MAINTAINING WHITENESS: THE FEAR OF OTHERS AND NICENESS

This article links two ways of maintaining whiteness and white privilege employed by gated communities residents in the surrounding suburbs of New York City and San Antonio, Texas. The first, the fear of others, is well documented in the anthropological literature but not as a strategy for maintaining whiteness in the built environment, while the second, the desire for “niceness,” is a relatively new construct that focuses on the way people make moral and aesthetic judgments to control their social and physical environments. Niceness and fear of others were initially understood as discursive means for justifying and rationalizing the choice to live in a residential development that was closed off and seen by outsiders as exclusionary. It also became apparent that fear of others, when combined with niceness, inscribes racist assumptions on the landscape. This inscription of whiteness is seen as natural, normative, taken-for-granted, and most importantly out of residents’ everyday awareness. Thus, gated communities with private governance and a homeowners’ association are creating and maintaining white spaces similar to those in South Africa discussed in this volume by Matthew Durrington. This addition of the concept of niceness to an understanding of how gated communities work as racist and exclusionary places begins the unraveling of how “nice” people, who say “nice” things, and have “nice” or liberal values, participate in maintaining whiteness in the built environment.

KEYWORDS: gated communities, whiteness, physical environment, niceness, fear of others, crime

INTRODUCTION

In this article I link two ways of maintaining whiteness and white privilege employed by gated communities residents in the surrounding suburbs of New York City and San Antonio, Texas. The first, the fear of others, is well documented in the anthropological literature but not as a strategy for maintaining whiteness in the built environment (Brodkin 2000; Dominy 1995; Fine et al. 2004; Low 2003). The second, the desire for “niceness,” is a relatively new construct that focuses on the way people make moral and aesthetic judgments to control their social and physical environments and defend their white privilege (Duncan and Duncan 2004; Hartigan, 2009; Low 2003).

This analysis grows out of my theorizing of private governance and secured-access housing based on 10 years of ethnographic research (Low 2003). Niceness and fear of others were initially understood as discursive means for justifying and rationalizing the choice to live in a residential development that was closed off and seen by outsiders as exclusionary. It also became apparent that fear of others, when combined with niceness, inscribes racist assumptions on the landscape. This inscription of whiteness is seen as natural, normative, taken-for-granted, and most importantly out of residents’ everyday awareness. Thus, gated communities with private
governance and a homeowners’ association are creating and maintaining white spaces similar to those in South Africa discussed in this volume by Matthew Durrington (2009). This addition of the concept of niceness to our understanding of how gated communities work as racist and exclusionary places begins the unraveling of how “nice” people, who say “nice” things, and have “nice” or liberal values, participate in maintaining whiteness in their built environment.

To develop this argument, I draw upon ethnographic examples from my gated community research. I begin by providing a brief overview of the structural and legal context of gating as a basis for developing a working definition of whiteness and a materially based analysis of how white privilege works. I then present my evidence, locating fear of others within the gated community, and then illustrating niceness as one strategy of local environmental control. I conclude by retracing my argument that the rules and regulations of the built environment, and their justification and legitimation as “nice” that order it, are important although often overlooked components of maintaining whiteness in the suburbs and among middle-class residents.

THE CONTEXT OF GATING IN THE USA
The gated community is a response to transformations in the political economy of late-20th-century urban America. The increasing mobility of capital, marginalization of the labor force, and dismantling of the welfare state began with the change in labor practices and deindustrialization of the 1970s, and accelerated with the “Reaganomics” of the 1980s. This economic restructuring and relocation of global capital produced political changes with far-reaching social consequences.

The shift to the right during the Reagan years intensified an ideological focus on free market capitalism. Power, wealth, and income all tilted toward the richest portions of the population. While the income share of the upper 20 percent of Americans rose from 41.6 percent to 44 percent from 1980 to 1988, the period of the greatest expansion in gating, the average after-tax income of the lowest ten percent dropped 10.5 percent from 1977 to 1987, producing an increasingly bifurcated class system (Phillips 1991). These economic and political changes intensified already existing inequalities of neighborhood resources and services, while escalating housing prices left more families homeless and without health care.

Globalization and economic restructuring also weakened existing social relations and contributed to the breakdown of traditional ways of maintaining social order. Social control mechanisms and their associated institutions, such as the police and schools, were no longer seen as effective. This breakdown in local control threatened middle-class neighborhood residents, and the gated residential community became a viable and socially acceptable option.

The creation of gated communities, and the addition of guardhouses, walls, and entrance gates to established neighborhoods, evolved as an integral part of the building of the fortress city, a social control technique based on the so-called militarization of the city (Davis 1990, 1992). It is a strategy for regulating and patrolling the urban poor comprising predominantly Latino and Black minorities. Gating is only one example of this new form of social ordering that displaces and regulates people or activities rather than eliminating them. Policing and enclosures create areas where a protected group—for example, the very wealthy—is shielded from others’ behavior (Flusty 1997). A safe environment excludes all those who are considered dangerous, who consequently become increasingly defined by their isolation and indices of race and class (Low 2008).

Racism is the cornerstone of patterns of urban and suburban separation and exclusion that inscribe material whiteness and the racialization of class in the USA. Cities continue to experience high levels of residential segregation based on discriminatory real estate practices, zoning ordinances, and mortgage structures designed to insulate Whites from Blacks. Blacks are less likely to move to the suburbs in the first place, and then more likely to return to the city (Massey and Denton 1988). Residential proximity to Blacks intensifies Whites’ fear of crime, and Whites who are racially prejudiced are even more fearful (Skogan 1995).

