

# **Imagining Conformity: Consumption and Homogeneity in the Postwar African American**

## **Suburbs**

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### **Abstract**

In the wake of World War II many urbanites left cities for a suburban life that has been persistently derided for its apparent social, material, and class homogeneity. This paper examines the African American experience of post-World War II suburbanization and the attractions of suburban life for African America. The paper examines two suburban projects in Indianapolis, Indiana, one a “sweat equity” housing community and the other a subdivision, both of which placed consumption at the heart of postwar citizenship. Rather than frame such consumption simply in terms of resistance to anti-Black racism, the two suburban experiences illuminate the African American imagination of visual and material “sameness” and demonstrate the challenges of archaeological studies of ethnicity and stylistic distinction.

## Homogeneity and the Color Line in the American Suburb

The image of interchangeable suburban homes fronted by White families and Cold War consumables has often symbolized American postwar social, disciplinary, and material homogeneity. Historical narratives of the suburban experience routinely paint it in homogeneous class and racial terms, and while that picture of postwar homogeneity was rhetorically hyperbolized many ideologues did aspire to engineer demographically uniform communities. Perhaps no suburb better depicts that ambition for homogeneity than the original Levittown, the Long Island, New York community where the Levitt Brothers built 17,447 homes by 1951 (Lambert 1997:23). Boosted by Federal Housing Administration and veteran's loans, banks provided loans for 10 million new homes in such communities between 1946 and 1953. The FHA required suburban planners to restrict the sale of suburban homes to Whites, a practice often referred to as "redlining." The FHA considered Black residents "adverse influences" to be excluded from FHA-funded communities, and the Levitts embraced that advice (Gotham 2000:626). William Levitt rationalized the firm's racial covenants restricting sales to Whites only with the argument that "As a Jew, I have no room in my mind or heart for racial prejudice. But . . . I have come to know that if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 to 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community. That is their attitude, not ours" (*New York Times* 1957:170). In 1960, Levittown's 82,000 residents included not one African American, making it the single largest universally White community in America (Jackson 1985:235).

Nevertheless, that picture of suburban segregation risks assuming that African America was uniformly excluded from the suburban cultural landscape; it hazards accepting longstanding stereotypes of middle-class White tract housing encircling impoverished Black inner cities; and it ignores African American desires for a foothold in a postwar consumer culture that was

conformist, homogeneous, and racist. Levittown was an extreme and somewhat atypical example of postwar suburban segregation that ignores the one million African Americans who were part of suburban settlement in the 1940s and 1950s. One in six African Americans who moved north between 1910 and 1930 moved to a suburb, and in 1940 one-fifth of African Americans living in metropolises were suburbanites (Wiese 2010:5). Nevertheless, from World War I to 1970 the African American share of the national suburban population only rose from 3% to about 5% (Stahura 1986:132).

Scholars including Andrew Wiese (2010) and LeeAnn Lands (2009) have quite convincingly documented the long-term Black suburban experience, painting a picture of postwar suburbs as one more battleground for equal housing that had been waged for the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. African American suburbanization histories typically have focused on African American resistance to housing racism, and anti-racist housing activism clearly lies at the heart of the suburban historical narrative. However, it is less clear specifically what the suburban experience meant in African American imagination and how African American social distinctions were expressed in prosaic material things. For many White and Black ex-urbanites, suburbanization was perhaps less about distinction and exclusivity than it was about *sameness*; that is, for many Americans the suburbs provided an exceptionally powerful material expression of collectivity, conformity, and stylistic affinity. In African American experience there is a rich heritage of consumption that invoked nationalism and painted commonplace consumer baubles as instruments that confirmed citizenship (Mullins 1999; Cohen 2003). Nevertheless, that African American consumer politics assumed the material form of apparent aesthetic homogeneity and was largely implicit, imaginative, and perhaps even invisible to many White observers and subsequent scholars.

