

“IT CAUGHT ON FIRE”:  
A ‘BOTTOM-UP’ HISTORY OF THE URBAN CRISIS IN GREATER ST. LOUIS

Master’s Thesis  
in North American Studies  
Leiden University

Douwe Schipper  
Student No.: 2371294

June 1, 2019

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. B. Rieger  
Second Reader: Dr. E.F. van de Bilt

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
CH. 1: RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION: THE DELMAR DIVIDE.....	16
CH. 2: PUBLIC HOUSING: PRUITT-IGOE .....	27
CH. 3: DEINDUSTRIALIZATION: EAST ST. LOUIS, IL .....	38
CONCLUSION .....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	50

## INTRODUCTION

On August 9, 2014, the white police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. This incident was followed by extensive local protests and riots, which, in turn, sparked a widespread media debate about racial inequality in the St. Louis area and nationwide. As part of that debate, the editorial board of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* remarked the following about the role of the past in the shaping of Ferguson's future:

The coming months will test this community's willingness to change for the common good. History says we can't do it, but history has brought us to an uncomfortable place. History is cause. Changing history is now the cause.<sup>1</sup>

If history is indeed the cause, then changing history requires, first, a detailed understanding of the causal dynamics that rendered Ferguson, the wider St. Louis area, and American cities more generally prone to racial unrest. Urban historians have convincingly demonstrated how these dynamics, while racial and class-based in appearance, are embedded in a deeper postwar transformation of the American city: the so-called 'urban crisis'.<sup>2</sup>

Urban crisis, which is the central theme of this thesis, refers to a number of inter-related phenomena that arose in numerous American cities during the second half of the twentieth century. These include suburbanization (often in the form of 'white flight') and corresponding depopulation and a decreasing tax base in central areas, physical blight, pollution, and increases in crime, drug addiction, poverty, unemployment related to deindustrialization, and racial inequality.<sup>3</sup> Cities affected by this crisis were often, although not exclusively, located in the North East or the Midwest, an area sometimes pejoratively referred to as the 'Rust Belt'; notable examples include Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City (especially Brownsville and the South Bronx), Philadelphia, and – the subject of this thesis – St. Louis.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Overcoming History". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 28, 2014: A10. Accessed June 14, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996/2005/2014: 271; Richard Florida. *The New Urban Crisis: Gentrification, Housing Bubbles, Growing Inequality, and What We Can Do About It*. London: OneWorld, 2017: 171-172.

<sup>3</sup> This description of the urban crisis is based on John F. McDonald. *Urban America: Growth, Crisis and Rebirth*. London: M.E. Sharpe, 2008: Xv.

<sup>4</sup> Tracy Neumann. *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transition of North America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016: 5.

In the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, St. Louis, which is strategically situated just south of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, evolved into one of the Midwest's most important commercial and industrial centers and one of America's major inland ports. However, in the postwar period, the city began to grapple with typical characteristics of urban decline: rapid industrialization, depopulation, physical decay, suburbanization, and increasing racial inequality. Its population decreased from 856,96 in 1950 to 453,805 in 1980 (and further down to 319,294 in 2010).<sup>5</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, St. Louis became one of America's most racially segregated cities. Colin Gordon, who is perhaps the most notable historian on the decline of St. Louis, argues that the city is "a telling (and understudied) setting for understanding the broader patterns of modern urban history" and that it "is part of the modern urban crisis and, like a single cancerous cell, bears all the genetic markers of the larger disease".<sup>6</sup> Not only does St. Louis constitute a typical case, it is also interesting because of its place in historiography; while it is not 'over-researched' like, for instance, Detroit, there is at least some secondary literature to engage with.

As I will illustrate more elaborately below, much of the historiography that tries to explain the urban crisis, including Gordon's book on the decline of St. Louis, *Mapping Decline*, approaches urban decline from an economic and statistical perspective, and focusses on long-term, large-scale (i.e., structural) developments.<sup>7</sup> This approach is achieved using particular types of primary sources, most notably demographic statistics and political records. In short, the emphasis lies on the structural factors that *constrain* human agency and *produce* daily life; these are explored through the specific set of primary sources that make this top-down construction most visible. While this approach has certainly been fruitful, it also creates a gap; it reveals little about cultural context and pays little attention to the agency and experience of ordinary individuals who experienced the urban crisis. In order to help fill this gap, this thesis refers to a different set of primary sources: documents that reflect personal experience or opinions, such as diaries, memoirs, interviews, and opinionated newspaper articles. My central question, then, is the following: does the integration of such documents into the pre-existing historiography lead to a different image of the St. Louis urban crisis?

The term 'urban crisis' was popularized by Thomas Sugrue, who postulated it as the central notion of his 1996 classic about the decline of Detroit, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

---

<sup>5</sup> United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census". Accessed November 18, 2014 at <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Gordon. *Mapping Decline. St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008: 8.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*.

Sugrue was the first historian to integrate racial variables with structural developments; he explains the transformation of Detroit as the result of three simultaneously occurring factors: the flight of industrial jobs, the persistence of workplace discrimination, and racial segregation policies in housing.<sup>8</sup> As such, he concludes that the crisis can only be confronted if the complex and entangled histories of these factors are well understood. Much of the subsequent historiography on the urban crisis has adopted a similar focus on the interplay between race, politics, and economy.<sup>9</sup> Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* (1998), for instance, connects the political engineering of segregation in Chicago's public housing sector to an emergent 'pan-white' identity.<sup>10</sup> David Schuyler's *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster* (2002) embeds the failure of urban renewal programs in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the city's struggle with its legacy of racial inequality and segregation.<sup>11</sup> Robert O. Self's *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (2003) links civil rights struggles for economic rights with the urban and suburban history of California.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to its focus on race, recent historiography on the urban crisis is characterized by an emphasis on historical structures and a general disregard for personal agency. Sugrue, for instance, focusses in particular on long-term, large-scale economic and spatial developments. He does not principally oppose subject-centered or 'bottom-up' explanations, and he does not deny the possibility and significance of human agency and individual motivations and behavior. Moreover, Sugrue occasionally engages in social and cultural historical research by focusing on the lived experience of the urban crisis. He does so most prevalently in his examination of the motives behind white flight, in which he analyzes the discourse of several white individuals who felt threatened by the economic implications of black migration into their Detroit neighborhoods. In this section, he even uses memoirs as a primary source.<sup>13</sup> Overall, however, *Origins* overwhelmingly emphasizes structural developments: gradual shifts in the political landscape, abstract economic developments, and structural and institutionalized racism. Sugrue focusses on such structures not because he prefers the impersonal over the personal, but because