Residents of middle-class and upper middle-class neighborhoods often cordon themselves off as a class by building fences, cutting off relationships with neighbors, and moving out in response to problems and conflicts. At the same time, governments have expanded their regulatory role through zoning laws, local police patrols, restrictive ordinances for dogs, quiet laws, and laws against domestic and interpersonal violence that narrow the range of accepted behavioral norms. Indirect economic strategies that limit the minimum lot or house size, policing policies that target nonconforming uses of the environment, and social ordinances that enforce middle-class rules of civility further segregate family and neighborhood life (Merry 1993, 1990, 1981).
The creation of “common interest developments” provided a legal framework for the consolidation of suburban residential segregation. Common interest development describes “a community in which the residents own or control common areas or shared amenities,” and that “carries with it reciprocal rights and obligations enforced by a private governing body” (Judd 1995). Specialized “covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions” (CC&Rs) that extend forms of collective private land tenure and the notion of private government were adapted by the lawyer and planner Charles Stern Ascher to create the modern institution of the homeowner association, a form of private governance, in 1928 (McKenzie 1994, 1998; Ross et al. 1996).

The evolution of “pod,” “enclave,” and “cul-de-sac” suburban designs further refined the ability of land use planners and designers to develop suburban subdivisions where people of different income groups would have little to no contact with one another. Regulated resident behavior, house type, and “taste culture” are more subtle means of control. Even landscape aesthetics function as a suburban politics of exclusion, often referred to as making everything “nice” (Government by the Nice, for the Nice 1992).

Private land use controls are not new, but there is a trend away from governmental control over land use toward increased reliance on privately created controls. The shift in the zoning process from a publicly debated and voter-enacted system to a privately imposed system may be far more restrictive than any state statute or local ordinance. Gated communities and their use of common interest development legal restrictions are both redefining and privatizing the political, social, and aesthetic dimensions of the suburb and middle-class home (Nelson 2005).

The economic restructuring of the 1970s not only stimulated many of these neoliberal practices, but also transformed the city in three major ways: (1) racial ghettos became abandoned spaces; (2) “edge cities”—suburban communities with combined residential, business, social, and cultural areas—expanded; and (3) luxury housing with separate facilities and services concentrated in the center city (Marcuse 1997). Peter Marcuse (1997) argues that these spatial changes produced a social hierarchy of built forms based on walls and partitions. Walls can provide a refuge from people who are deviant or unusual, but they require patrolling the border to be sure no one gets in. The resulting vigilance necessary to maintain these “purified communities” actually heightens residents’ anxiety and sense of isolation, rather than making them feel safer. These interlocking processes depict a world with increasing reliance on urban fortification, policing, and segregation to maintain whiteness, while a number of legal strategies such as common interest developments, rules and regulations (CC&Rs), homeowners associations, as well as suburban design and planning laid the groundwork for the development of gated communities.

DEFINITIONS AND THE MECHANICS OF WHITENESS

My working definition of whiteness is based on theories of the social construction of race and class (Bourdieu 1984; Brodkin 2000; Brown 2000; Fine 2004). In this discussion whiteness is not only about race, but is an historical and cultural construct actively produced and reproduced to further and/or improve an individual or social group’s position within the power dynamics of the neighborhood, region and/or nation/state. It refers to the systematic advantage of one group over other, where whiteness become the location of advantage in societies structured by racial dominance (Frankenberg 1993, 2001).

Whiteness and the privileges accrued are viewed as middle-class privileges and are not restricted to access by color, but also by class, gender, sexual orientation, and place of origin. Karen Brodkin (2000) writes that many groups now considered White were not originally and illustrates how Italians, Irish, and Jewish immigrants became White only when assimilated economically and culturally into the middle class. This transformation based on the taking on of middle-class, so-called American, values is an important aspect of whiteness within the gated community in that residents confound whiteness and middle-class attributes in such a way that one can be substituted for the other.

Whiteness also refers to the privileges of being a member of a socially unmarked category (Carter 1997; Fine 2004, 2009). Blacks and Hispanics, as well as other members of minority or immigrant populations within the USA, are racially and ethnically identified by socially constructed notions of phenotypic traits; these “traits” are used to mark groups as different from being White. Whiteness, on the other hand, is the assumed norm—socially, physically, and even politically—and dominates national ideas of beauty, social class, and goodness.

Aida Hurtado and Abigail Stewart (2004) have identified the power dynamics of whiteness for its owners. These dynamics are hidden and rarely challenged because white socialization occurs in largely
racedly segregated living arrangements in the USA (McIntosh 1992:77). The mechanisms associated with race privilege vary with socioeconomic status and gender but are salient across most individuals. They include distancing, denial, superiority, belongingness, and solidarity. These mechanisms for defending whiteness can be observed in the gated community vignettes, accompanied by their justifications for living in a White, secured enclave.

Richard Ballard (2004) argues that the construction and defense of whiteness is like the colonization of Africa by Europeans. That is, the “defended community” is a little bit of Europe in Africa. In the USA, he posits, it is about becoming a dwindling bit of whiteness in a browning America. Similar to colonial cities with walled compounds for the colonizers, gated communities, both in South Africa and the USA, are an attempt to defend whiteness in the suburbs.

Matthew Durington (2009) suggests that whiteness is created by gated space, and that fortified suburban enclaves control space through exclusion, rather than movement as is the case with white flight from the city to the suburb in the USA. Tom Sanchez and Robert Lang (2002), on the other hand, are exploring the racial composition of gating, finding that even when controlling for class, Latinos and Asians disproportionately live more often gated communities, while African Americans are the much less likely to live in one (also see Sanchez et al. 2005). Based on my research, I suggest this pattern occurs because African Americans perceive gating as inherently racist, and correctly identify these enclaves as inscribing whiteness. On the other hand, Latinos and Asian Americans interested in “becoming White folks” (Brodkin 2000) prefer to have access to the white privileges and benefits encoded in the built environment.