This paper examines African American suburbanization in Indianapolis, Indiana, particularly the distinctive politics of suburban materiality, social and ethnic visibility, and the material homogeneity of mass-consumed goods. African diasporan archaeologists have long examined how ethnicity is expressed in material culture and been critical of archaeological interpretations that focus on seemingly unique ethnic consumption patterns. Few settings more clearly destabilize the hackneyed trope of ethnic visibility more than African American suburbia and the accompanying embrace of Cold War materiality. Suburban life aspired to foster material if not social sameness, and many observers from the outset have argued suburban life has a leveling influence more than a distinguishing effect. In 1957, for instance, Rita D. Kaunitz (1957:195) voiced a popular assessment of suburban homogeneity when she argued that the “new suburbs have become a great melting pot where classlessness and inconspicuous consumption are almost consciously practiced.” This “classlessness” was calculated rhetoric, but it had genuine conformist effects that observers have often caricatured by focusing on suburban social insularity, stylistic homogeneity, and sheer boredom. Such analysis often has failed to interrogate the suburban imagination, dig beneath the clichéd surface appearance of homogeneity, or examine the diversity of suburban experiences (Hawkins and Percy 1991; Kinnane 1998).

The trope of suburban material and social homogeneity has often passed unchallenged, but prescient observers have long questioned appearances of uniformity or the implication that it was disempowering. For instance, William H. Whyte’s 1956 *The Organization Man* was one of the most trenchant Cold War attacks on suburban homogeneity. Whyte was wary that a collectivist mindset flourished in postwar suburbia, a mindset that favored group consensus in broadly defined organizational life over individual achievement. Whyte (1956:298) argued that

the “organization man” was beholden to conformism and that “suburbia is the ultimate expression of the interchangeability so sought by organization.” Consumption did not express difference and distinction in Whyte’s suburbia; instead, suburban materiality was “inconspicuous consumption” governed by a largely unspoken yet ever-evolving consensus about what material things were “essential.” Nevertheless, Whyte (1956:11) believed that individualists could negotiate the conformist experience, suggesting that “the man who drives a Buick Special and lives in a ranch-type house just like hundreds of other ranch-type houses can assert himself as effectively and courageously against his particular society as the bohemian against his particular society. He usually does not, it is true, but if he does, the surface uniformities can serve quite well as protective coloration.”

There are fascinating archaeological implications in Whyte’s argument that the organization man’s individuality was almost wholly *internal*, incubated beneath “surface uniformities.” The general archaeological picture of African American expressive culture fixates on distinction if not dissent reflected in literal material and aesthetic visibility; that is, archaeologists tend to search out ethnicity, racial subjectivity, or social distinction that is more-or-less visible in material style and public display. Like most scholars, archaeologists have gravitated toward the public dimensions of African American expressive culture, especially those that confront racism or express ethnicity. The focus on public dissent and resistant material distinction hazards ignoring the intimacy, quiet, and interiority that Kevin Everod Quashie (2009, 2012) argues is at the heart of African American experience. Quashie argues that scholars invoke Blackness to represent hyper-visible public resistance, but that definition of resistance says more about American structural inequality than it says about the imagination, desire, and humility of African American inner life. Quashie does not read the death rites to resistance at all;

rather, he advocates a sensitive interpretation of resistance that contemplates the significance of African American imagination, interiority, and genuine quiet that is ignored by a focus on a particular range of Black public expressions. The African American suburban experience certainly included articulate anti-racist protest, and African American consumer history is dotted with consequential interventions against everyday marketplace racism. Nevertheless, African American consumption also took the form of quiet, if not inchoate personal imagination residing beneath the surface of public dissent, tactical evasion, and strategic confrontations of structural racism.

Consequently, the suburbs were not a stage for other-directed performances of Blackness that wielded refrigerators, sofa sets, and televisions as props; rather, the suburbs were intimate spaces of quiet imagination about African American citizenship. Ranch house living rooms were spaces that expressed desires for citizenship, confirmed human dignity, and optimistically interpreted the American Dream. They were not public displays of middle class behavior as much as they were private soliloquies reimagining Black subjectivity. In the suburbs, African Americans continued the perpetual quest to set aside the notion that Black people were markers of difference and instead embraced material homogeneity and suburban conformity to imagine their essential human dignity and rightful position at the heart of American society.

