for those who are denied its comforts, but even and most strikingly for those who have always had readiest access to and been most protected by it. It is not surprising that the facts of racism and class injustice have inspired a body of novels that address the literal dispossession of male and female immigrants, African Americans, and poor white migrants: think of *The Jungle* (1906) and the wrenching seizure of the Rudkus family's small house and equity, into which members have poured their "souls"; the Joads' expulsion from their land and futile pursuit of one of "the little white houses among the orange trees" in California; the temporary thrill of house ownership enjoyed by the Italian family of *Christ in Concrete* (1939), just before the breadwinner Geremio is killed in a construction accident and the house is lost; Lutie Johnson's desire to move off "the street," that is, out of a tiny, dingy, and insufficiently private Harlem apartment and into a house like the one she once shared with her husband, before financial hardship forced her into another family's domestic service.[20] Where contemporary critics are at pains to emphasize the differences between representations of the conventional domestic desires of the white middle class and the community-oriented as well as kinship-focused values of people of other races and classes, these examples invoke correspondences rather than sheer contrasts. The protagonists of these novels have access to a vision of house ownership as a vehicle of Americanization and social mobility, a marker of stability, independence, and respectability, a source of emotional as well as material shelter, even as the novelists take pains to establish how difficult ownership and its outcomes are to achieve for the variously outcast. Simply to label these ways of conceptualizing house and home as *bourgeois* is both to miss how pervasive these values have become across twentieth-century American cultures and to ignore as well the ways in which some middle-class attitudes toward houses and homes may be thought to have changed.[21]

My interest in narratives about suburbs and white middle-class homelessness arises in part from their denial of the values and benefits that powerfully sustain such novels of disenfranchisement. The suburban house is not merely the setting for dramatic encounters and the resolution

of conflicts; rather, the home itself is the topic, the problem around which many of the novels I focus on revolve. In the context of the suburb, one encounters a male-authored and frequently male-focused body of literature that is obsessed with the meaning and value of home and community, with reassessing the boundaries that separate domestic life from other activities and places, and with exploring the limits and opportunities of a so-called displacement. As a tradition of popular writing about the home, the suburban novel provides a useful lens through which to view an emergent version of a domestically oriented male identity that is at odds with the usual rituals, defensive strategies, and compensatory projects of masculine refurbishing. At its center are men who desperately want the promises of home fulfilled. Thus, in contrast with standard accounts of canonical nineteenth-century and modern literature that rely, as Baym and Lora Romero have argued, on a gendered aesthetic of male alienation from "a feminized realm of domestic familiarity," the alienation of men from the suburban home in the popular novel expresses the *desire for* domestic familiarity.[22] This desire obtains among characters, who seek to reestablish the emotional connection of home, and among novelists, who invoke the home as the measure of the characters' loss. In discovering the deep domestic attachments of a range of literary texts by and about men, including those within genres such as hard-boiled fiction and naturalism, which have traditionally been conceived in opposition to emotional work of any sort, this project indicates how we might begin to reevaluate the arc of the sentimental tradition in the twentieth century.[23] My primary emphasis, though, is not on arguing for the existence or tracing the implications of male sentimentality, but rather on explicating what it means for affect so readily to fail disgruntled men as well as women who live in circumstances for which the Rudkuses, the Joads, Geremio, and Lutie Johnson fight and in some cases die. If living in a suburb means feeling dispossessed, the white middle-class home is reconfigured in the twentieth-century novel not only as a desirable site of male affect and identification, but as an institution that delivers far more in the way of self-pity than gratification.

Before I turn to the significance of self-pity for cultural studies of racial and class identity, it is worth examining the differences between the contours of sentimental dispossession and the potential violation associated with the influx of mass-produced commodities into the mid-nineteenth-century home, to clarify the profound inadequacy of the prevailing paradigms for the twentieth century. In Stowe's *House and Home Papers*, for example, when the wife and daughter of the narrator flood the house with sterile commodities in a corrupt redecorating effort, he differentiates between a home filled with well-used, well-loved, and comfortable furnishings and a house of formal, fashionable goods that is for looking at,

not living in. At stake is the right affective relation of persons to meaningful objects as against the impersonal transactions of the market, and it is telling that Stowe announces through a man's voice that the house ceases to provide sanctuary from the commercial world when it becomes women's conduit to it. But for Stowe's narrator, there is nothing wrong with wanting the house "to appear a little as other people['s] do."[24] Sixty years later the idea that one's house resembles those of "other people" is exactly the concern with mass production in and of the house and the processes of standardization with which it is associated by the 1920s. Once the home has begun to be staked out as the inevitable, indeed natural, territory of consumer culture in advertising, feature articles, and household advice columns, disapproval over commodification per se becomes increasingly irrelevant; the massification of both the home and the middle class is the salient issue.[25]