Enoch Page (2006) reminds us that most public space is racialized as White and reinforces white privilege through the circulation and manipulation of information, knowledge, and cultural symbols. Page’s concept of “white public space,” where communication technologies, distribution networks, and the commodification of the black image are controlled by white interests, depicts the difficulty of creating a space where white privilege is not exercised (Page and Thomas 1994, Page 1999). White public space is linguistically constructed by the monitoring of racialized populations for signs of “linguistic disorder” (Hill 1999:680) in much the same way that gated communities and other middle-class and elite white suburbs are purified spatially and through their fortification.

Maintaining whiteness in the context of the suburban USA and particularly within gated communities, thus, is not only about race and racializing, but is a middle-class and normative concept. Whiteness is defined by a person’s “cultural capital,” that is, the ability to have access to and make use of things like higher education and social graces, vocabulary, and demeanor that allow one to prosper or at least compete within the dominant culture. It is a sense of entitlement to certain privileges that are out of the reach of others. Thus “middle-class whiteness” is defined as much by mainstream acceptance of norms, values, and life expectations as by race or ethnicity (Kenny 2000).

The following vignettes are drawn from research published in Behind the Gates: Life, Security and Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America (Low 2003). The methodology is described in detail this publication, and therefore not included here. Briefly, the ethnographic data are from ten years of interviewing in seven gated communities located in New York City (Queens), Long Island, New York, and suburban San Antonio, Texas. Three to four developments in each location were investigated to vary the purchase price and house type. A research team made up of myself and graduate students used an opportunity sample because it was difficult to enter these private environments without an invitation from a resident. All but two of the respondents and their spouses were White and middle class. All of the men and some of the women were professionals and of the managerial class who worked outside of the home, while most of the women spoken with were stay-at-home wives and mothers. The majority of interviewees were female, mostly because they were available and perceived to have the leisure to speak with us. Also, my feminality played a role in this gender disparity. In some interviews the husband was present and offered his point of view as well.

The presentation of data begins with an illustrative vignette, followed by a discussion of the implications of the material. This tacking back and forth between data and interpretation enables the reader to experience the resident interview before I engage in my analysis.

FEAR OF OTHERS

**VIGNETTE 1: VISITING MY SISTER IN HER GATED COMMUNITY**

*My husband and I have reservations about going to a Fourth of July party, but my sister coaxes us with the promise of margaritas and sinful desserts, finally winning us over. Dressed in New York chic, we cross the street to enter an imposing Santa Fe style house deco-
rated with Mexican furniture and colorful textiles, full of people talking, children racing about, and our hosts serving drinks and dishing out enormous quantities of food. My husband wanders out to the pool, while I stay inside where it is air-conditioned. My choices are watching television with the older men, or sitting with our hosts’ teenage son and his friends. I sit down at their table, and am soon involved in a spirited discussion.

“Should we go downtown after dinner to see the fireworks along Riverwalk?” the host’s son asks. Riverwalk is the commercially successful development that revitalized the center of San Antonio.

“Will there be many Mexicans there?” a tall, gangly boy in a Nike tee shirt and nylon running shorts asks.

“It’ll be mobbed with Mexicans. I’m not sure I want to go,” a girl with heavy blond bangs responds.

“I am struck with how they used the word “Mexican.” Yesterday I toured the local missions where the complex history of Spanish conquest and resettlement of indigenous peoples is inscribed in the protective walls of the church compounds. Surely, these young people learn about Texas history in school.

I interrupt the flow of conversation and ask them what they mean by “Mexican”? A young man in baggy khakis and a baseball hat worn backwards looks at me curiously:

“Why, the Mexicans who live downtown, on the south side of the city.”

“What makes you think they are Mexican,” I reply, frowning a bit. “Because they speak Spanish?”

“They are dangerous,” a young woman in a tennis skirt asserts, “packing knives and guns. Our parents don’t allow us to go downtown at night.”

They decide to stay and watch the fireworks from the golf course—at least they would not be with their parents—and wander off to find their other friends.

I remain at the table, my mind racing to bring together scattered bits of the history and culture of the region. Texas was originally part of Mexico, colonized by the Spanish. The majority of people who live in Texas identify themselves as descendants of the Spanish and/or Mexicans who settled the area. “Mexicans” can refer to the founding families of San Antonio, hacendados and other landholders, who make up a significant part of the political elite and upper class. “Mexicans” also can mean visiting Mexican nationals who maintain summer houses in the region and this neighborhood. There are people who legally immigrated to Texas, but retain strong ties to their native birthplace, and call themselves “Mexicans.” Finally, there are the “Mexicans” that the teenagers mentioned, a stereotyped group of what some locals think of as poor, undocumented workers who speak Spanish, but who in fact come from all over Latin America.1

The teenagers’ discussion of “Mexicans” reminds me of Boyle’s (1995) novel about a gated community in Southern California. In one passage the protagonist is arguing with the president of the homeowners association about a decision to add gates to their walled suburban housing development. The discussion represents many of the feelings and thoughts of my interviewees, but that are socially unacceptable to so clearly articulate:

“I guess I got carried away.”

“No, no: you were right. Absolutely. It’s just that you know as well as I do what our neighbors are like . . . And the gate thing is important, probably the single most important agenda we’ve taken up in my two years as president.”