---

<sup>8</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, xxxvi-xxxviii.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998; Robert O. Self. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005; David Schuyler. *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, 1940-1980*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*.

<sup>11</sup> Schuyler, *A City Transformed*.

<sup>12</sup> Self, *American Babylon*.

<sup>13</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 215.

of the particular nature of the urban crisis phenomenon, which is structural in the sense that it has manifested itself in a very similar fashion in many U.S. cities:

The emphasis in this book on economic and spatial structures is not meant as an alternative to [subject-centered] approaches, but instead as a context in which they can be best understood. Economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices. They set the limits of human agency. Within the bounds of the possible, individuals and families resist, adapt, or succumb.<sup>14</sup>

In his book on the decline of St. Louis, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (2008), Gordon adopts a similar preference for structural developments, or – as he characterizes it – ‘tracing patterns’, but he diverges from Sugrue’s philosophy of history in two main ways.<sup>15</sup> First, his structuralism is less holistic; he has a rather narrow interest, namely in how developments in the political realm yield structural demographic trends. Second, as its title suggests, Gordon’s *Mapping Decline* revolves around maps, i.e., visual representations of data. Much of that data is numerical. Thus, whereas Sugrue underscores his arguments with a balanced combination of qualitative and quantitative examples, Gordon prefers to draw primarily on statistical evidence.

Notwithstanding these differences, it is clear that Gordon and Sugrue both operate within a wider historiographical tradition that prefers to consider urban history from the viewpoint of social structures rather than from the perspective of individual agents. Historian Peter Burke characterizes this philosophy as ‘holist’, and contrasts it with ‘methodological individualism’, which asserts that the social is reducible to individual actions.<sup>16</sup> Holists are sometimes accused of misrepresenting the exercise of power as a unilateral, top-down process; creating a false dichotomy between perpetrators and victims; and having a general disregard for instances of human beings making their own history.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, *Origins* and *Mapping Decline* neither interrogate historical developments from multiple perspectives nor acknowledge a plurality of identities in the shaping of urban reality. Rather, they focus predominantly on the individuals and institutions that they perceive to be in control of structural urban dynamics,

---

<sup>14</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the debate between methodological individualists and holists, see Peter Burke. *History and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005: 127.

<sup>17</sup> Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 127; Alex Callinicos. *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014: 46-55.

which, in practice, are all white and usually affluent and male. Gordon does so most explicitly; with his focus on public and private policymaking, he attributes agency only to those who were formally in (governmental or corporate) power. Sugrue cites several groups that determined the course of Detroit, “corporate executives and managers, labor unions and their rank-and-file members, federal, state and local governments, individual white Detroiters, and black Detroiters”, but he asserts that the latter were “far less powerful than employers, white workers and homeowners”.<sup>18</sup> As far as Sugrue does analyze identity, he seems interested only in the cultural construction of whiteness.<sup>19</sup> Black identity is implied to be less interesting because black people, as victims of circumstance, were too constrained to use their identity and exercise agency.

Sugrue’s allusion to a lack of black power is indicative of a second problematic aspect, present in both *Origins* and *Mapping Decline*: the failure to incorporate cultural context. Cultural expression constituted an important means through which black people – often deprived of economic and political power – reacted to their marginalization and obtained (imaginary, mystical, spiritual, political or even, in the case of, for instance, successful jazz musicians or street artists, economic) power.<sup>20</sup> In other words, black people used culture to exercise their agency, and therefore, cultural analysis is necessary to adequately address black agency. Importantly, analysis of black culture does not equal cultural explanations of poverty (discussed more elaborately below), which assert that a tendency toward poverty is somehow inherent to black culture.<sup>21</sup> As both Sugrue and Gordon rightfully indicate, black poverty is a much more complicated phenomenon, with its primary roots in structural marginalization and oppression.<sup>22</sup>

The important point is that these structural developments emerge in equally complex cultural contexts, and generate an array of multifaceted cultural responses grounded in the agency of individuals experiencing poverty. Some recent work in urban history has attempted to approximate such responses. For instance, in his attempt to explain the historical foundation of the Ferguson riots, Richard Rothstein cites the story of a black man, Larman Williams, in

---

<sup>18</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> See especially chapter 8, “‘Homeowners’ Rights’: White Resistance and the Rise of Antiliberalism”, in Sugrue, *Origins*, 209-230.

<sup>20</sup> Saadi A. Simawe. “Introduction: the Agency of Sound in African American Fiction”. In Saadi A. Simawe (ed.). *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000: xxiii.

<sup>21</sup> This kind of explanation is put forward in, for instance, Edward C. Banfield. *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*. Boston: Little Brown, 1968; Franklin E. Frazier. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1939.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 9; Sugrue, *Origins*, 4.

order to illuminate how racial policymaking was undertaken and responded to.<sup>23</sup> This thesis will further investigate the potential of illustrating such abstract developments with concrete examples of individual agency, experience, and cultural expression. I will do so through the prism of the postwar history of St. Louis, Missouri.

