Placing the Academy

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Levittown Breeds Anarchists!
Film at 11

Kathryn T. Flannery

Everybody comes from someplace, and the places we come from—cherished or rejected—inevitably affect our work.

Lucy Lippard

My mother-in-law used to joke that she needed a separate address book just for my husband and me. Married while still in college in the late 1960s, we have since moved from place to place, rarely staying in any one place more than a few years. From Ohio to upstate New York, New York to Virginia, Virginia to Massachusetts, Massachusetts to North Dakota, North Dakota to Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania to Indiana, and now back to Pennsylvania, we have been restless nomads, not content to stay put, and even when “settled” in one geographic locale, we’ve fixed up an apartment or a house only to move on to another one in the same town. And yet, in over thirty years of wandering, we have managed to avoid returning to the kinds of places where we grew up: we’ve managed, that is, to avoid returning to the suburbs. Even so, we trail the suburbs behind us, not as some psychological leg-iron that we’d rather lose and forget, but as a knotty rope of expectations about place, about home. Most of the time that knotty rope bumps along, fraying as we move farther and farther away from childhood. But every once in a while the knots catch on something and jerk us back.

We live in a city now, on a mixed-use block as urban planners like to say: some rentals, some owner-occupied dwellings,
a commercial property or two. This is an ethnically and racially diverse “border” neighborhood, marking a just-visible line between Pittsburgh proper and the next urbanized town over. We’ve had a hard, bearing-down-on-you kind of winter, with snow that kept buried the accumulating layers of urban detritus. Until, that is, a first thaw exposed it all. That’s when, once again, I got the itch to move. Nomadic tribes move to give the land a rest, letting the land reabsorb the waste and grow back what the domestic animals and the humans have grazed down. Maybe this itch to move is some sort of atavistic urge—except I wasn’t aiming to leave my own mess behind, but someone else’s careless trash. There is only so much of someone else’s mess I want to pick up before I become more than a little irritated and restless to move. So I set out to look—just look—for an alternative place to live. Driving through a nearby town, farther and farther from the sights of the rusting postindustrial city, I began to notice how other drivers yielded the right of way, how a hulky SUV, gas-guzzler though it surely was, courteously pulled to the curb to let me pass through a narrow lane. I began to relax. I found my way to a tidy neighborhood, tidy yards, no visible trash, no obvious piles of dog feces, and as far as I could tell, no cigarette butts or assorted fast-food containers decorating the defiant hydrangeas. This wasn’t technically a suburb, but a small town, and yet I read onto this landscape what I remembered from childhood—not bland uniformity but a largely untrumpeted sense of joint purpose, of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. Not a lawn-nazi-world where men take pride in creating the monoculture of poisoned turf, but a neighborhood that assumes rather simply that one picks up after oneself. I was feeling the need for this sort of (albeit righteous) tidiness, for a bit of what I remembered as home. And that’s part of what I mean by the knotty rope. It snagged on tidiness.

The trouble of course is that tidy can seem to depend on sameness. Christine Frederick, an early critic of suburban living, rejected what she saw in 1928 as “neat little toy houses on their neat little patches of lawn and their neat little colonial lives, to say nothing of the neat little housewives and their neat little children—all set in neat rows, for all the world like children’s books” (qtd. in Lippard 226). But is that the inevitable formula? I grew up in Levittown, New York, in the 1950s, a place and a time that would seem to confirm the simple calculus, having come to represent in the cultural imaginary all that is most troubling about America.
Although not the first planned community, Levittown was the largest—17,447 houses in all—and it thus took on the role of prototypical post-WWII cultural uniformity, serving as the subject of sociological studies that set out to diagnose America’s ills and as literary counterpoint to what America was thought to have been (or thought that it should be) (Kelly 3). The feminist art historian Lucy Lippard observes that after World War II, “planned obsolescence and consumer culture took hold in earnest” with “the first Levittown [leading] the way to plastic supernormality” (226, 232). In his fictional memoir, *Tidewater Morning*, William Styron refers to “the legion of bleak Levittowns” that stand in stark contrast to the village of his narrator’s youth, a village figured as a “more agreeable, far prettier place to grow up in than the mass-produced high-tech eyesores that overwhelmed the landscape in later decades” (115). Although at least some part of my academic training (as well as my political commitments) inclines me to hold consumer capitalism responsible for these “eyesores,” for the human-made blight evident almost anywhere one turns in the United States, I cannot say that I recognize my own childhood in Lippard’s “plastic supernormality” or Styron’s “bleak Levittowns.” There is something more to the story than this familiar metonymic critique suggests, something paradoxical that has to do with complex relationships between order and sameness on the one hand and freedom and change or flux on the other.