“You really think so? To me, I say it’s unnecessary—and, I don’t know, irresponsible somehow.”

Jack gave him a quizzical look. “Irresponsible?”

“I don’t know. I lean more to the position that we live in a democracy . . . I mean, we all have a stake in things, and locking yourself away from the rest of society, how can you justify that?”

“Safely. Self-protection. Prudence. You lock your car, don’t you? Your front door?” A cluck of the tongue, a shift from one hip to the other, blue eyes, solid as stone. “Delaney, believe me, I know how you feel . . . but this society isn’t what it was—and it won’t be until we get control of the borders.”

“That’s racist, Jack, and you know it.”

. . . “Not in the least—it’s a question of national sovereignty. Did you know that the U.S. accepted more immigrants last year than all the other countries of the world combined—and that half of them settled in California? And that’s legal immigrants—people with skills, money, education. The ones coming in through the Tortilla Curtain down there, those are the ones that are killing us.

But it is not just in Texas and California that residents of gated communities stigmatize immigrants as a source of fear. In New York as well, residents identify “ethnic changes” and a changing socioeconomic environment as potentially threatening.

VIGNETTE 2. CAROL AND TED IN A GATED COMMUNITY IN SUBURBAN LONG ISLAND

Carol and Ted Corral have been living at their gated community for eight months and had previously lived in Great Neck for the past twenty-eight years. Prior to Great Neck, they had lived in Brooklyn.
I ask about their life in Great Neck. Ted replies that it’s a great community socially, and the children had a good school. It’s an affluent community and offers lots of benefits. Carol adds that most of her friends were made there when her children were small.

Ted describes the community as “very, very educated . . . You know so everyone goes on to college, and it stressed the role of family, and you know, it’s just a wonderful community. But it’s changing, it’s undergoing internal transformations.”

Carol says, “It’s ethnic changes.”

And Ted repeats “It’s ethnic changes, that’s a very good way of putting it.”

Carol agrees and adds that it started to happen “in the last, probably, seven to eight years.” The changing composition of the neighborhood made them so uncomfortable they decided to move.

I ask about their prior residence in Brooklyn. Ted shrugs his shoulders. I say that I would like to know about why they left for comparison, and finally Carol answers. She tells me they had moved from Brooklyn to bring up their children in a better environment. The school system was changing, and they did not want their children to go to school with children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were being bused into their Brooklyn neighborhood.

“These kids were wild,” she says, “and had a different upbringing.” She wanted to protect her children from exposure to the kinds of problems these kids might cause. The neighborhood was still uncomfortable, but the school system was not “desirable,” as she put it. They had both grown up in Brooklyn, but the neighborhood changed, so they decided to build their own home in the suburbs.

I ask how they decided to move here, and Ted answers that they were looking for something that would suit their lifestyle better. He adds that they chose a gated community because they wanted a secure lifestyle with no hassles and no responsibilities.

The psychological underpinnings of this fear of others discourse is “dualistic thinking,” a form of social splitting used to cope with anxiety and fear. It oversimplifies and dichotomizes cultural definitions and social expectations to differentiate the self from the other regardless of whether it is a contrast of Anglos and “Mexicans,” Whites and illegal immigrants, or Whites and “ethnic others.” The concept of splitting draws upon psychoanalytic relational theory, particularly Melanie Klein’s (1975, Silver 2002) work on the development of object relations. According to Klein, psychological splitting is the process of disassociation between “good” and “bad” representations beginning when the infant differentiates external and internal relationships by splitting the mother into good and bad, incorporating the good mother who can be identified with, and rejecting the bad. It is a psychological means of dealing with contradictory and often conflicting feelings.

Psychological splitting can be used as a form of denial and resistance, providing a means of distancing oneself from an undesirable self-image and projecting it onto another. Social splitting is often used to project social fears onto a more vulnerable group, such as the Jews during World War II, or the homeless on the streets of present day New York City. It also helps to explain the kind of “us” versus “them” thinking employed by the gated community residents to rationalize their fears of those outside the gates.

During periods of economic decline and social stress, middle-class people become anxious about maintaining their social status and seek to identify the reasons that their environment and social world is deteriorating. Social splitting offers a strategy that is reinforced by cultural stereotypes and media distortions, allowing people to psychologically separate from people who are threatening their tranquility and neighborhood stability. The walls and gates of the community reflect this splitting physically as well as metaphorically, with “good” people (the good part of us) inside, and the “bad” remaining outside.

Advertisements for gated communities evoke this social splitting and even go a step further in envisaging what is being defended against. For example, the developer of Sanctuary Cove, Australia’s first gated community told reporters: “The streets these days are full of cockroaches and most of them are human. Every man has a right to protect his family, himself and his possessions, to live in peace and safety.” Based on his study of gated communities in Australia, Matthew Burke (2001) found that the solidifying of perimeter barriers led to a greater sense of residents being “insiders,” and reinforced the reverse process “the creation of a perception that designates those beyond the walls as ‘outsiders’.”

Neoliberal practices of the shrinking state and the reinscription of responsibility on individuals and communities provide the structural substrate for these psychological processes. Individuals and communities in cities are encouraged to protect themselves from perceived threats, thus contributing to the emergence of a new pattern of civic militancy even at home. Matt Ruben and Maskovsky (2008) point out that the “home” in Homeland Security is where these feelings and practices are most in evidence. Inderpal Grewal (2006) further contends that neoliberal contexts bring forth a rearticulation of the

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public/private division, placing nationalism and militarism within the home. She illustrates her contention through a feminist analysis of *USA Today*’s columnist Michelle Malkin’s “security mom” for whom “nothing matters . . . [more] than the safety of my home and the survival of my homeland” (cited in Grewal 2006: 26).