In *Mapping Decline*, Gordon describes how St. Louis became an independent city with fixed boundaries in 1876. Therefore, when the urban area began to expand in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, new streetcar suburbs such as Richmond Heights and University City became independent municipalities within the separate St. Louis County. This resulted in the creation of a politically fragmented Greater St. Louis area. The processes of suburbanization and political fragmentation continued throughout the twentieth century. Gordon argues that the concentration of separate political bodies in one metropolitan area resulted in a constant dynamic of competing urban agendas and policies, which, in turn, framed the course of urban development. In a politically fragmented urban area, the cross-municipal movement of people, along with their income and capital, results in shifts in municipal tax bases. This makes municipalities in which capital is concentrated increasingly powerful and desirable and simultaneously reinforces the decline of economically stagnating municipalities. In St. Louis, as in many other American cities, that self-reinforcing mechanism materialized in the form of white flight, first to the inner-ring streetcar suburbs and later even further into the county.

Because political fragmentation made regional urban planning impossible, the fate of twentieth-century St. Louis depended on intra-municipal policies, which, in practice, prioritized the interests of its private property-owning inhabitants over the common, cross-municipal interest of economic and racial equity.<sup>24</sup> In practice, the intent and effect of these policies were highly racialized: “what these policies shared – across the metropolitan area and across the full sweep of the twentieth century – was the conviction that African American occupancy was a blight to be contained, controlled, or eradicated”, argues Gordon.<sup>25</sup> Such policies (which are discussed in more detail in chapter 1) were sometimes public (e.g., zoning ordinances) and sometimes private (e.g., blockbusting, redlining). Combined with other circumstantial variables, such as deindustrialization and the absence of a geographical boundary to sprawl (e.g., an ocean or a mountain range), racialized policymaking turned St. Louis into one of the most graphic and sustained versions of the urban crisis.<sup>26</sup> It is now one of the nation’s most

---

<sup>23</sup> Richard Rothstein. “The Making of Ferguson”. *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Developmental Law*. 24.2 (2015): 165-204.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 11.



segregated metropolitan areas, with Delmar Boulevard functioning as an invisible economic and racial barrier between predominantly white and relatively affluent St. Louis to its south, and predominantly black and relatively poor St. Louis to its north. The impact of this ‘Delmar Divide’ on local residents constitutes the central theme of chapter 1 of this thesis.

Racial segregation is not the only challenge that postwar St. Louis has faced. The city’s central area and its inner ring suburbs have long been visibly blighted and partially abandoned. Its municipal population has been decreasing dramatically for decades, while the population of the overall urban area, which includes the city’s politically autonomous suburbs, increased in the period between 1940 and 2000.<sup>27</sup> Urban renewal efforts, such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex, invariably yielded the adverse effect of more decay, sprawl, and racial inequality. I examine the history and ultimate decline of Pruitt-Igoe in detail in chapter 2. The conditions inside this project, which was opened in the early 1950s in order to provide adequate housing to former inhabitants of inner-city slums, began to deteriorate by 1958. The buildings were ultimately demolished between 1972 and 1976. This fate subsequently became viewed as a profoundly significant historical event, a critical juncture that marked the transition from the optimism of high modernism to the anarchy of postmodernism. For instance, in 1977, cultural theorist Charles Jencks famously proclaimed that the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe signaled the death of modern architecture.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in 1982, footage of Pruitt-Igoe was featured in Godfrey Reggio’s cult film *Koyaanisqatsi*. The film examines the interplay between human technology and nature through juxtapositions of slow-motion images with music composed by Philip Glass. It dramatically shows some of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings were demolished using explosives as Glass’s composition reaches a climax, thereby underscoring the cultural importance of the event.<sup>29</sup>

The weight of such publicity attached to Pruitt-Igoe encouraged a widespread debate, among scholars and journalists alike, about the cause of its failure. Early commentators followed Jencks in blaming the failure of Pruitt-Igoe on architectural negligence. Oscar Newman, for instance, argued that there existed a relationship between environment and behavior, and that the crime that occurred on the Pruitt-Igoe premises was directly caused by its public space being ‘indefensible’ and too massive and chaotic to encourage residents to

---

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Jencks. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1977: 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> *Koyaanisqatsi*. Directed by Godfrey Reggio. 1983.

maintain it or safeguard it from vandalism and violence.<sup>30</sup> Katharine G. Bristol's seminal paper "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" (1991) firmly rejects the architectural explanation, and points instead to contingent, economic and institutional as well as racial causes, such as poor and racist policymaking and a decreasing tax base due to depopulation in St. Louis.<sup>31</sup> Bristol argues that "by placing the responsibility for the failure of public housing on designers, the myth [of architectural failure] shifts attention from the institutional or structural sources of public housing problems".<sup>32</sup> After Bristol's paper was published, architectural explanations fell out of fashion. Elizabeth Birmingham, for example, contends that architectural explanations like Jencks's completely ignore the profoundly important issues of race and poverty.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the prominent 2011 documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* argues that the decline of Pruitt-Igoe is best understood in a changing urban-economic, not architectural, context. Specifically, the enormous housing deficit that a flourishing St. Louis faced in the late 1940s had turned into a housing surplus in the impoverished and depopulated St. Louis of the 1960s. This eliminated the middle-class need for public housing, leaving projects like Pruitt-Igoe partially abandoned and occupied by only the poorest segment of the population.<sup>34</sup>

Other early commentators, both in the popular press and in scholarly discourse, explained the failure of Pruitt-Igoe as the result of the behavior of its black inhabitants.<sup>35</sup> The most prolific scholar adhering to this model was perhaps Lee Rainwater, who summarized the implicit paradigm behind his 1970 book *Behind Ghetto Walls* as follows:

White cupidity creates structural conditions highly inimical to basic social adaptation (low income availability, poor education, poor services, stigmatization), to which Negroes adapt by social and personal responses which serve to sustain the individual in

---

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Bristol. "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth". *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44.3 (1991): 167; Oscar Newman. *Defensible Space*. New York: MacMillan, 1972: 56, 58, 66, 77, 83, 99, 101-108, 188, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", 163-171.