In other words, houses that contain mass-produced and -consumed goods and department-store living rooms or that are built en masse in post–World War II developments are associated with homelessness not because they have been improperly penetrated by an abstraction called the market. Rather, the association comes through the undesirable multiplication of such houses and furnishings, interiors and exteriors, that look exactly alike. The twentieth-century home is under siege, not from any conventional notion of the public or commercial sphere, but as it has been opened up to other private homes. Warren Susman influentially described the preoccupation with developing and projecting a self that is different from "the crowd" as one of the most significant cultural shifts in twentieth-century American mass society.[26] In objecting to the indignity of having a house that looks like others, the suburban novel suggests that the individuated home is the place where individuated selves are formed and sustained, its role in this process expanding as the economic base of white middle-class men shifts further toward managerial and white-collar employment for others and away from entrepreneurship. Labor historian Gary Cross has argued that suburban house ownership and the independence it seemed to promise became "part of a trade-off" after World War I for the employee's increasing dependence in a bureaucratizing workplace; the American Dream became more closely associated with the chance to "own your own home," rather than "your own" business or the means of production.[27] While *Mildred Pierce* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* protest against a proliferation of identical houses as impediments to this dream, they also propose a beneficial fluidity between homes and businesses—the home as a commodity that restaurants can produce more effectively than lone housewives can, white-collar values as a model for domestic life. The affinity between middle-class homes and

workplaces seems utterly unimaginable if one's primary frame of reference is an outworn tension between home and market.

The representation of the suburb in the American novel points to men's and women's participation in consumer and work cultures; it articulates the relations between individuals and a dense network of local and national affiliations that mass production, standardization, and, by the fifties, the specter of conformity served to clarify and reinforce. Indeed, the literary figure for the exemplary consumer in the 1920s is not a woman, as we would expect, but Lewis's beleaguered businessman, Babbitt, and one result of his consumption practices is the erosion of all boundaries between his Floral Heights house and the houses of his neighbors, who come to be defined in terms of their similarity rather than their proximity to him.[28] Historians of the suburb have tended to emphasize the radical break between the building boom of the 1920s and, following a sharp decline in suburban construction during the Depression and World War II, the national proliferation of large-scale subdivisions in the late forties and the fifties and, again, in the last twenty years or so, the rise of modern, uniform "edge cities" or "technoburbs" of decentralized labor and commercial leisure, as well as living, spaces.[29] I do not want to minimize the tremendous demographic and topographical differences between eras, even decades, of development, but Lewis's vision of a national neighborhood in the early twenties anticipates the unprecedented homogeneity associated with the paths of suburbanization since World War II. "How to tell if one is in suburban Atlanta or Denver or Houston?" Richard Rodriguez wondered in December 1999, as a television camera panned over bland strip malls.[30] Rodriguez's "Where am I?" is an emblematic expression of what we often think of as a definitively postmodern dislocation. Examining its antecedents in the work of Lewis and others allows us to consider important continuities, and not just changes, in ways of thinking about and representing the twentieth-century suburb and suburban house, which is the primary object of my analysis—the suburb as created in and through various discourses, rather than the suburb itself.

Obviously the kinds of suburbs whose depictions I discuss, which include upper-middle- and upper-class East Coast and midwestern garden suburbs, small-scale lower-middle-class subdivisions in southern California, postwar developments modeled after Levittown, and contemporary gated communities, differ significantly from one another. One of my reasons for examining representations of a variety of residential environments is to draw meaningful connections between them in order to understand how and why such a generic term as "the suburb" might have come to stand in for them all. The boundaries between suburbs as well as between houses are long seen to be in flux. Beginning with Lewis, to write about the suburb is to express a constitutive tension between the locally

specific and the uniformly unlocatable, in which regions are routinely represented through domestic architecture, artifacts, and landscape to be in the process of absorption into a national suburban totality. The powerful affiliation of writers with particular regions—Lewis and the Midwest; Cain and southern California; Wilson, Updike, and Rick Moody, the Northeast; Barthelme, the South—is necessarily complicated by their contributions to a literary tradition that has by the nature of its preoccupations gone so much against the grain of regional writing.