This emotional and political environment is in part being created in response of a wide spread perception that there is a “fiercely hostile, dystopian environment ‘out there’” (MacLeod and Ward 2002). This imaged dystopia of terrorist cells, criminals, drug dealers, and other social predators who lie in wait for susceptible middle-class citizens legitimates an increasing fortified and revanchist urban landscape (Smith 1996). Further, it is exacerbated by the way that terrorism and crime have been linked through the lexicon of fear and threat in the American language. Altheide (2003) observes that

The attacks on certain buildings in the United States on 9/11 were cast as “terrorism” and that term has now become widely used. Just as crime and criminality has merged over decades with numerous myths, identities and characteristics of “criminals.” Just as “crime” resonates with audiences who tend to think of “violent crime,” and in turn, “criminal types, characteristics and images,” so too has terrorism. Terrorism has been socially constructed as a variant of crime. (43)

These processes—the psychological underpinning of social splitting and the structural analysis of neoliberalism—become part of a defense of whiteness through what Alan Fiske (1998) calls “nonracist racism,” a racism that is encoded in race-neutral discourses, such as law, economics, health, education, and particularly housing and capital accumulation. Another version of this process is “laissez-faire racism” (Robo, Kluge and Smith 1996), used by White Americans to become comfortable with inequality and segregation as a putatively nondiscriminatory set of socioeconomic circumstances produced by the free-market economy.

The connection of nonracist racism to gating is through “the abnormalization by visible and thus surveillable” categories (Fiske 1998:84). For example, compared with most large cities, the suburbs do not have many public places were strangers intermingle, and the relative isolation and homogeneity of the suburbs discourages interaction with people who are identified as the “other.” Baumgartner’s (1988) study of an upper middle-class suburban town outside of New York City documents how local residents are upset by outsiders appearing on residential streets. Strangers by virtue of their race or unconventionality are singled out as “suspicious” even if merely walking down the street. The physical organization of the street pattern—cul-de-sacs and dead-end streets—enables residents to monitor their neighborhoods and to spot outsiders who linger.

Residents explain their monitoring behavior by citing their “fear of crime,” by which they mean “predatory behavior by strangers.” They voice concerns about poor Blacks and Hispanics from New York City or San Antonio entering their town and preying upon residents. Despite the low rate of crime in the gated area, residents are overly concerned about people who seem out of place. For example, the anthropologists Constance Perin found that Americans see “renters, blacks, children, the elderly, people with low incomes, together with signs of them in housing and geographical locations, as being culturally unsettling” (1988, cited by Hartigan, 2009).

Gating exacerbates this ability to monitor and be concerned about “marked” intruders by creating a kind of “pure space” for residents. The more “purified” the environment—the more homogeneous and controlled—the greater residents’ ability to identify any deviant individuals who should not be there (Sibley 1995). “Pure spaces” expose differences and have clear boundaries that facilitate policing. They are characteristic of the North American suburb where boundary consciousness is part of mainstream society. Gating only makes the boundaries more visible and psychologically salient.

Gating therefore clearly involves the “racialization” of space, in which the representation and definition of “other” is based visible characteristics particularly racial categories (Ngin 1993). In the past, overt racial categorization provided the ideological context for restrictive immigration laws and discriminatory deed restrictions and mortgage programs. Today, race is used to justify social prejudice and unfounded fears (Ray et al. 1997). Helen and Ralph offer a vivid description of their “nonracist racism” and how the desire for a pure white space occurs.

**VIGNETTE 3. HELEN AND RALPH IN SUBURBAN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

Helen and Ralph were one of the first families to move into the gated community. They originally moved to Sun Meadow for the golf course but now would only consider living in a gated community. When I ask her why, she replies:

Setha Low     85

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Because after seeing that there are so many beautiful neighborhoods that are not [in] a secure area, [and] that's where burglaries and murders take place. It's an open door [saying] to people, come on in. Why should they try anything here when they can go somewhere else first. It's a strong deterrent, needless to say.

She feels that there is less crime in gated developments than in San Antonio in general. She knows people living in an equally nice nongated neighborhoods who have had their homes broken into and who have been assaulted with weapons. The worst that has happened is a few cars have come through and “messed things up.” She thinks that it was probably kids. Only a few families have been robbed or burglarized.

Helen feels her community is different because it is secured. Without the gates, she thinks, anybody could come knocking on your door and put you in compromising situation. She illustrates her point by telling me what happened to a friend who lives “in a lovely community” outside of Washington, D.C.: She said this fellow came to the door, and she was very intimidated because she was white, and he was black, and you didn’t get many blacks in her neighborhood. She only bought it [what he was selling] just to hurry and quick get him away from the door, because she was scared as hell. That’s terrible to be put in that situation. I like the idea of having security.

Helen and Ralph put on their burglar alarm every time they leave, although she thinks they may be overly cautious. She also keeps her doors locked, because she has had people walk in her front door thinking her house was for sale.

I ask her if she is concerned about crime in her gated community. She answers, “no, not here, but in San Antonio.” She goes on to explain that San Antonio, like any major city, has problems:

There are gangs. People are overworked, they have families, they are underpaid, the stress is out of control, and they abuse their children. The children go out because they don’t like their home life. There’s too much violence everywhere. It starts in the city, but then the kids get smart enough and say ‘oh, gee, I need money for x, y or z, but it’s really hot in the city, let’s go out and get it some place else.’ We’re the natural target for it. So being in a secure area, I don’t have to worry as much as another neighborhood that doesn’t have security.