I cannot say that having grown up in Levittown gives me greater access to some “truth” about the place, but rather the experience of having been made the subject of scholarly attention adds a certain kind of personal edge to my academic work. As a historian of literacy practices, I have been drawn to stories “from below,” in the spirit of the social historian E. P. Thompson: those stories that do not fit readily into the larger, grander stories that history and the social sciences want to tell. I cannot say that Levittown taught me such historiography, but learning as an adult that scholars and social critics had held such families as my own under their academic lens was sufficiently alienating to incline me to seek out alternative forms of intellectual work. What happens when the “subject” speaks back? Whatever the time frame of my research, even when it is remote in time, there is thus something personal for me in wanting to think about how ordinary people don’t simply do what the planners and politicians and the social critics—and academics—think they should do. This then is an intellectually
anarchic counterweight to my desire for tidiness: I am drawn to the messy parts of history, the parts that run counter to the dominant stories, and those instances that remind me of how ordinary nonconformity can be. The joke is that places like Levittown can indeed breed anarchists.

As Lippard argues, “one reason to know our own histories is so that we are not defined by others, so that we can resist other people’s images of our past, and consequently, our futures” (85). Levittown was not and is not a single place, nor can it be held in amber. The point is not that my memories of childhood can override what I now know about the official histories of that place. At the same time, my memories lead me to be skeptical of scholarship that figures the human actors as dupes or pawns or easily categorizable types. When I ask students in my classes to conduct historical research, I ask them to test out what they read “on the pulse”: given your personal experience, does this public account make sense? If it runs counter to your sense of things, what sense can you make of the disjuncture? I don’t want to say that personal experience, personal memory, automatically carries more weight—sometimes our experiences are exceptional, our memories at best partial—but it is to say that dissonant sites where personal and public stories are in tension may well be precisely the places that need to be explored, opened up, reexamined, that tell us something we have overlooked about the past, but also something about the investments of those who have had the power to tell the stories. It is sometimes in these cracks that open up in the dominant stories that we get some inkling of the unheroic nature of human agency.

My family, like others who lived in Levittown, both fits and fails to fit the terms that have been applied to them. If, as Barbara Kelly argues, Levittown was grounded in a notion of environmental determinism—that is, a properly designed place was expected to produce a better citizenry and, thus, Levittown as garden community was expected to produce good yeoman citizens—then the primarily young families that initially peopled the place somehow failed (mercifully) to fully conform to expectations. Their lives were not so easily engineered, not so easily mass-produced as the houses. The residents made and remade homes, as they made and remade their lives, not to produce a utopian community but also not in the paternalistic image of the eponymous founder. When Levittown was first built, it may have been “clean and quaint and hopeful,” but it very quickly began to change into a “multifaceted place that reflects
difference, the lives within it, and the social forces that form it from
without, even when such a reflection exposes some ugliness” (Lipp-
pard 231). Levittown was not the ideal community promoted in the
developer’s advertising, nor was it the model for The Truman Show.
The relationship between place and people, between intention and
actuality is more complex, more ambiguous than that. Levittown
can thus stand for the mismatch between what traditional scholar-
ship “from above” has to say about a place and what those who live
and work in the place have to say.