#### “Adverse Influences”: Racism and the Indianapolis Suburbs

In the 1940s a series of events transformed the African American cityscape in Indianapolis, Indiana in ways that were repeated in many other American cities. Wartime migration to Indiana’s capital city had significantly swelled the African American population, but Black residency was tightly restricted by a network of realtors, city administrators, and

bankers. By war's end many African American neighborhoods had deteriorated significantly, fueling slum clearance programs that had begun to take aim on the community in the 1930s. While the African American near-Westside languished, 9000 new homes were built between 1940 and 1942 to support wartime workforces in outlying Speedway and Warren Township, and 52,000 new homes were built in the city in the 1950's, but nearly all were in neighborhoods inaccessible to African Americans (Hulse 1994:137).

The vast majority of postwar suburbs were funded by Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans that explicitly rejected funding for any racially mixed neighborhoods and considered nearly all Black neighborhoods too risky to extend homeowners mortgage insurance. The FHA underwriting manual specifically indicated that if “a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Jackson 1985:208). In the absence of completely Black suburban housing tracts, the FHA would not extend loans to neighborhoods that included even a single African American homeowner. The National Association of Real Estate Boards was similarly resistant to integration. Their code of ethics indicated that a “realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in the neighborhood” (McKenna 2008:50). In 1943 they suggested that such adverse influences “might be a madame with a string of callgirls, a bootlegger, a gangster, or a colored man of means who was giving his children a college education and thought they were entitled to live among whites.”

Into this situation stepped Flanner House, a social agency that had served African Americans since 1898. In 1936 Tuskegee-trained Cleo Blackburn was hired as the Flanner House director, advocating a “self-help” mantra that would remain the Flanner House philosophy

through the New Deal, postwar decline, and the Civil Rights movement. In 1944, for instance, Blackburn directed the construction of a community cannery, health center, nursery, and gardens at its 16<sup>th</sup> Street headquarters. A year later *Survey Graphic* reported on the new center, indicating that Flanner House “has built a new settlement on the edge of what former U. S. Housing Administrator Nathan Straus called the worst Negro slum in America. It has been instrumental in constructing a new health center nearby. It is operating perhaps the largest community gardening and canning project by and for Negroes in the United States” (Riis and Waldron 1945:340).

Blackburn stood squarely among the supporters of urban renewal. Blackburn’s 1946 study of 454 Black households on the city’s near-Westside concluded that the neighborhood was “one of the most unsightly, unsanitary, and deteriorated sectors in the entire city of Indianapolis,” and the homes “needed major repairs and few of them had adequate plumbing facilities” (Blackburn 1946:95). Blackburn (1946:95-96) indicated that “the majority had given up hope for any possible improvement,” and he advised that it “is urgently recommended, that the clearance, planning, and redevelopment of this area under the Redevelopment Act of 1945 affords the only hope of correcting the conditions existing in the area. . . . Immediate steps should be taken by the Indianapolis Redevelopment Commission to declare the area blighted and to acquire, clear, and redevelop it.”

Created in 1944, the Indianapolis Redevelopment Commission was charged with directing urban renewal displacement, but it had relatively little plan for what to do with the uprooted residents. Blackburn’s ambitious proposal was to tear down a swath of homes and build “sweat equity” housing in which African American male head of households constructed their homes and the homes of their neighbors (women could not participate in home construction). The Redevelopment Commission purchased a 178-acre tract north of Crispus Attucks High

School in November 1946, and after displacing the residents (none of whom were guaranteed acceptance into Flanner House Homes) they turned it over to Blackburn and Flanner House (Preston 1946:1). Construction began in 1950 by a series of men whose families had been exhaustively reviewed by Flanner House for their “health, honesty, diligence, [and] cooperativeness” (Flanner House Homes 1946:9). Twenty-one veterans were among the first groups of home-builders, with the construction on each group of homes taking roughly a year. The project targeted those who were “financially able to purchase and maintain homes,” but they also included in the review a second group “who are responsible, of good character, [and] have cooperative characteristics. . . . Strong leadership, preparatory and follow-up education, guidance from civic leaders needed for this group.” Peopled by solidly middle-class African Americans in social if not financial terms, the Flanner House Homes project aspired to erase slums and foster “middle-class” values in one fell swoop, albeit without directly confronting racist housing restrictions.