Ironically, Helen’s concern with crime developed after she moved into her gated community, but living there reinforces the importance of having gates and guards for personal security. She is more concerned about someone walking into her house than with crime in general. Yet she is one of the few residents who specifically cites an example where racial difference triggers a sense of fear. Like Ted and Carol Corral, who moved because of “ethnic changes,” Helen alludes to her friend’s experience as the kind of thing that she is frightened of. “She was scared as hell,” Helen comments. Her story—although displaced on her friend—suggests how Helen would feel if a Black person came to her door. It is also unclear in the second vignette whether the Corrals are referring to racial or cultural differences in Great Neck. They could be referring to the large influx of Iranian Jews into their suburban neighborhood or the increasing number of Latino immigrants in Long Island. In both cases, however, these interviews conflate racial and ethnic differences with an increased potential for crime.

Racist fears about the “threat” of a visible minority, whether it is Blacks, Latinos, or “ethnic others” is remarkably similar. This is because many neighborhoods in the USA are racially homogeneous. Thus, the physical space of the neighborhood and its racial composition become synonymous. This racialized spatial ordering and the identification of a space with a group of people is a fundamental aspect of how suburban landscapes of reinforce racial prejudice and discrimination. In these communities, “whiteness has the social power to define itself as the normal, as the point where normality can be produced and elided with the orderliness of the social order: whiteness is both the source and the practice of normalization” (Fiske 1998:86). Gated communities enhance residents visual surveillance of boundaries and therefore further promote the maintenance of whiteness.

NICENESS
There are other means employed by gated community's residents to distinguish themselves from others. John Hartigan (2009) argues that there are “very powerful cultural categories in the USA, such as ‘nice,’” ‘friendly,’” and ‘comfortable’ which Americans operate in exclusionary manners on a variety of fronts that include, but are certainly not limited to race” (Hartigan 2009). In my research, “niceness” emerged as an important moral and aesthetic judgment for gated community residents. Gating, in fact, has been called “government by the nice,” referring to the CC&Rs (covenants, contracts and restrictions) written into deeds dictating even the colors a house can be painted, the weight of family dogs, the type of furniture or curtains that can be seen in one’s picture window, and the color (white), number and type of Christmas tree lights (Government by the Nice, for the Nice 1992). Some homeowners associations even regulate behavior; a woman caught
kissing her boyfriend in her driveway in the evening was fined and threatened with expulsion. Residents in New York talk about board members who survey the community daily looking for infractions (Archer 1996; McKenzie 1998).

Niceness is about keeping things clean, orderly, homogeneous, and controlled so that housing values remain stable, but it is also a way of maintaining whiteness. Whiteness provides access to education, elite taste cultures and behaviors, and allows a group to prosper within the dominant culture. In places like Long Island, New York, and San Antonio, Texas, being “middle class” and being “White” overlap such that one social status can be taken for another.

I agree with John Hartigan (2009) that gated community residents are talking about middle-class American values when they want a “nice” environment. One component is cleanliness and orderliness. Another is an underlying concern with maintaining one’s home as a financial investment, and a third is as a way to control the environment to keep unwanted others out. The CC&Rs and the rulings of the homeowners association board are strategies for making sure that the gated community will remain a “nice” environment, separated from others and the city, thus retaining its whiteness and privilege.

**VIGNETTE 4. REBECCA IN A SUBURBAN SAN ANTONIO GATED COMMUNITY**

Rebecca’s reasons for moving in a gated community were simple—she wanted safety and no hassles. Property value and choosing a good location were her other major concerns. She and her husband moved in only four months ago and were still getting settled.

She had her heart set on this gated community because of the convenient location, and because it was “nice, nicer than any other community.” She wanted to be the first one in, to get a prime piece of land, and picked the best lot right across from the clubhouse. She now has everything: newness, luxury, safety, scenery, and value.

Rebecca and her husband are relieved they know what the houses will look like beforehand, and that the architect uses only traditional styles. There are no modern houses; just the three models available when they moved in, and now three more. They are all the “New England line” using only four colors: soft beige, yellow, gray, and white.

One great thing about Manor House is that she will be able to sell her two-story, colonial style home easily and move in another model.

“Well, I don’t think this will be our final home,” she adds. “Maybe we can talk again.”

“I thought you said it was perfect.”

“It’s nice in many ways, but it won’t be my permanent home.”

Constance Perin (1988) points out that Americans are both “neighbors” and “traders” when it comes to real estate. In homeowners’ calculus, the physical appearance of the development and particularly their street or block matters the most, and residents endeavor to keep their neighbors “up to snuff.” And it is important for neighbors to maintain a firm line between the value of money—and resale value of their home—and neighborly love. The reason for such concern is that about 64 percent of American households put “just about everything they have into buying a house,” and the maintenance and appreciation of house value is dependent on how well everyone else keeps up their house and landscape (Ross et al. 1996).

Based on this reality, it is not difficult to understand why most gated community residents accept the extensive set of covenants and restrictions that they think will bolster the value of their house and property. Residents cannot change the exteriors of their houses or the landscape, thus insuring a certain level of quality and consistency. Even though residents complain about the restrictions and inconvenience, the CC&Rs provide an extra measure of safety and security, socially and financially. These rules and regulations, as has been pointed out by Sally Merry (1993), are most acceptable to the middle-class, White residents who are interested in preserving a certain kind of “quality” neighborhood that legitimates the creation of a segregated and defended landscape.