It would be no surprise to my father to learn that Levittown’s
developer William Levitt shared in a widespread belief that, if citi-
zens owned their own homes, they were less likely to engage in
subversive activities. “No man who owns his house and lot,” Levitt
contended, “can be a Communist [because] he has too much to
do” (qtd. in Kelly 49). My father was no fan of Levitt, whose busi-
ess tactics my father held in disdain. My father was a Roosevelt
New Deal Democrat, and, for him, Levitt represented the kind of
self-serving capitalist who took advantage of post–World War gov-
ernment programs for his own gain rather than for the good of
the commonweal. At the same time, my father was no fan of com-
munists. Before the war, before he enlisted in the Army Air Corps,
my father had worked in a tool and die factory in Brooklyn. He
tells two kinds of stories about that experience: one has to do with
standing up to the bosses and the other has to do with standing
up to the “commie goons” who threatened to take over the union.
The latter story has to do with my very skinny father wielding a
very large wrench in the “goon’s” face. The former story has to do
with my father beating the boss at his own game by more efficiently
reaching the expected production quota in shorter time, to either
earn more money or earn more time off. My father would agree in
principle with Levitt that a man should be able to own the roof over
his head and that hard work should by rights be rewarded. But he
would have categorized Levitt as a “boss,” someone who could not
be fully trusted and, therefore, someone to outwit. Just as working
for a boss was a fact of life, buying a home from someone like Levitt
was understood to be a practical, if not wholly savory, necessity.

Levittown can be understood as having been created as an “in-
tentional” community with an ideological agenda, a place planned
to “structur[e] the social order” (Kelly 44). Levitt was not inventing
the plan, however, but was following the prescriptions of the Federal
Housing Administration that reflected “a growing consensus about
the nature of the American character and about the role of the house and home in its formation” (42). Not a new set of ideas, of course, as Barbara Kelly observes,

*an ideology of house and home had been part of the American political culture from the colonial days through the founding of the Republic and into the reform periods that followed it. Expressed from the top in the form of land grants and voting privileges for the landed, and from the bottom in the form of a restless wandering in search of a better piece of land, the consensus was rooted in the theory that the privately owned homestead was the most appropriate form of housing for the republic.* (42)

More immediately, in the wake of World War II and against the backdrop of the rise of communism, Levitt capitalized on the federal government’s efforts to address a significant housing shortage (and thereby ward off political upheaval).

Some sixteen million GIs had returned from duty only to find insufficient housing. Depleted construction supplies, a labor shortage, and the building industry in decline meant that new housing had to be created quickly. One report has it that ex-GIs and their families across the country “were living with their parents or in rented attics, basements, . . . unheated summer bungalows [and] some even lived in barns, trolley cars, and tool sheds” (Levittown Historical Society). In this regard, my parents were fairly typical. After my father was discharged from the service, he and my mother and my older sister, then an infant, moved in with my mother’s parents on Staten Island, the most rural of the boroughs of New York City. But when I was born, the need to find a place of their own became acute. Neither of my parents came from money, and so they had to depend, in prototypically American fashion, on their own pluck and luck. My father found work as an air traffic controller at LaGuardia in Queens and that meant moving closer to his work. At the same time, my parents wanted more privacy for a growing family and greater independence to craft a life not bound to the Republican and conservative expectations of my mother’s family. With little money, they had few options. For them, Levittown never appeared as selling out to cultural uniformity. They did not have the luxury to think in such terms. Rather, Levittown represented the only way they could afford to own their own home
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and to escape what Peter Hales refers to as the “relentless self-replication” of apartment-house living in one of the city’s boroughs (5). In that sense, the unlikely Levitt house represented promise and possibility, “a new form of ideal American life, one that combined the idealized middle-class life of the prewar suburban communities, with the democratized life of younger, mainly urban-raised GIs and their families” (3).

In 1950, my parents bought one of Levitt’s basic four-room Cape Cods with an unfinished attic and no garage. This was the first model in the development, and it was designed with cement-slab construction. What I remember as sweaty floors were a result of building the house not on a basement foundation but on a cement base in which were placed heating coils. When the heat was on, moisture would condense on the tile surface, making the floors a slippery hazard. The surface was hard on my mother’s feet and hard on anything that happened to fall. Glass baby bottles were especially vulnerable. The floor plan was simple: essentially a square divided into four sections, a living room and kitchen in the front of the house, two bedrooms in the back, with a small section of one bedroom “square” taken up by the bathroom. Levitt later added ranch models, still on the four-square plan, but with slight variations in color, window placement, and roof line. Although my parents were seeking privacy from their parents, the Levitt house itself provided little space for privacy for family members. No “master suite” separated parents from the children; initially only a single bedroom was shared by whatever number of children; everyone used the one bathroom; and no playroom, no basement, no spare space allowed family members to hide away from other family members. The physical space required a literal rather than sentimental family togetherness. Strictly enforced naptime gave my mother some respite, some private time. Whether we slept or read in our bedroom, it did not matter, as long as we were quiet and left my mother alone for one hour—one hour to herself.