In covering so much ground, temporally and spatially, this book seeks not only to analyze and synthesize the literature of different regions and genres, but also to move beyond the typical ways of periodizing American literature. If, as I would argue, it is impossible to understand the range and complexity of the suburb's cultural meaning without taking into account the literature that has explored and interpreted white middle-class suburban experience, the suburb also can shape our ideas about twentieth-century literary production by presenting a fuller picture of novelistic convergence and coherence than is available in literary studies set in some more or less discrete portion of the twentieth century. Critics regularly categorize twentieth-century American literature according to fairly rigid periods that promote rupture: turn of the century ending just before or after World War I; the interwar years; postwar; contemporary or postmodern. There is also the momentous decade phenomenon: the prosperous 1920s, the traumatic 1930s, the complacent 1950s, and so on. With the exception of the 1890s, gateway to the modern, only the twentieth century is divided up in this fashion. My study concentrates on the 1890s through 1960; by confining my discussion of post-1960s novels to the epilogue, I may seem to give them unduly short shrift, especially to readers who assume that a study of the suburban novel begins with Updike and Cheever. But I read these novelists and their later incarnations as heirs rather than inaugurators of a tradition; what impresses me are the relative modesty of formal shifts in literary treatments of the suburb and the conspicuous continuities of thematic preoccupation and representational strategy.

EMPTY WHITE PEOPLE

This study also reveals how these representations of suburban life have produced the suburbanite as a kind of sociological label within literature whose contours remain consistent in important ways. In attending to the sociological dimension of this literature, I follow the example of Christopher P. Wilson in *White Collar Fictions*. Wilson not only brings class to the forefront of popular American literature during the early decades of

bureaucratization, but he also demonstrates the significance of the "normative," "paradigmatic," and "typical" to literary representations of white middle-class life, to the extent that individuals within an unrepresentative occupational class were regularly made to stand in for the "average" American and their social life for that of the "mass."[31] My recourse to the sociological does not, of course, imply any claims about the statistical pervasiveness of real aggrieved suburbanites, nor about the novel's accuracy in modeling the feelings and habits of actual residents of the suburb. Like Wilson, however, I am interested in the power of cultural representations, specifically, in this case, best-selling novels, to enter into the popular consciousness, to construct imaginative and yet influential worlds to which they frequently claim to be referring.

This power is evident from the way in which suburban novels have been discussed by critics and readers. I am hardly the first to read suburban novels as sociologically important; in reviews and popular references, the significance of *Babbitt*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and the Rabbit novels, among others, has been cast in terms of the truth and utility of their insights into and assessments of American society rather more often than in terms of aesthetics. And in contrast with Wharton, this has been by way of praise as frequently as blame. Between the years when allusions to Babbitts and gray flannel suits took on a life of their own in commentaries about the middle class, *Native Son* was controversially embraced and disputed as a signal contribution to the study of African American urban experience. Even Cain, whose fiction might at first glance seem resistant or irrelevant to this framework, was acclaimed by a reviewer for possessing an "anthropologist's tenacity" in his treatment of suburban culture, and *Mildred Pierce* was cited as a potentially "invaluable gloss on Middletown," the setting for two celebrated sociologies of middle-American life in the 1920s and 1930s.[32] Burroughs had no such intentions for *Tarzan*, at least, that is, until he began to promote the Tarzana subdivision in Los Angeles. Then he drew upon the superiority of community-minded yet self-sufficient white people like Tarzan to conceptualize the ideal suburbanite and neighbor. The novelists as well as many reviewers and other cultural critics understood these novels to be documents freighted with social import, with the exception of *Tarzan*, and to participate in describing, mapping, and molding the cultural meaning of places and people, and here *Tarzan* is relevant, if only after the fact. To read these novels in an informed way, as interventions in the production of a distinctly suburban identity, and thus to retrieve a sense of their currency requires one to attend to the ways in which they reworked and reinvented the ideas and issues that invigorated their historical moment.