Another way that a discourse of niceness appears is when “offenders” or “outsiders” violate the public order by ignoring or challenging local standards of cleanliness and aesthetics. Residents may become annoyed, for example, by poorly kept buildings, rundown yards and gardens, and rusting automobiles parked outside a home. In one New York City suburb, citizens consider a school bus parked in a lot across the town hall a visual blight that hurts the appearance of their neighborhood. Signs, shop decor, and street furniture in suburban towns are subject to local scrutiny to prevent the area from becoming disorganized and “filthy” like nearby cities (Baumgartner 1988). Cleanliness and orderliness indicate the “type of people” who live in a place and establish a norm of middle-class civility, masking the imposition of whiteness.

The less attractive physical and social conditions in a locale—for example, unregulated public behav-
ior, diminishing quality or maintenance of property, and lack of capital investment—do, in fact, contribute to an increased sense of community disorder and fear of crime. As well, rapid neighborhood changes and signs of decay result in a heightened concern for safety (Perkins and Taylor 1996; Taylor and Covington 1993). Residents perceive and read ecological changes in their local environment as part of an ongoing assessment of their social worth as well as the stability of their housing market. It is therefore not surprising that subtle visual cues are closely attended to. Indeed, in some cases, shifts in such cues can generate crises. But again, the changing physical conditions are conflated with what is perceived as a changing social environment. As one New York City resident explained, she moved to a gated community, “when Bloomingdale’s moved out and Kmart moved in.”

The criminalization and racialization of disorder and desire for clean and safe environments is part of the neoliberal restructuring of the city and public space (Low and Smith 2006; Mitchell and Stachelli 2006), reminiscent of the “broken windows” theory of crime control in the 1980s. In both cases, the “niceness” and “cleanliness” required for “safety” works as a coded way to talk about and take action against racial difference and a loss of white privilege. “Niceness” is one way of maintaining social control of the neighborhood and becomes particularly powerful when linked to “changes in the neighborhood” that justify the reasons that a person or family decides to move to a gated community, a “safer” and more secure environment.

One strategy for minimizing neighborhood deterioration is to live in a residential development with strict rules and regulations. Many gated community residents say they have found the perfect place to live, and include the gates, walls and guards, as well as the CC&Rs as part of this vision. They make trade-offs to live in these restricted environments and adjust their personal, social, and economic values to fit their new home environment.

**VIGNETTE 5. LAUREL AND HENRY IN A SUBURBAN LONG ISLAND GATED COMMUNITY**

Laurel moved in eight months ago. She did not feel safe in her previous Long Island neighborhood. Her husband travels and keeps late hours, so an alarm system was installed after a neighbor was robbed.

When I ask whether there is anything the family misses about their previous home, the conversation takes a sudden turn.

The one thing I don’t like about condominium living is that everything has to be cleared [by the homeowners association board]. One of the first things we realized is that we didn’t have a storm door on the front door.

I said “That’s crazy,” especially when we let our dog out she jumps on the door and you can hear her when she’s ready to come in. “We’ve got to get a storm door. Henry, go out and buy a storm door.”

And he said, “I can’t go out and buy a storm door.” We just had the storm door put in this week, and that was eight months ago. It had to pass the committee. You can’t buy the strong wood one either. They choose the storm door and you pay for what they choose. And if you don’t like it, tough.

Laurel continues talking about the restrictions imposed by what she calls “the committee.” Laurel continues:

If I want to put in planting, especially in front, it has to meet community standards. I mean, logically I can understand they don’t want somebody putting in sunflowers all over the place, but if I want to plant my tulips, I have to get it approved first by the committee. That’s the part I don’t like. But I’ve decided to accept it.

I ask her if she thinks other residents feel the same way. Laurel replies:

I know my neighbor does. I was surprised when she moved in. She had a magnificent garden she put in herself [where she lived before]. I’d ask her “What are you going to do about your garden?” (talking in a whisper behind her hand).

She said, “I’ll plant here.”

“But don’t you realize you’ve got to pass, you know . . .” I said.

“I’ll do it in the back, they won’t notice,” she confided.

“You’re taking a chance,” I warned her.

Laughing I ask: “so what do they do, come and look at your backyard, at your tulips?” Laurel looks at me.

I don’t know. I was speaking to the man who is the landscaper and told him about our concerns on our property, on making changes. I asked, “Why can’t I just plant? I have to plant my bulbs now, or I won’t have anything in the spring.” This was last fall.

He said, “Well, you know, we have a committee, and you have to tell them what you want to do, and I’m sure they’ll let you do it, but . . . .”

I ask if they allow pets. Laurel replies that they would not have moved in if they did not allow pets. But they have put in some rules about it since some people let their animals run everywhere and do not pick up after them. Some gated developments are even more restrictive and do not allow pets even to visit. The committee even gave them trouble about putting up a television satellite when they moved in.

Evan McKenzie (1994) writes about the problems and disputes that emerge from rigid enforce-
ment of such arbitrary rules. He is worried about the
loss of first amendment rights and residents’ inability
to challenge board rulings because of the initial con-
tracts signed. Unfortunately, new owners often are not
aware of the extent of CC&R restrictions at the time
of purchase. Nor are they cognizant that they have
agreed to abide by an arbitration panel appointed by
the community association industry, rather than hav-
ing legal recourse for litigation of disputes in the
public court system. New residents do not understand
that they have waived many of their free speech rights,
because they are living in a private space controlled by
a corporation, much like a mall or office complex.

An extreme case of the degree to which privatiza-
tion and neoliberal tendencies can lead is the exam-
ple of Bear Creek, Washington, a 500-resident walled
community with private streets, sewers, gun control,
and design control regulations. Bear Creek prohibits
flag posts, firearms, visible clotheslines, satellite dishes,
street parking, and unkempt landscaping. The presi-
dent of their homeowners association boasts they have
moved ahead of government by being able to enforce
these restrictions by covenants which in the public
sector might run afool of constitutional restrictions
and statutory limitations (Ross et al. 1996).