<sup>32</sup> Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", 163.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Birmingham. "Reframing the Ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, Structural Racism, and African American Rhetoric as a Space for Cultural Critique". *Western Journal of Communication*, 63.3 (1999): 291.

<sup>34</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History*. Directed by Chad Freidrichs. 2011.

<sup>35</sup> A. Scott Henderson. "'Tarr'd with the Exceptional Image': Public Housing and Popular Discourse, 1950-1990". *American Studies*, 36.1 (1995): 31-52.

his punishing world but also generate aggressiveness towards the self and others, which results in suffering directly inflicted by Negroes on themselves and on others.<sup>36</sup>

This model draws on Oscar Lewis's concept of a 'culture of poverty', which posits that poverty is sustained in certain groups across generations because the cultural values of people experiencing poverty perpetuates their condition.<sup>37</sup> In the late 1970s, William Julius Wilson famously reformulated Lewis's culture of poverty concept with the notion of a black 'underclass'. According to Wilson, patterns of behavior (joblessness, crime, welfare dependency, single-parent homes, etc.), common among poor black people, reinforce their marginal position.<sup>38</sup> Most of the recent urban historiography – both on public housing and on the urban crisis more generally – rejects the culture of poverty thesis and the underclass category. These scholars implicitly adopt Herbert J. Gans's argument that the derogatory and moralistic undertone of such notions obscures the structural source of urban problems.<sup>39</sup> Instead, as already noted above, scholars like Sugrue and Gordon redirect their attention to larger economic and political structures.<sup>40</sup>

Within that prevailing structuralist paradigm, a notable recent phenomenon is the emergence of suburban history as a distinct subfield. Historians of suburbia, such as Robert E. Bruegmann and Thomas J. Vicino, challenge the overly simplistic dualism of the notion of the suburb as a white and affluent counterpart of declining inner cities.<sup>41</sup> Thereby, they reveal the essentializing qualities of the traditional paradigm of urban history, which divides socio-geographical space into cities, suburbs, and rural areas.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as I will illustrate in chapter 3, which describes the urban crisis in St. Louis's industrial suburb of East St. Louis, Illinois, St. Louis's urban crisis did not simply spread from the center, only to affect inner-ring suburbs over time as well. Instead, the crisis formed and spread according to contingent geospatial

---

<sup>36</sup> Lee Rainwater. *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (e-book edition). New York: Routledge, 1970: 181. N.B.: page numbers in the references to this book reflect the e-book edition.

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Lewis. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, 1959.

<sup>38</sup> William Julius Wilson. "The Black Underclass". *The Wilson Quarterly*, 8.2 (1984): 88-99.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert J. Gans. "From 'Underclass' to 'Undercaste': Some Observations About the Future of the Post-Industrial Economy and its Major Victims". In Enzo Mingione (ed.). *Urban Poverty and the Underclass*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996: 141-152.

<sup>40</sup> Examples include Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Bradford D Hunt. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009; Sugrue, *Origins*.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Bruegmann. *Sprawl: A Compact History* (paperback edition). Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2005/2006.; Thomas J. Vicino. *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Bruegmann, *Sprawl*, 10.

patterns, without regard for the different categories that humans construct to subdivide their habitat. The twentieth-century history of East St. Louis (similar to, for instance, Philadelphia's industrial suburb of Camden, New Jersey, or Detroit's satellite city Flint, Michigan) embodies this decentralized nature of the urban crisis phenomenon.

The suburban history of the urban crisis as well as the other arguments and narratives outlined above are part of a wider historiographical *discours(e)* on the urban crisis, a semiotic and cultural system or conversation in which several texts about the urban crisis are produced and negotiated. Combined, the specific texts that this discursive system incorporates produce a prevailing view, a 'big picture', about the decline of American cities. As I have indicated above, this prevailing view usually explains the urban crisis as the result of macroeconomic forces, poor policy choices, and structural, institutionalized racism. This structuralist explanation has become highly authoritative, permeating and dominating not only scholarly debates but also mainstream media accounts and other types of popular discourse.<sup>43</sup>

As with any other discourse, this historiography of the urban crisis is one of 'power-knowledge' relations: power makes use of knowledge in order to legitimize itself, but it also produces that very knowledge in accordance with its own ideology. For instance, historians of the urban crisis mobilize their power in order to establish that economic and statistical primary sources and structural analysis become the main methodological tools within the discursive system. At the same time, these historians also utilize this methodology in order to persuade others of the truth of their inferences, and thereby to establish their epistemic authority. Power-knowledge dynamics determine which texts the wider discourse will incorporate and which texts it will ignore. The attribution of power to specific individuals or institutions is not always intrinsically motivated, but instead often based on arbitrary variables, including the epistemic authority of the knower – which, again, is reproduced in the process of knowing.<sup>44</sup> The contingent lines along which power operates, in short, informs the course in which the field of knowledge develops.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> A prominent example of a popular-scholarly book that examines the interplay between racism, policy and economy is, for example, Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York City: The New Press, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> The function of the reputation of the knower in the making, maintenance, transmission, and authority of knowledge is further explored in Steven Shapin. *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010: 4.

<sup>45</sup> This conception of discourse is based on Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*. (transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith) New York: Vintage Books, 2012; Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Vol 1: An Introduction*. New York: Random House, 1990.