Whatever the social or psychological cost, the Levitt house was economical. Economies in mass construction made it possible to build houses that “a group on the lower edge of middle-class life—in effect, a prewar tenant class with a median income of little over $3000” could afford to buy (Taylor 1; Levittown Historical Society). Having learned cost-cutting techniques during the war, Levitt continued to perfect the mass production tract house that has now become so familiar. Cheap land, cheap building methods,
nonunion contracts, and modifications in building codes together made it possible for Levitt to produce houses assembly-line fashion, averaging, when fully operational, thirty houses a day (Levittown Historical Society). This may not seem so remarkable today when blap housing developments sprout like toadstools after a spring rain. But it was remarkable then. My father’s father had been a house builder on Staten Island before the Crash, but in his day he was thought “progressive” because he could work on two or three houses at once—not to complete these few houses in a day, but to work on building them over several weeks, or even months. My grandfather was a craftsman who built “from scratch” on site. Levitt, on the other hand, developed on-site, factory-like techniques—technically not a prefab process—that depended on the delivery of precut lumber to the construction site and the greater availability of standardized building materials such as sheetrock panels. Teams of workers moved from house site to house site, “completing one stage of construction before moving on to repeat that stage at the next site” (Kelly 26). Levitt bought directly from manufacturers when he could, and when he could not—as in the case of a nail shortage—he built a factory on the building site (27).

I doubt that my parents had much sense of Levitt’s goal to create a “complete, integrated, harmonious community” for people thought of as occupying something called a “tenant class” in order to “provide a pleasant and wholesome social life” for this lower order of humans (Levitt qtd. in Kelly 36). I doubt that my parents had any sense—or would have accepted the designation—that they were part of a tenant class. Rather, they were drawn to the possibilities in the physical place, limited as it was, not to a philosophy based on class-oriented “uplift.” Not elegant, the Cape Cod was nonetheless solidly built and came fully equipped—unusual for the time—with stove, refrigerator, cabinets, and washing machine, the latter tucked under the staircase going up into the unfinished attic. My father would later make money on the side by repairing the hundreds of Bendix washing machines that inevitably broke down after a few years’ use. All Levitt houses had the same brand appliances, leading to a cottage repair industry. Later model houses included a built-in television set, also tucked in under the staircase, but this time on the living room side of the stairwell (Levittown Historical Society).

Each small house sat on a proportionately large lot, providing physical distance and relative privacy from neighbors, a remarkable luxury for those accustomed to urban life. Each lot was planted
with four trees. I remember two apple trees on our corner lot, an improbable mimosa with its feathery pink blossoms, and a peach tree that at maturity produced enough peaches for my mother to can, and, after a hurricane, littered the yard with rotting, fermenting fruit. To this day, I cannot stomach the smell of ripe peaches. The sandy soil that had once supported potato farmers soon supported lawns and gardens. My mother said she could just tuck a cutting into that friable soil knowing that almost any plant would root and grow without great effort.

Interior lanes curved through the development designed to keep major traffic to its periphery. Sidewalks along quiet streets meant that as child I could ride my bicycle safely as far as the parkway or I could walk to a playmate’s house within the development without adult supervision. Indeed my mother sent me off on the first day of kindergarten to walk the few blocks to school with no other companion than another five-year-old in the neighborhood. Such independence depended on the expectation that we were safe to go off on our own. Although so large that it spilled across two towns and drew on the services of several municipalities, school districts, and fire stations, Levittown was nonetheless crafted to feel like a small town, arranged as it was around a series of “village greens,” an echo of some English pastoral landscape. We could walk to the store, to the free public swimming pool (one of nine provided by the developer and open except during polio scares), and to school. Churches, synagogues, public libraries were all close at hand. The librarian knew me, knew that I liked to read, and set aside books for me. On the edge of the development, but still walking distance for my sister and me—on what we called the “turnpike” and urban planners would call “strip commercial”—were an ice cream parlor, bowling alley, roller skating rink, and movie theatre. I could not walk to the turnpike alone because it meant crossing a heavily traveled road, but my older sister and I could go together, or we could all go as a family. For all the ways in which the suburbs are now inextricably identified with the automobile, Levittown was designed—as were more affluent planned communities such as Radburn, New Jersey—as if it were still possible to do everything one needed to do by walking. Because my father drove the one car to work, commuting along one of Long Island’s parkways, much of the time walking was the only means of transportation for the rest of the family. Without mass transit, my mother had to wait to use the car on those days when my father either carpoled or worked
nights. Or she depended on neighbors. While I remember Levittown as a safe place for children, a place I could explore without close watch, I also know that it was in many ways a confining place for mothers, for my mother.