The Flanner House Homes might be circumspectly counted among the numerous “inner suburbs” built in American cities in the first wave of postwar suburbanization (Orfield 1997). A variety of observers have termed the earliest World War II suburbs as “inner suburbs” (Jackson 1985:9; Hanlon and Vicino 2007; Hanlon 2010), “inner ring suburbs” (Leigh and Lee 2005), or “first-tier suburbs” (Hudnut 2003). Flanner House Homes was distinguished from many of these other suburbs by its proximity to downtown (two miles from the city’s center), but its low-density single-family homes, standardized design, and commitment to mass consumption were typical of postwar suburbs. In 1958, for instance, the city’s African American newspaper, the *Indianapolis Recorder* (1958:1) recognized the community’s invocation of suburbia when it

credited Blackburn with “creating a modern `suburb,’ not on the outskirts but the center of the city.”

Suburbs are routinely stereotyped as white-collar tract housing on the urban periphery that was home to affluent White residents fleeing poor, predominately Black cities. However, there were enormous distinctions in spatially peripheral communities from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century onward: among other meanings (Sies 2001:331), the “suburb” might refer to largely unplanned settlements with strong ties to an urban core; low-density communities with a breadth of consumer services and social institutions (e.g., schools); or mass-produced tract subdivisions for auto commuters. Likewise, many suburbs departed from the stereotype of White professional families, including many ethnic communities (Carnevale 2014) and a national predominance of working-class households (Sies 2001:214).

Nearly all of these postwar communities championed themselves as “middle class” (as did many urbanites), but that term was more of an ideological ideal than a clearly defined demographic reality. The suburb itself was a set of values, experiences, and ambitions, an idea more than a material or demographic entity, and the middle class likewise referred to an idealized frame of mind more than a concrete social and financial standing. Still, imagining oneself as part of a suburban middle class had concrete effects. Among the clearest of these values was the embrace of postwar consumer culture (Cohen 2003). In the five years after World War II, the sales of domestic furnishings and appliances expanded 240 percent (Nickles 2002:584), and Blackburn clearly envisioned Flanner House Homes as part of the new suburban materiality.

In 1953, 50 new homes had been completed. Like the suburban architecture they borrowed from stylistically, the houses were roughly 975 square-foot spaces with standardized

footprints and one of four basic street facings. There was nothing that especially distinguished the Flanner House Homes from any house in the suburbs, reproducing the very material culture that was simultaneously staking a claim to American suburbia. Flanner House specified the original furnishings in each home with a fair amount of specificity: the living rooms, for instance, would hold a sectional set, easy chair, cocktail table, end table, radio, three lamps, desk, piano, magazine rack, and bookcase. The project plan included a list of specified activities for each room, with the living room designed for “lounging, dancing, reading, entertainment of guests, family games, card playing, storage for folding chairs and table, clothes closet, [and] guest sleeping room.”

The Flanner House Homes’ prosaic modern conveniences and standardized domestic spaces evoked a conformist consumption. William Whyte (1956:313) argued that such conformist materiality was the hallmark of suburbia, suggesting that when suburbanites “see a neighbor vaunting worldly goods, they can see this is an offense—not to them individually, mind you, but to the community. When people comment unfavorably about conspicuous display, they usually stress that they themselves see nothing wrong with it, *but that other people might*; and the purchase, therefore, was ill-advised.” The Flanner House Homes clearly aspired to reproduce the self-disciplining “unpretentious consumption” that Whyte described, favoring stylistic affinities over individual distinctions of taste.