Surely, the structural approach that urban historians employ has been fruitful and important, for instance, by revealing the irrationality of blaming poverty on the poor. Nonetheless, the pre-eminence of this methodology is ultimately contingent on an arbitrary power-knowledge interplay. A different, not necessarily inferior or superior, type of methodology may yield markedly different insights. In this thesis, I focus on the potential of documents that reflect personal experiences or opinions as a different category of primary source. More specifically, I will use testimonies that appear in diaries, memoirs, interviews, and opinionated newspaper articles. This choice of primary source is partly motivated by the fact that I am unable to access American archives because I am writing this thesis while being physically located in the Netherlands. Diaries, interviews, and newspaper articles are not commonly used by urban historians, yet easily accessible at a distance; they are often digitized or appear in books or documentary films that are available in libraries worldwide.

Many of these testimonies appear in *egodocuments*, items that primarily convey autobiographical memories, which can be defined as personal recollections of *episodic* events (e.g., the decline of one's neighborhood) and *nonepisodic* facts (e.g., one's childhood address).<sup>46</sup> Importantly, such memories are not necessarily accurate. Instead, memories are incomplete and, more often than not, partially fictional. In addition to the original event or fact, they reflect contextual variables such as the culture in which they were produced and the recollecting subject's position in his or her life cycle.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, because memories are *narrations* of past events, they add a literary element to the events.<sup>48</sup> Thus, autobiographical memories are not objective representations of the past – and historians should not treat them as such.

In addition to ego-documents (which convey memories), I will use testimonies that convey a personal perspective or opinion. These should be treated with similar caution. Opinions, much like memories, are narrated interpretations of cultural, economic, political, and social realities and provide no segue into historical reality per se.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, both memories and opinions constitute a particular type of text that, much like any other type of source, *aims*

---

<sup>46</sup> Daniel L. Greenberg, Lauren L. Deasy, and Amelia L. Zasadski. "Autobiographical Memory". In: James D. Wright (ed.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Volume 2. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015: 282-288.

<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt. *History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007: 76.

<sup>48</sup> Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker, and Michael Mascuch (eds.). *Memory, Family, and Self: Tuscan Family Books and Other European Egodocuments (14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century)*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014: 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> A useful example of the biases and discursive strategies that underpin an opinionated editorial is given in Terry Locke. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London/New York: Continuum, 2004: 54-73.

*to* represent the past objectively and impersonally. Moreover, the mediums in which they appear constitute a type of text that urban historians usually ignore. Thus, within the larger aim of this thesis – which is to nuance the discourse on the urban crisis by adding a previously neglected type of text or representation to it – memories and opinions are legitimate objects of inquiry.

The question is, then, whether and how the history of St. Louis’s urban crisis derived primarily from analysis of memories and opinions differs from the traditional, structuralist historiography. To be sure, it is impossible to provide a completely new ‘big picture’ within the bounds of a single thesis. Therefore, within the wider focus on St. Louis, I will conduct three smaller case studies into specific aspects of St. Louis’s urban crisis, namely residential segregation, public housing, and suburban deindustrialization. I decided to specifically investigate these three aspects after a preliminary glance at the available primary source material; each aspect surfaced repeatedly throughout the various diaries, memoirs, interviews, and newspaper articles I found.

The thesis is structured as follows: each aspect is considered in a separate chapter. Thus, chapter 1 examines the effect of the urban crisis at the level of the residential neighborhood. Specifically, it considers the emergence of the Delmar Divide. It also looks in detail at the impact of this divide on the residents of North City. Chapter 2 explores St. Louis public housing and considers specifically the failure of Pruitt-Igoe. Finally, Chapter 3 investigates the cultural impact of suburban deindustrialization by examining the situation in East St. Louis, Illinois. In each of these chapters, I contrast the view that emerges from the testimonies I use with pre-existing historiography. In this way, I reveal several factors that shaped the life and experience of St. Louisians, and yet remain underexposed or are misrepresented in historical accounts. Thereby, instead of providing a new metanarrative, I simply give examples of new insights that emerge from or are suggested by my research. In doing so, I hope to start a conversation about how urban historians’ choice of source material shapes the narratives they produce about the urban crisis.

A final word about the chronology and time frame is in order. Contemporary historiography tends to have a revisionist view of the chronology of the urban crisis. Both Sugrue and Gordon argue that the process of urban decline started much earlier than usually assumed. Scholars have traditionally situated the beginning of the urban crisis in the 1960s (most accounts do not speak of an ending, implying that the crisis continues into the present). Sugrue, however, argues that the period between the 1940s and the 1960s “set the stage for the

fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America today”.<sup>50</sup> Gordon locates the roots of the crisis even earlier, arguing that demographers have failed to recognize the economic and demographic boom that hit St. Louis in the years surrounding World War II as a temporary distraction from a downward spiral that had its roots already in the 1920s.<sup>51</sup> In any case, it is clear that the urban crisis is a long-term phenomenon. Because of this protracted nature and because documents that are accessible at a distance are relatively scarce, I have decided not to confine my inquiry to a short and limited period, and instead aim to explore primary sources from all of the postwar decades. This, I hope, will help illuminate a degree of continuity between current urban events, such as the Ferguson riots, and the history that served as the cause.

---

<sup>50</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 4-5.

<sup>51</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 22.