We have become suspicious of such places, of course, suspicious of the idea of manufactured community, of enforced domesticity that keeps women in the kitchen and out of the workforce and hides social difference and dissent behind the facade of sameness. Criticisms arose, in fact, before the first Levitt houses were built. Some feared the creation of an exurban ghetto with the influx of a tenant class that was not expected to know how to tend to property; others found the development aesthetically abhorrent with what appeared initially as “relentless homogeneity, the cramped quarters of its interiors, and the raw, unfinished quality of its landscape” (Hales 4). Still others assumed that in purchasing affordable housing, the primarily young buyers were also being “initiated . . . into a postwar climate of ‘conformity and privatization’” (Taylor 1). It is no doubt true that by helping to finance home ownership through such efforts as Levitt’s, the federal government was giving access to lower-income citizens who would otherwise have been excluded and, in the process, was expecting that these new homeowners would, as Barbara Kelly puts it, have a stronger stake in American society. Rather than overtly or explicitly dictating a set of bourgeois values, however, such social policy provided incentive for the “traditional values of cooperative individualism, industry, and thrift” through underwriting home mortgages (Kelly 168). But, for all the ways in which both the developer and the federal government had crafted a plan to reshape the so-called tenant class, the homeowners themselves, in varying ways and degrees, proceeded to remake much of the plan.

In renting or buying a Levitt house, families initially agreed to build no fences, agreed to limit the colors they would paint their houses, agreed to install no “laundry poles or lines outside the house, except the one portable revolving laundry dryer” provided by the developer, and that only in the rear yard and only on weekdays. Almost immediately, residents began the process of disrupting the uniformity of the houses, building fences, adding dormers, building garages, painting their houses outside the approved colors—and hanging laundry when they needed to. Following the war, do-it-yourself home improvement was a necessary response to the general labor shortage, and home decorating and handyman publications
proliferated, providing assistance to new homeowners (Kelly 71). My father was not unusual in building a garage and finishing off the so-called expansion attic. He did not want the garage for the car—and in fact, he never built a driveway to make it possible to drive the car into the garage—but wanted a large workshop for the power tools he used to build furniture and to create additional living space for a growing family. Although local newspapers and magazines featured such transformations of the basic Levitt home, showcasing residents’ handiwork, not everyone was so impressed. Ironically, even though critics continued to condemn the uninspired uniformity of Levitt housing, the sociologist William Dobriner criticized what he saw as do-it-yourselfism run amok. What was once “clean,” “quaint,” and “hopeful” in Levittown was soon marred through “individualism, indifference, neglect, and taste good and bad”:

*Do-it-yourself paint jobs: red, aqua, chartreuse, cerulean and pink trims. Jerry-built dormers stagger out of roofs. The expansion attics are all fully expanded. You see a half-finished carport, patched concrete, broken asbestos shingles, grime and children’s fingerprints ground into a peeling light-blue door, a broken picket fence, a dead shrub, a muddy trampled lawn. . . . (qtd. in Lippard 231)*

The black and white wallpaper my father put up in the bathroom would no doubt have appalled Dobriner as much as it embarrassed my mother, with its cartoon depictions of people bathing. No nudity, mind you, just a repeated pattern of bathing scenes, a head peering out from above a shower curtain or an improbable third arm appearing with scrub brush in hand. The decor was always a compromise between what my mother envisioned and what my father actually carried out as the resident handyman. My mother sewed curtains, slipcovered sofas and chairs, and braided rugs, but the work of remaking the physical space was left to my father. However successful or unsuccessful the collaborative effort in anyone else’s estimation, my parents assumed that the house was theirs to do with as their budget and time would allow, as both a matter of necessity—two children were now four children—and as a matter of personal aesthetics.