There is little evidence that many African American consumers simply “displayed” their consumer citizenship with the belief it would convince anti-Black racists to rethink their apprehensions, but Blackburn viewed the project as a genuine performance of middle-class citizenship. A persistent promoter of Flanner House and the sweat equity project, Blackburn trooped scores of White observers through the neighborhood. Ultimately, though, Blackburn

systematically avoided the structural inequalities that prevented African Americans from securing housing. Flanner House Homes reproduced residential segregation, they made no assault on racist lending practices, and the year spent building sweat equity homes was simply an impractical mechanism to transform the African American city. When out-of-state lenders began to offer mortgages to African Americans the Flanner House Homes program ended in 1964. The roughly 330 homes Flanner House Homes built may have been symbols of African American discipline and consequential points of pride and dignity for residents, but they could not come remotely close to addressing the boundaries that restricted African American housing for the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pierce 2005:70-71).

#### The Suburban Shangrila: The Middle Class and the African American Suburbs

While Flanner House was promoting suburban values in the city, some African Americans began to blaze a trail into the suburbs that departed significantly from the unpretentious homogeneity championed by Cleo Blackburn. Among Indianapolis' first African American suburbanites were Henry L. and Della Greer, and the area they moved into would become Indianapolis' preeminent African American suburb. Born in 1894, Henry Greer served in the Army in World War I and worked in an Indianapolis lumber yard, waited tables, and was a porter at the Spink Arms Hotel for about 15 years. He married Della in 1926, who taught at the segregated Crispus Attucks High School and was head of the Black high school's Art Department. Henry worked as a real estate agent and then opened a liquor store in 1936.

The Greers moved to Grandview Drive by June, 1946, when the *Indianapolis Recorder* reported on a reception at their Washington Township "country home," which was about 10 miles from the city center. A small plate at the gate identified the 3500 square foot, five-bedroom

home as “Shangrila,” and the unique and large home was certainly not an example of the “unpretentious” suburban materiality William Whyte described. In 1957 the Greers’ home was included on an Alpha Kappa Alpha Tour of Homes (which included a Flanner House Home as well), and the newspaper article noted that the Greers’ home “was designed by Mrs. Greer to utilize all the phases of nature and to display her extensive collection of beautiful antiques” (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1957a:5).

The Greers’ home may have reflected a consumer taste that Shelley Nickles (2002) indicates was common in many upwardly mobile suburban transplants. Nickles argues that many Americans of working-class roots embraced bold styles (such as chrome decorative flourishes) and rejected the spare aesthetics promoted by postwar designers and housing ideologues like Flanner House’s Cleo Blackburn. Specifically what constituted such “boldness” apparently varied quite a lot, but for some African Americans along Grandview it appeared to include antiques. For instance, a 1960 description of Frank and Georgia Stewart’s home at 6525 Grandview indicated that “Mr. and Mrs. Stewart drew and executed their own plans in building their home,” much as Della Greer had done (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1960:5). Like Della Greer, the Stewarts’ home featured antiques, including “an antique love seat carved from Chinese teakwood that is over 600 years old.” The house featured other conspicuous decorative goods, with the newspaper noting that “Mrs. Stewart has an affinity for wallpaper and every room is uniquely papered. . . . The hall leading to the bedrooms is papered in a ‘Gold Fleck’ design. The master bedroom is done with a ‘Madame Butterfly’ and the paper in the second bedroom is called ‘Golden Pheasant.’ Visitors will note the kitchen wallpaper shows the calorie counts of many foods.”

When African Americans moved into uniformly White neighborhoods in Indianapolis from the 1920s onward they were greeted with tension and violence. However, the area around the Greers' home remained almost completely uninhabited until development began in the mid-1950s, and it offered a partially wooded landscape that was quite unlike urban Indianapolis. As in many early Black suburbs (Wiese 2010:189), perhaps the most significant downside of the affordable and accessible space was the initial absence of full city utility services. Most of the neighborhood's first homes were built with septic tanks and wells, but by 1963 the neighboring Grand View Estates proudly heralded it had city water and sewer connections (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1963b:3).