## CH. 1: RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION: THE DELMAR DIVIDE

J. Rosie Tighe and Joanna P. Ganning characterize the St. Louis of today as a ‘dual city’, because it features spatial segregation according to race and income between its northern half (‘North City’) and its southern half (‘South City’). North City is currently 97% black, while South City is 62% white.<sup>52</sup> This racial divide corresponds to a significant difference in income and capital, reported by Tighe and Ganning as follows:

	Median Annual Income	Median Home Value
‘North City’ (97% black)	\$21614	\$44922
‘South City’ (62% white)	\$30725	\$75556

*Income and home value statistics for the northern and southern sides of St. Louis City, with Delmar Boulevard as the dividing line.*<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, a 2018 report issued by Washington University in St. Louis found an 18-year gap in life expectancy at birth between the 63105 ZIP code in the Clayton area in the southern part of St. Louis County and the 63106 ZIP code in North City – areas that are less than 10 miles away from each other.<sup>54</sup>

Delmar Boulevard is commonly identified as the dividing line between these two parts of the city (hence the name ‘Delmar Divide’).<sup>55</sup> As such, the street is considered a ‘key marker’ of the racial and economic disparities in the St. Louis region.<sup>56</sup> In this chapter, I examine two elements of the Delmar Divide. First, I explore the historical practices – redlining, zoning, and blockbusting – that helped solidify and sustain the divide. Second, I investigate the impact of the emerging divide on residents of rapidly transforming neighborhoods. In both instances, I use different types of testimonies (memoirs, interviews, and op-eds in newspapers) in order to introduce new, bottom-up perspectives into the existing historiography.

In St. Louis, rigid patterns of racial segregation in residential neighborhoods first emerged during the First Great Migration (1916-1940).<sup>57</sup> In this climate of demographic

---

<sup>52</sup> Tighe, J. Rosie, and Joanna P. Ganning. “The Divergent City: Unequal and Uneven Development in St. Louis”. *Urban Geography*, 36.5 (2015): 657.

<sup>53</sup> Tighe and Ganning, “The Divergent City”, 658.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy Cambria e.a.. *Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide*. St Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis, 2018: 5.

<sup>55</sup> Tighe and Ganning, “The Divergent City”, 658; Ian Trivers and Joanna Rosenthal. “A Picture is Worth 930 Words: The Delmar Divide”. *Focus on Geography*, winter issue (2015): 199-200.

<sup>56</sup> Trivers and Rosenthal, “A Picture”, 199.

<sup>57</sup> Cambria, *Segregation in St. Louis*, 16.



change, several intentional strategies to promote such segregation took hold. Local municipal governments as well as private individuals and enterprises employed such strategies.<sup>58</sup> The most notable of these practices were redlining, zoning, and blockbusting.<sup>59</sup> During the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), these practices continued. Coupled with the rise of fragmented and competing suburbs from the late 1940s onward, the practices helped solidify the Delmar Divide as it exists today.<sup>60</sup>

Historians sometimes suggest that redlining, zoning, and blockbusting occurred under the radar, remaining largely invisible to the public eye. According to this narrative, the invisibility of these practices was due to the fact that they were devised in distant political and entrepreneurial spheres rather than the public sphere. For instance, Gordon argues that “discrimination [...] was often hard to disentangle from other elements of a loan or an insurance application [...] and the costs of doing business in long-neglected central cities”.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the testimonies I consider below suggest that there was a great deal of knowledge about discriminatory practices available to the public, as well as a great deal of resistance against them. In other words, through public discourse about discriminatory practices residents of affected neighborhoods enacted a certain degree of political participation. This is a significant insight because it shows how the urban history of economic and racial inequality is not just one of affluent and white rule, but also one of poor and black resistance. In what follows, I will treat redlining, zoning, and blockbusting separately and give examples of resident awareness and resilience for each of them.

Redlining is an example of a private policy – employed by banks and realtors – that creates and sustains spatial segregation between different demographic groups. It refers to class-based and racialized patterns in banks’ investment decisions. Usually, banks exercise redlining by investing in certain neighborhoods while refusing to invest in others and by providing certain demographic groups with loans and mortgages while refusing these services to others. Importantly, these investment patterns are not based on evidence-based risk assessment, but rather on subjective demographic prejudices. Redlining then creates a self-fulfilling prophecy in which redlined neighborhoods enter a vicious cycle of economic decline because of a lack of investments.<sup>62</sup> In St. Louis, redlining was a common practice throughout much of the twentieth century. A 1934 redline map (Fig. 1) shows that realtors already engaged in the

---

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*.

<sup>59</sup> See chapter 2 and 3 in Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 69-111, 112-153.

<sup>60</sup> Cambria, *Segregation in St. Louis*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Dreier. “How Banks Color Community Development”. *Challenge*, 34.6 (1991): 16.

practice in the 1930s. The map outlines the city's 'Negro Districts', presumably in order to mark where it was appropriate to provide services to black people and where it was not. The map also shows the different districts of St. Louis city, each along with three statistics: the total number of black people, the percentage of black population in the district, and the percentage of total city black population represented by that district.