To varying degrees, each of the texts I examine directly engages popular and professional discourses about the suburb and frequently the city,

which include sociology, architecture and architectural criticism, interior decoration, urban planning, and real estate advertising. Although my chapters are variously structured around individual literary texts, clusters of novels by several authors, and in one instance, the authorial career, I employ a contextualist approach throughout the book in order to explicate and relate diverse cultural representations of the suburb. For me the most interesting feature of the suburban siege mentality in literature lies in its discontinuities with the accounts of suburban habits and habitats offered by other intellectuals, particularly the image of the self-satisfied, even haughty, suburbanite. Harlan Paul Douglass, author of the first full-length sociology of suburbanization as a national trend, observed without prejudice in 1925 that "the suburbanite cherishes a characteristic sense of superiority," just as the suburb was becoming a favorite target among hostile intellectuals who, as Stilgoe has argued, "hated most what they saw as smug satisfaction in 'American ways'" enshrined there.[33] And widespread attacks on the complacency of postwar suburbanites are well known. But the characteristic suburban affect in *Babbitt* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* involves extremes of discontent rather than satisfaction, pathos not complacency. This substitution may seem self-evident to us now; if so, it is a further tribute to the potential "power" of literature to "becom[e] axiomatic."[34] With *Babbitt*, the dissatisfied suburbanite is basically a literary invention as an American icon, which emerged at a time when stereotypes of the suburb had not yet hardened and its meaning was up for grabs. It continues to sustain contemporary novels of white middle-class dispossession such as Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People* (1968), Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), and Gates's *Preston Falls*. The enduring popularity of this narrative, with readers as well as writers, and the difficulty of telling other kinds of stories about an environment that has historically been a bastion of racial and class privilege reveal the importance of laments about the suburban house and way of life—of a deeply fraught self-pity—to the meaning of white middle-classness in this century.

The prerogatives and pitfalls of white identity have generated a good deal of commentary in recent years, but to a surprising degree critics have downplayed or ignored the centrality of self-pity to it. Studies of whiteness have been concerned with exposing its invisibility as a racial identity, with demonstrating the centrality of other races to so-called white identity and culture, and with imagining the social and political consequences of making the actual content of a culturally situated whiteness manifest. Richard Dyer, who analyzes cultural representations of whiteness, and Ruth Frankenberg, who studies its sociological construction, have argued with others that to itself whiteness appears to be unmarked, the presumptuous baseline against which the racial presence and hence marginality of

others are established. The paradox of whiteness is that its very amorphousness as an identity is understood simultaneously to situate its social privilege and to describe an embarrassing cultural and spiritual banality. It is often experienced as a distressing lack of hipness among people who see themselves as "cultureless": "to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing," to relinquish "fun, 'life.' "[35] Frankenberg observes in passing "white women's mourning over whiteness" (200) as deficiency, and Dyer notes, and is fearful of seeming to contribute to, a "Poor us" (10) refrain, but their interest in describing the signification of whiteness as "apparently empty cultural space" (Frankenberg 192) is primarily to expose it as further evidence of the white normativity and entitlement that prevent whiteness from seeing or naming itself.

By contrast, David Roediger insists unequivocally that in the absence of specific ethnic affiliations, whiteness really is an "empty culture."[36] *Nothing* is its proper name and content. He points hopefully to the popularity of hip-hop music and style among younger white people as both a spontaneous and rebellious alternative to "what passes as white culture" (15) and "an explicit, often harsh, critique of whiteness" (16). Eric Lott develops the relation of African American culture to the construction of white culture and identity to make a different point about their emptiness. Describing "the (b)lack on which whiteness depends," Lott rhetorically mimics the synchronism of white lack and black plenitude that reinforces whiteness as an enduring, constitutive absence even in the process of its creation.[37] Nonetheless, white male working-class appropriations of black cultural forms, whether in the case of nineteenth-century minstrelsy or of Elvis and his impersonators, are retrieved from mere vacancy. They are treated as richly textured and complex white/(b)lack subcultures, in which "racial ambivalence" may also in some instances, according to Lott, hold out the "possibility of radicalism."[38]

It is in the historical and cultural study of the white working class that whiteness studies has been especially influential.[39] Whiteness as an identity and a culture is complicated in ways not yet fully explored when the middle class comes into focus. As the cultural mainstream, the white middle class is unamenable to recuperation through the concept of subcultures.[40] If we recall Wharton's criticisms of a "middling," "middle class" American life, and consider similar rebukes offered in different contexts and periods by intellectuals ranging from Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford to David Riesman and William H. Whyte, along with various suburban novelists across the century, we see that there is an illustrious tradition of associating the middle class with cultural emptiness and spiritual poverty. It is most apparent in relation to white people and characters, those who have constituted the majority of the middle classes in and out of fiction; indeed, the virtual invisibility of race in *Babbitt, Mildred*