The art historian Peter Hales has argued that critics of Levittown tended to judge the place “from an older, more elite standpoint—they
were, themselves, idealizing an American landscape inappropriate to Levitt, to his constituency, or to the moment in which Levittown came to be” (4–5). Such critics took as their reference point upper-middle-class, nonurban, individualized, custom-built housing, possible only for the few before the War and certainly not possible for those Levitt (or the Federal Housing Administration) referred to as the target market. In response to the kind of criticisms raised against Levittowners’ handiwork, Lucy Lippard suggests that it would be well for us to consider how “human and hopeful” it is “when an artificially happy-face facade has given way to a multifaceted place that reflects difference.” Levittown might then be viewed not as the “epitome of suburban self-abnegation” but as “a tribute to the ineradicable drive for self-expression” (231).

The physical look of the place, as Lippard suggests, reflected on some level a degree of human diversity. From the outset, Levittown was more diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion than the surrounding Long Island communities, especially the historically exclusive WASP enclaves of the North Shore. The relative physical proximity of different ethnic groups in a city can make us forget how enforced the lines dividing neighborhoods—and peoples—could (and can) be. But my parents were part of a generation dislocated first by economic depression and then by war. Many of the men of their generation had, thanks to military service, come into contact with people they would never have known in their old neighborhoods. What military experience began, Levittown continued by housing in one neighborhood people who were unlikely to live together if they had returned to their former lives on Staten Island or in Queens or Brooklyn. Relatively diverse in ethnic background, they were nonetheless similar in age and socioeconomic status. Most of those who crowded the development office early on to rent or purchase a Levitt home were married couples in their twenties and early thirties, some with small children, and most of the men were veterans (Kelly 59–60). Primarily blue-collar workers—many employed in the nearby aircraft industry, as well as some, like my father, “in the recently emerged white-collar middle class, wage-earning people whose work was clean, but not well-remunerated”—the first residents were for the most part people who before the war could not have afforded a home. They may not have measured up to dominant cultural norms in terms of “wealth, education, or social standing,” as Barbara Kelly observes, but they were clearly looking to move up (45).
It is clear that the socioeconomic status of residents changed as did the physical environment. And yet, there was from the beginning one troubling constant, troubling especially because not unusual. In the earliest deeds, William Levitt included a racial covenant barring any owner of a Levitt house from selling to anyone other than “members of the Caucasian race.” At the time, Federal Housing Administration guidelines recommended against mixing “inharmonious racial or national groups.” The federal agency advised that “if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Mohan 1; see also Chappell). While Levitt did in fact mix nationalities (whether or not “inharmonious”) in apparent opposition to the federal recommendations, he nonetheless cited the FHA to support his decision to bar blacks, justifying his action on the grounds that it was “a business decision.” Segregation was the norm and sanctioned by federal authorities, he contended, and to run counter to that norm would mean that other businesses would beat him in the marketplace. The language of the covenant is telling: “The tenant agrees not to permit the premises to be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race. But the employment and maintenance of other than Caucasian domestic servants shall be permitted” (Mohan 1). The obvious racism here is married to the ludicrous notion of servants for homeowners categorized as part of a tenant class.

The FHA may have wanted to address the housing shortage for returning GIs, but that did not include the 1.2 million black Americans who had served in the armed forces (Raines 2). And yet, this oversight could have been a very brief chapter in the history of Levittown. The Supreme Court ruled in 1948, well before all the Levitt houses were built, that such covenants were “unenforceable as law and contrary to public policy”; and a year later the FHA revised its policy to no longer back mortgages that involved racial covenants. Subsequent deeds for Levitt houses did in fact omit the racial covenant, but Levitt continued to reassure the public that he would not sell homes to blacks. Only later, when faced with legal and political pressure, did Levitt relent (Mohan 2). And yet, the taint of racial discrimination together with the larger racism of American housing practices insured that Levittown would remain—continues to remain—largely white. No doubt for some whites who purchased Levitt homes, racial segregation was a selling point. For others, however, especially early on, it was not necessarily a matter
of active choice. Unlike gated communities today that attract the economically advantaged, who can choose where to live and actively choose (at least economic) exclusivity, the white sector of the so-called tenant class had fewer options. At the same time, the returning black GIs had fewer options still, with African Americans losing ground—literally—throughout the course of the twentieth century so that fewer and fewer blacks owned property. Levittown managed on some level to break down ethnic and religious barriers but did not and has not managed to break down the racial divide that seems now, if anything, more, rather than less, definitive of American culture.