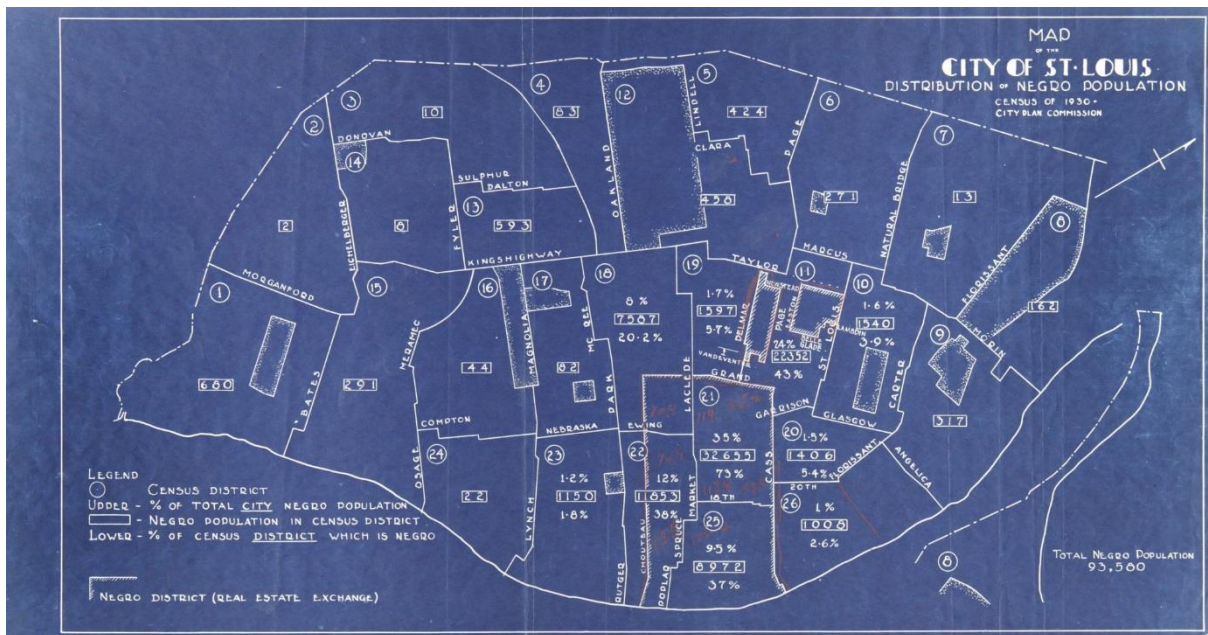


Fig 1: A 1934 redline map.<sup>63</sup>

By the 1970s, the existence of redlining had become a topic of debate in local academic and political discourse. This is illustrated by the angry reactions to a 1979 study about redlining that was funded by the Missouri Savings and Loan League and carried out by researchers from St. Louis University. The study had denied the existence of redlining in St. Louis and had thereby exonerated lending institutions of the charge, as issued by St. Louis community groups, that they consciously withheld loans and mortgages to certain demographic groups. In response, Missouri State Senator J.B. Banks argued that “the persons who made the statement that there isn’t any red-lining just must be insane”, adding that “I guess it’s understandable that if you go out and commission a study, you get what you’re looking for”.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> “Map of the City of St. Louis: Distribution of Negro Population, Census of 1930. (Realtors’ Red Line Map).” *Missouri Historical Society*, mohistory.org, 1934. Accessed March 21, 2019 at <https://mohistory.org/collections/item/resource:221591>.

<sup>64</sup> James E. Ellis. “Anger Meets Study Denying Redlining Here. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 8, 1979: 11C. Accessed March 30, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

An article that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* from 1977, entitled “High Risk Area Complaints on Insurance Rates”, highlights the experience of Mr. and Mrs. Berman, whose racial and economic background are left unmentioned. Mrs. Berman describes the difficulty that she and her husband faced while searching for a company willing to provide insurance for their house in the redlined Lafayette Square neighborhood:

[...] The agent told us that we might have trouble renewing the policy next year. And then we’ll have to start our shopping all over again. Before we found [our current insurance company] Prudential, insurance agents were telling us that either they wouldn’t insure us, because we were in a high risk area, or else their rates were just too high. When we first moved into the house, we just carried over the policy we had in Baldwin for \$101 a year. But when that expired we had to start shopping around. Our second year, we paid about \$260 a year for just liability and fire insurance. That didn’t include theft. When we went to renew it, the rate had gone up to \$400. It’s like we’re being penalized for living in the city. And we can’t afford that.<sup>65</sup>

Viewed together, the reactions to the redlining study and the experience of the Bermans illustrate that both residents and politicians were well aware of the existence of redlining in St. Louis. However, in the political arena, enterprises that engaged in redlining successfully lobbied to keep the discussion about the existence of redlining alive in order to prevent concrete political action against it. As historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway have demonstrated, this is a commonly applied lobbying strategy, also employed in the controversies about global warming and the health impacts of tobacco smoking.<sup>66</sup>

The second policy that promoted racial segregation in St. Louis was zoning. Unlike redlining, which is carried out by private enterprises, zoning is an example of a *public* policy that can establish spatial segregation between different demographic groups. Tax income and the obligation to provide social security services gives municipalities much incentive to exclude the poor and attract the rich. In the middle years of the twentieth century, suburban municipalities across the United States began employing exclusionary zoning regulations (i.e., land use laws) for the realization of this objective. Measures such as reserving most or all of

---

<sup>65</sup> Charlene Prost. “High-Risk Area Complaints on Insurance Rates”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 10, 1977: 8C. Accessed June 2, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>66</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

their land for low-density, single-family settlements; setting minimums for lot and building size; or prohibiting manufactured housing were mobilized to prevent the poor (which, in practice, were often black people or the elderly) from moving into suburbia. Instead, the poor were forced to live in older and higher density housing in central city areas that remained unprotected by zoning.

In many American cities, including St. Louis, zoning was an important cause for middle-class suburbanization, sprawling, and class-based and racial segregation.<sup>67</sup> In St. Louis, the role of zoning in the management of blight was already a topic of public debate in the 1940s. This is illustrated in an opinionated letter to the editor that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1946, in which an anonymous author protests against a measure that would authorize inner-city neighborhoods with multiple residence blocks between Kingshighway, Union, Lindell, and Delmar Boulevard. He or she argues that “the authorization of multiple-residence blocks in good single-residence areas has been the curse of St. Louis; it has driven tax values down and speeded the exodus of thousands of families into the county”.<sup>68</sup> What the author leaves unmentioned is the entanglement of race with anxieties about property values and tax base; black people were more likely to be poor and therefore live in multiple residence blocks. The presence of black people also drove down property values; therefore, exclusionary zoning was one way to keep them out.<sup>69</sup>

Similar anxieties rooted in the intersection of race and capital continued to fuel the debate about zoning up until the 1970s. This is exemplified in a dispute between a resident group called Citizens Against Rezoning and two private enterprises that wanted to build a discount store called *Venture* in the area between Interstate 270 and Olive Boulevard in West St. Louis County in 1977. In order to do so, the enterprises had persuaded the St. Louis County City Council to rezone the area for commercial development. An article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, which appeared in the same year, highlights the experience of two residents of the area and members of the Citizens Against Rezoning group: Mr. and Mrs. Edward M. Peterson. Mr. Peterson expresses his concerns as follows:

You buy a home and stick your hard-earned money into it. You try to keep it up, and then somebody comes in next door and can do what they damn well please. It's not how

---

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 112-113.