Mary Corbin Sies (2001:333) argues that African American suburbanites tended to favor communities with a "more rural aesthetic," and Georgia Stewart chose her lot specifically because it backed onto Crooked Creek. When Grand View Estates opened in 1963 opposite the Stewarts' home, it invoked nature and open space as its advertisements heralded its "prestige living out where there's plenty of fresh air, sunshine, and community pride!" (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1963a:16). Nevertheless, the neighborhood had a relatively conventional suburban landscape revolving around manicured lawns and orderly flower beds. Della Greer, for instance, seemed attracted to a meticulously crafted landscape whose carefully managed flower gardens and lines of sight evoked the aesthetics of affluent suburbs. A 1963 *Ebony* article saw such suburban landscapes as testimony to the African American middle class' expansion, arguing that "manicured lawns and neat ranch houses in Crestwood Forest in Atlanta, in Chatham Fields in Chicago, in Ponchartrain [sic] Park in New Orleans, in New Rochelle in New York, testify to the phenomenal growth of the Negro middle class" (Van Alstine 1963:101). A 1960 description of the Stewarts' home observed that the "grounds include a spacious lawn, a section set aside as

wild life preserve, and beautiful flower and vegetable gardens” (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1960:5). Such vegetable gardens may have evoked some residents’ memories of rural settings, but the gardens appear to have been relatively small and largely ornamental features in the handful of yards that included them. This was quite different from the Flanner House gardens and cannery, which were expressly intended to foster residents’ self-sufficiency and work ethic; Flanner House residents were allowed little freedom to personalize their yard spaces, which were more carefully monitored than the lawns in the Grandview suburbs.

In 1955 developers and realtors began developing a “modern suburb” directly across from the Greers’ home on Grandview Drive (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1955:9). A December advertisement heralded 88 available lots in the Augusta Way subdivision bordered by 62<sup>nd</sup>, Coburn, and 64<sup>th</sup> Streets and Grandview Drive. African American realtor C.J. Hughes acknowledged that the community was a response to suburban segregation, telling the *Indianapolis Recorder* (1956a:8) that “‘This subdivision meets the demands of many particular people and families with middle incomes and higher who want good modern homes in locations commensurate with their investments.’” The newspaper championed the citizenship implications of home ownership in such suburbs when it reported that “home ownership brings rich rewards in personal feeling of individual and family security and helps develop the ‘solid citizen,’ a much desired civic and community asset.” Nevertheless, a 1956 advertisement obliquely acknowledged the class exclusivity in Augusta Way, touting standard suburban attractions like “Gas—Water—Lights” and “Close to Schools” while noting the community had “Reasonable Restrictions” (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1956b:3).

An October 1957 advertisement by African American realtor W.T. Ray heralded a home in Augusta Way that was nearing completion for Earl and Vanessa Seymour (*Indianapolis*

*Recorder* 1957b:3). The advertisement's detailed description of high-quality materials and design violates the stereotype of suburban homes simply as interchangeable architecture. The Seymours' ranch home was "designed by architect Joseph B. Johnson" and featured "fireplaces in living room and basement recreation room, 3 bedrooms, all electric kitchen with custom built cabinets of South Carolina Birch, baked Pink finish, [and] an attractive family room off of the kitchen adds a cheerful note of informality to this comfortable home. Imperial Black Marble sills, remote control lighting and the best in plumbing fixtures typify the high quality workmanship and materials that go into homes in this Northside subdivision."

Such customization may have been hyperbolized by the Seymours' realtor and the city's African American newspaper, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, but their commentary did not fixate on suburban stylistic homogeneity. In 1960, for instance, the *Indianapolis Recorder* described the 2722 Schofield Street home of Bernest and Eddy Turner on the city's eastside, commenting that its "living room walls are finished with an unusual paint called multa-kolor, and the floor is done with block hardwood. Mrs. Turner is especially proud of the glass tables in her living room, and the marble section in her modern sectional sofa. The draperies pick up all the colors used in the living room" (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1960:5). On the one hand, the newspaper's analysis of suburban materiality diverged little from conventional "middle class" suburbanization discourses; on the other hand, it and the African American press routinely underscored African American consumers' favor for high-quality and more expensive goods. In 1963, for instance, the president of Serta bedding company told *Ebony* that "more and more stores in predominately Negro neighborhoods stock Serta products—and sell more of the top of the line than of cheaper merchandise. But of most importance is the fact that the Negro today wants top quality in bedding just as he does in clothing, furniture and food" (Van Alstine 1963:104).