I don’t know whether my parents’ deed included a racial covenant. By 1950 when they bought their house, the Supreme Court had already ruled, and so it would be unlikely. But they could not have failed to notice the racial make-up of the development, even though I don’t remember this fact of segregation to have been a topic of conversation between my parents or among the neighbors. Racial segregation was no doubt such a fact of life in much of the North that it could go unremarked, but consciousness of racism could not be kept entirely out of view. I remember a dinner at my mother’s sister’s house—they lived in one of the small fishing villages on the North Shore of Long Island—when my uncle used a racial slur. My father stood up from the table, said he did not want his children to hear such language, and marched us all out of the house and drove us home, back to all-white Levittown.

The contradictions of Levittown make clear that place alone does not determine lives but represents a set of limits and possibilities. Human actors who people a place are never wholly free to shape the environment or their lives but have to improvise from the possibilities at hand. In the dynamic interaction of place and people, change happens, but never fully as the planners plan it or as ordinary people intend it (to echo Marx). Thus Levittown does not stand for a single ideological formation, nor can it offer a fully predictable judgment about the American character. It is, as Lucy Lippard suggests, multicentered even as—or perhaps especially when—its limitations are exposed. For my parents, Levittown gave them a place to begin independent lives with a degree of distance from the conservatism, and, perhaps paradoxically, from the racism of their upbringing. Even as my mother’s life was hemmed in by the limited expectations her family had for girls and the domesticity of Levittown, she worked to insure that not just her sons but also her
daughters would go to college. While raising a family and crafting a home, she continued to teach herself skills that later—after we moved from Levittown—would lead to rewarding work outside the home. My parents tended to support liberal causes closer to the interests of their primarily Jewish friends than to their Protestant families. I remember when they banded together with other parents in the neighborhood to remove anti-Semitic materials from the elementary school curriculum. They raised their children to distrust “systems” and “bosses,” to assume that if one is not part of the solution, one is part of the problem, and to believe that houses and communities and places of work and lives are all revisable.

We were raised to think the world could be changed, and we had a responsibility to contribute. Indeed, to let things be is slothful, wasteful; above all, independence means doing it yourself. When they could afford to do so, my parents moved on, eventually leaving New York altogether for the wilds of Ohio. My family never lived in a planned community again, and we never lived in a wholly white community again—but we also never moved back as a family to a city.

Even as this long winter very reluctantly gives way to spring, my need to flee the city has passed, at least for now. We have begun this summer’s restoration project on our hundred-year-old house. We begin to work the year’s compost into the depleted urban soil and coax still more plants to grow in this small urban lot. Indeed, our house and yard seem more amenable to fixing up than the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the large research university where I teach. Like my parents, I have had to make compromises with my environment, to change what is within my compass but never quite to make peace with systems and bosses that seem so impervious to change. As long as the system, imperfect as it is, can make room for the work that matters to me most—that is, in teaching and in scholarship, but also politically, in figuring out how human agents manage and can manage better in relation to structures most often not of their own making—then I can see my way clear to stay a little longer.
Notes

1. Restrictive covenants were only one way to prevent blacks from buying property. Covenants in general "are a way to enforce some requirement in perpetuity, no matter how often the property changes hands." Any subsequent buyer is expected to abide by the terms of the covenant that "run[s] with the land." Initially racial covenants were thought to be unaffected by the Constitution (which was understood to address only government action) because such covenants were treated as private agreements between individuals. But in 1968, the Fair Housing Act outlawed racial discrimination in housing even by private individuals and specifically outlawed racial covenants (Gerber 1).

2. Geoffrey Mohan of Newsday reports that "into the 1980s, and today, [Levittown] remains 97 percent white" (2).

3. According to Franklin Raines, in 1920, blacks owned about "15 million acres of land [but by 2002], they [held] only 1.1 million acres" (2).

Bibliography