By contrast, the local government can use zoning
ordinances and enact design review standards to regu-
late the landscape. But to be enforceable, the standards
must be objective, allow for due process, and serve the
public’s health, safety, and welfare needs. Property
owners are entitled to a hearing on any government
decision to restrict the use of private property, and if
the restriction creates a hardship, property owners can
apply for a variance. Further, if the zoning ordinance
or design standards are deemed excessive, they can be
considered a “taking,” and the property owner must
be compensated for any financial loss. These same
protections are not available to a property owner living
in a private, gated community because “these constitu-
tional and statutory limitations do not apply to
private agreements.” In other words, residents are
trading many of their basic civil rights in order to be
sure that their community is “nice.”

**VIGNETTE 6: IRIS IN A NEW YORK CITY
GATED COMMUNITY**

I asked Iris if she has any concerns about living in a
gated community.

Well, it’s not about the gated community, but the
homeowners association. And yeah, a homeowners
association is a pain in the neck, because if I want to
change my front door, I can’t. If I want it brown to-
morrow, I can’t do that, or if I want to put a statue on
my front lawn—not that I would want to do any of
these things—but it does protect you from the crazy
neighbor who wants to paint the house red. It definitely
has some negatives and some positives, but for my
personality and way of life, I don’t mind it. I chose the
neighborhood, because I like the style of the homes,
and there would be nothing that I would really do, be-
cause I like what I have, and I’m not looking for
anything that would be against the homeowners’ asso-
ciation. Everything is included for me.

Iris remarks that she had problems in her old
neighborhood where all the neighbors had to approve if
you wanted to add an extension on your house. In this
gated community no external changes are allowed.
But she says she knew this beforehand and chose to
move because of the overwhelming advantages. “I love
the neighborhood and how it looks. The homeowners
association protects it for me.”

The aesthetic control of the landscape is another
strategy by which “niceness” is expressed and used to
mark a residential development, and the people
within it, as middle class (Duncan and Duncan
2004). Aesthetic management has long been used by
elite families to demarcate their estates and buffer
their property boundaries. Through their power and
influence in the local context—bolstered by historic
preservation and conservation easements—elites
have successfully protected their geographical set-
tings throughout the USA (Hayden 2003; Low et al.
2005; Low and Smith 2006). In a similar vein, mid-
dle-class families imprint their residential landscapes
with “niceness” reflecting their own landscape aes-
thetic of orderliness, consistency, and control.

One explanation for why some residents are will-
ing to accept these apparently excessive restrictions
can be attributed to their anxiety about maintaining
their middle-class lifestyle and socioeconomic posi-
tion. Baby boomers across the nation are worried that
the advantages of a middle-class life, the so-called
cultural capital, that families pass on—knowledge,
contacts, and inherent privileges—are being lost. For
the middle class, and especially the lower middle class,
downward mobility during the 1980s and 1990s due to
economic restructuring and shrinking job opportuni-
ties meant that their children face diminished
expectations, including living in less affluent commu-
nities with fewer amenities1. The deterioration of
middle-class suburban neighborhoods, escalating
housing prices, a flat job market, and limited job
advancement enhances the fear that the economic
future is not as secure as it was for the previous
generation when there were expanding employment
and housing opportunities. This anxiety about
losing one’s social position translated into an ex-
pression of a loss of white privilege.
One of the ways that previous generations heralded their arrival into the middle class was to buy a home in the suburbs. Now, this symbolic arrival is not enough because many of traditional middle-class suburbs are situated in areas with decaying physical environments, increasing heterogeneity, and in some cases, rising crime. Gated communities, with their increased security to keep “others” out, and strict enforcement of rules and regulations, are an attempt to bolster resident’s middle-class status. By regimenting the environment, keeping it “nice” and filled with “nice” people, maintaining the resale value of one’s home, and putting up with increasing privatization and restrictions, residents hope to keep the threat of economic decline, and loss of class position at bay. This underlying social and economic anxiety is a crucial factor in middle-class residents’ search for security. Niceness provides the rationalizing discourse for navigating this new moral and aesthetic terrain.

CONCLUSION
Gated communities make visible the systems of racial segregation and social exclusion that already exist in the suburbs in the USA, but now constructed in concrete. These systems are dependent on cultural notions of whiteness that are produced, reproduced, and defended in a number of ways. Social splitting, creation and surveillance of purified spaces, and the homogenization and racialization of space help to explain how dualistic thinking (in this case White/non-White) becomes embedded in the local culture. The discourse on the fear of others encompasses many social concerns: class, race, and ethnic exclusivity and gender, however, all of these concerns lead back to the normalization of a White, middle-class, and male perspective. Understanding this discourse as defending whiteness provides a verbal component that complements he visual landscape of fear that cordons off White and non-White actors.

Niceness reinforces this defense of whiteness by adding an aesthetic and moral dimension to the justification for closing others out. Wanting to live in a nice house, with nice neighbors, in a nice neighborhood where your home values and environment are stable are simply another way of rationalizing the desire to maintain whiteness. There are other strategies discussed in these articles, many that point to a set of values and expectations that are silent yet configure the landscape in particular ways.

NOTE
1. With the current economic recession and subprime mortgage crisis accompanied by a steep rise in the number of home foreclosures and families losing their housing investments due to negative mortgage balances, these fears have increased and the status of home ownership as a key element of middle-class status has further been eroded.

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