Earl and Vanessie Seymour participated in numerous neighborhood social events and were members of community social groups, a common pattern in Augusta Way and many other American suburbs. For instance, the Seymours were members of the Federation of Associated Clubs, an organization that lobbied for civil rights and upheld middle-class behavioral codes (Pierce 2005:134). Della Greer was a long-term member and secretary of the Delphinium Garden Club, whose mission was “to develop genuine appreciation for the healing power of nature’s bounty and beauty in a perplexed world” (Greer 1942:5; Woodall 1963:4). Frank and Georgia Stewart hosted meetings of the National Idlewild Lot Owners Association, a Black resort in Michigan where Madam C.J. Walker and W.E.B. Du Bois had been among the property owners. Like the Greers and Stewarts, the Seymours shared their home with neighbors and visitors for a wide range of socializing; for example, in July 1959, “through the courtesy of Mrs. Earl Seymore [sic], a small party of local people and visitors visited several of the new homes in the addition near 64<sup>th</sup> and Grandview” (Jackson 1959:4).

Bennett Berger’s 1961 analysis of the “myth of suburbia” acknowledged that many observers called this a “new kind of hyperactive social life.” Berger agreed with prevailing thought that social homogeneity and the absence of an older generation of established community leaders contributed to intensified suburban socializing. Nevertheless, Berger was wary of caricatures that lumped together a broad range of suburban communities. For instance, many of the Indianapolis organizations like the Delphinium Garden Club (circa 1930) had formed long before their members migrated to the suburbs, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century many African Americans had been part of a broad range of activist organizations and social groups alike (*Indianapolis Recorder* 1968:4). The persistent stereotypes of the Grandview neighborhoods as uniformly affluent or “middle class” were likewise simplistic. The Seymours,

for instance, were not stereotypical Black bourgeois: neither was descended from well-connected families; he had a working-class job in a creosote firm and then International Harvester; and neither had advanced beyond fifth grade. The Seymours and many of their neighbors in Augusta Way instead became linked in an upwardly mobile community that did not adhere to facile distinctions between working class and bourgeois (Nickles 2002:583). Berger (1961:39-40) may have been describing households like the Seymours and a general system of suburban values when he suggested that for “those interlopers who arrive in the suburbs bearing the unmistakable marks of a more deprived upbringing, suburbia is said to serve as a kind of ‘second melting pot’ in which those who are on the way up learn to take on the appropriate folkways of the milieu to which they aspire.” The ambitions of new suburbanites took many different social and material forms, so the “melting pot” implications of suburbanization can only be painted in broad and somewhat imprecise terms. Nevertheless, some African American suburbanites may well have imagined “middle class” homogeneity as empowering because they saw themselves escaping deprivation and the barriers to fair housing access.

The Grandview suburbs were sometimes rhetorically caricatured by African American peers as an insular Black bourgeois. In 1966, *Indianapolis Recorder* columnist Andrew W. Ramsey (1966:9) complained that “many of the Negroes who have struck it rich so to speak in the post war economy decided to escape the ghetto by building split level and ranch type homes out in the suburbs. Now hundreds of Negroes live in Washington Township outside in showplace homes and gress [sic] covered acreage. As they have moved in the whites nearby have moved out to be replaced by Negroes and so we have gained another ghetto but this time it is a golden ghetto.” Ramsey was apprehensive of the Grandview neighborhood’s racial and class segregation, lamenting that the main thoroughfare “leading out to this new sepia heaven is

beginning 'to go colored' so that one may pass from the inner city main ghetto out to the golden without passing too many white homes." In 1970 Ramsey (1970:9) renewed his "golden ghetto" critique when he argued that the claim that Atlanta was home to 14 African American millionaires "is easily believed as one visits the exquisite golden ghetto where these affluent Negroes are allowed to dwell."