Pierce, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and other novels of the suburb, which I do not otherwise belabor in my readings of them, signals not only, obviously, the real absence of African Americans from white suburbs, but also the inclination to see middle-class culture and status as the unique prerogatives, or rather, the unique drawbacks, of nonethnic white people. More than twenty years after *Babbitt*, Lewis devoted a whole novel, *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), to discovering the existence of a black middle class, which he associated with deep cultural reserves and spiritual integrity. But among African American intellectuals the black middle class has of course received its share of scorn as well, most famously in sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's study of the "black bourgeoisie" in the 1950s, but also in the work of such writers as Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, and Gloria Naylor. Only in Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985), as we shall see, is black middle-classness confident enough in itself to be structured around the feeling, rather than the fear, of dispossession. In contrast with a monolithic idea of empty white culture, then, culturelessness is an evolving concept and complaint that is crucial to the construction and representation of the middle class and flexible with respect to race.

The factor of class further prompts us to reexamine the significance of culturelessness as potentially radical self-critique. Frankenberg mentions briefly that the criticisms of white culture she heard during her fieldwork were often indistinguishable from critiques of the basic features of middle-class life, the privileged but boring class identity and the privileged but boring racial identity essentially fusing in some women's minds.[41] Rather than simply viewing these feelings as further evidence of the invisibility of race or even class, it is worth considering how and why white middle-class self-representations have come to be associated with such excesses of self-pity, as though this population is prostrated by privilege. Novels such as *Babbitt*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *Jernigan* pose problems for the assumption that if white people could be made to see how vacuous they are, their identity and affiliations would reorient in progressive ways. In these novels, white middle-class identity is premised on the recognition of its vacuity. Even as protocritiques of the national scale and costs of suburbanization, by emphasizing the fate of the white middle-class home they work to constrain potentially progressive intentions or effects.

George Lipsitz and Lott have observed that the folk cultures of the disenfranchised have provided a resource for combating "the alienation and isolation of bourgeois life, as well as . . . the relentless materialism of capitalist societies."[42] The legitimacy of this point is clear, but I want also to consider instances when the experience of white middle-class alienation has had more to do with self-pity than profound or even trite resistance to capitalist culture. The consumer is easily demonized or pitied as some-

one for whom mass-produced goods are "sympathetic extensions of self," but perhaps it ought to be more difficult either to extol or commiserate with the affluent consumer for whom mass-produced houses and furnishings reflexively become evidence of and opportunities for alienation.[43] Other scholars have described the place of alienation and victimization in white middle-class self-perception; perhaps most influentially, Jackson Lears has noted the disillusionment that fueled antimodernism at the turn of the century, when "many beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel they were its secret victims."[44] Lears's work explores the emergence of a therapeutic culture that accommodated, rather than challenged, the sources of the middle class's disaffection. David Savran has more recently analyzed the ascendance in contemporary American literature, film, and politics of the angry white male "as victim."[45] On different grounds, Lears and Savran legitimate the experiences of victimization. Savran's text is framed by the concerns of lower-middle- and working-class white men in a downwardly mobile world. The problem is not with their anger but with its misdirection; they mistake women and minorities for the real oppressors. For Lears, a sense of "weightlessness" (32) is the appropriate, if hopelessly inadequate, response among "beneficiaries" of the transformations associated with modern commodity culture and bureaucratization. My own work seeks to supplement rather than supersede these analyses. It suggests, with novelists like Lewis, Wilson, Updike, Ford, and Gates, that perhaps nothing comes more naturally to the affluent white middle class than feeling bad—maltreated, rather than angry or guilty—about being the white middle class.

The mentality of the suburbanite has recently been described by Homi Bhabha in terms of an almost global "fear and loathing," a description that is clearly on the mark as contemporary suburbs evolve toward ever greater insulation, by developing as magic corporate kingdoms (Disney's refuge at Celebration, Florida) and gated communities, where residents are willing to lock themselves in to shut the world out.[46] These long-standing feelings have played an important role in the literary suburbanite's retreat from the city and in the steps taken by white characters to justify their hostility to encroachment in *Tarzan*, *Native Son*, and Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal*. But I also seek to demonstrate the centrality of an independent *self*-loathing to suburban experience and identity. *White Diaspora* probes the "wounds" (Lipsitz 123) of white middle-class characters and asks whether it makes sense to think of the homelessness represented in popular novels about the suburb, the ground floor of bourgeois alienation as well as affluence, as evidence of empowering rhetorics of victimization, which somehow only seldom manage to be anything but rhetorical.