Ramsey's polemics were perhaps less about suburbia than they were about segregation, and he was correct that most African American suburbs remained racially segregated well into the 1970s. However, Ramsey and many other commentators invoked the suburbs as a rhetorical stereotype serving other political ends. Ramsey risked implying that suburban expansion was superficial class pretentiousness, and like many observers he failed to examine why residents were attracted to the suburbs. Many of those reasons along Grandview were common to nearly any suburb: commitments to family, social links between neighbors, open space, and a community spirit were invoked in a broad range of suburbs (Sies 2001:333). Some of the residents did aspire to escape unpleasant urban conditions, but many wealthy and marginal African Americans alike shared a strong notion of moral respectability and personal dignity that was under constant attack in segregated cities (Cooley 2008:153).

Much of the African American experience of postwar suburbanization repeats threads that were common in many other diverse suburban places. Residents in the Grandview neighborhood certainly were active players in anti-racist activism. However, many of these same activists seemed to frame domestic space and their suburban communities as a retreat from public spaces in which African American life was profoundly influenced by structural racism. Instead, the suburbs became places in which African Americans incubated many of their deepest

desires for human dignity. Consequently, their suburban conformism was not apolitical as much as it was personal, imaginative, and largely unexpressed beyond Grandview Drive.

There were significant material similarities in places like the Flanner House Homes and the Grandview suburbs, and such basic homogeneity certainly extended beyond postwar African America. There are perhaps two basic archaeological insights provided by African American suburbanization. The first is that the mostly portable things that would be the heart of a conventional archaeological analysis are oddly invisible in much of the period African American commentary on suburbs. Manicured lawns, modern furnishings and distinctive things like antiques and artwork can be found described quite often in postwar African American discourses, and most suburbs appealed to prospective residents by underscoring their proximity to shopping. However, everyday household things—canned foods, cosmetics, bed sheets, games, pets—secured relatively little sustained attention. Suburban materiality and shopping in an open marketplace were symbolically consequential, but the specific material things in African American houses escaped the attention of observers.

The second archaeological implication reaches well beyond postwar African America. Archaeologists have often labored to unravel subterranean resistance, illuminate hidden ethnic distinction, and celebrate creative agency lurking beneath material homogeneity. However, the seemingly conformist suburbs provided rich imaginative possibilities to many Americans. The allure of the suburbs and middle class life were perhaps not unique for African America as much as they were significantly amplified. In the absence of many citizen privileges, African America retained a rich imagination of introspection, dignity, and hope, and the suburbs capitalized on many of those dimensions of African American inner life. Suburbs promised to unite residents

with like-minded neighbors in a material conformism that signified collectivity rather than the loss of individuality.

Relatively few African American suburbanites framed their aspirations as public refutations of racist caricatures, no more than White suburbanites saw themselves demonstrating their right to citizen privilege. Nevertheless, the guise of racism inevitably meant that African American suburbs included many residents reimagining and reaffirming humanity in ways that rejected racist constructions of Black difference. Most African Americans simply did not see any incongruity in their desire for a suburban home: they saw home ownership and personal dignity as privileges that should be extended to any disciplined and respectable citizen. In some ways we might circumspectly conclude that many other consumers long before the 1950s were similarly attracted to quiet homogeneity rather than expressive individuality, but archaeologists have sometimes lapsed into projecting invidious status competitions and performances of identity onto nearly all consumers in the last half-millennium. The African American suburban experience instead underscores the fundamental imaginative dimension of material consumption and African American expressive culture while it demonstrates the social bonds fostered by stylistic conformity.

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## FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Flanner House Homes under construction (Photograph courtesy of IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

FIGURE 2. In the 1950's this Flanner House picture imagined middle-class life as it might appear through a Flanner House Homes picture window (Photograph courtesy of IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

FIGURE 3. An unidentified Flanner House Homes resident poses in her new living room, which she had already personalized with family photographs, a painting, and bric-a-brac (Photograph courtesy of IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).