<sup>68</sup> “To Halt Blight”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 14, 1946: 4A. Accessed March 30, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>69</sup> See also Rolf Pendall. “Local Land Use Regulation and the Chain of Exclusion”. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66.2 (2000): 125-142.

you expect good neighbors to act. These discount stores – they sell a lower quality merchandise at a lower price. Well, I'll just come out and say it. They drag in a lower class of people.<sup>70</sup>

Again, race is left unmentioned. It is, however, hard not to equate Peterson's formulation of a "lower class of people" with black people, if we view his reluctantly-made comment in the context of the white flight phenomenon (discussed below) that was affecting large parts of St. Louis and St. Louis County at the time. The important point is that the social location of black and white people alike was not only organized along a racial axis, but also inextricably intertwined with socioeconomic elements. This point should be of interest to cultural and social historians, because it facilitates understandings of distinctive group histories and experiences at the intersection of various systems of oppression and power (race and class, but also gender and nationality).<sup>71</sup>

The third and final policy that promoted racial segregation in St. Louis was blockbusting. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, many residential districts in American cities underwent a rapid racial change, with inhabitant populations transitioning from being almost exclusively white to being predominantly black. This phenomenon was invariably the result of a massive exodus of whites to newly built suburbs (the so-called 'white flight'). White flight heavily affected St. Louis. This is reflected in the overall census data of St. Louis City between 1950 and 1980, which shows a steady percentage-wise decline in white population, as well as (up until 1970) a steady percentage-wise increase in black population:

---

<sup>70</sup> Jeff Gelles. "How 'Mini-West Port' Became Discount Store". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 21, 1977: 1, 4. Accessed June 1, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>71</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. "Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Nation; Some Implications for Black Family Studies". *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29.1 (1998): 27.

Year	Total Population	White (% of total)	Black (% of total)
1950	856796	702384 (82)	153766 (17.9)
1960	750026	543004 (71.2)	214377 (28.6)
1970	622236	364992 (58.7)	254191 (40.9)
1980	453085	242576 (53.5)	206386 (45.6)

*Population census data for city of St. Louis. Source: US Census Bureau*<sup>72</sup>

Within the city, moreover, the white flight pattern materialized much more strongly north of Delmar Boulevard than south of it.<sup>73</sup>

Real estate agents (so-called ‘blockbusters’) sometimes actively stimulated white flight through the practice of ‘blockbusting’. By promoting a fear of black people moving into a neighborhood and driving down property values, they convinced white homeowners to sell their property at low cost. If one homeowner sold their property, the value of other properties on the block would decrease, which then created a vicious cycle of neighboring homeowners selling at low costs in fear of further devaluation, until the whole block was ‘busted’. Blockbusters then sold the houses on the block at much higher prices to black people who wanted to desperately move out of slums and public housing projects.<sup>74</sup>

It is well established that residents of cities in which blockbusting occurred had a degree of awareness of the practice.<sup>75</sup> While blockbusting created new housing opportunities for black people, the perception of blockbusting among blacks and whites alike is usually portrayed as altogether negative. For example, historian W. Edward Orser writes on blockbusting in Baltimore that “interpretations [of blockbusting] differed, particularly for those on the two sides of the racially dividing experience, as did assignments of responsibility and blame[,] but common to all was a sense of social dynamics that seemed beyond individual control and a sense of disjunction”.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, historian Kevin Fox Gotham writes that “blockbusting represented an insidious practice that was turning back the clock in the progress on race

<sup>72</sup> Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung. “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States”. *US Census Bureau*, Census.gov, 2005. Accessed March 21, 2019, at: <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.html>

<sup>73</sup> See the visualizations of white flight in Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 24, 26-30. These demonstrate clearly that white flight was much more pronounced on the north side of Delmar Boulevard.

<sup>74</sup> W. Edward Orser. *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994, ix.

<sup>75</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham. *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014: 109.

<sup>76</sup> Orser, *Blockbusting in Baltimore*, x.

relations” to the readers of a local black newspaper in Kansas City.<sup>77</sup> However, a brief glance at some primary sources suggests that blockbusting received a mixed, rather than purely negative, reaction. For example, one blockbuster from Chicago, in an interview delivered to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1962, construed his enterprise as an effort to *promote* racial equality:

If you are an average white citizen, with average prejudices, you may regard all this as the ruin of metropolitan neighborhoods. I think of it merely as more business for what already is a growth industry. My attitude stems from the fact that few white neighborhoods welcome Negroes who can afford to buy there; yet the need for homes for Negroes keeps growing. I assist in the solution of this problem. My function, which might be called a service industry, is to drive the whites from a block whether they want it or not, then move the Negroes in.<sup>78</sup>

While this justification may be partly interpreted as a simple rationalization of immoral behavior, the view that blockbusting was advantageous to minorities was more common. In an analytic editorial that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on December 24, 1969, journalist John Herbers writes the following about blockbusting in St. Louis:

For expanding minority groups, blockbusting has a positive aspect. It provides housing that would not otherwise be available. [...] Some Negro real estate operators would have no business under the current market if it were not for the process of white neighborhoods turning black.<sup>79</sup>

In brief, blockbusting was a more dividing issue than it is usually portrayed to be. While it was certainly perceived as detrimental to the health of the city as a whole, the nature of its effect on minorities remained a topic of discussion.

Having discussed the constitutive practices of redlining, zoning, and blockbusting, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the impact that the Delmar Divide had on the personal lives of residents whose neighborhoods’ demographic and economic makeup shifted quickly.

---

<sup>77</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 110.

<sup>78</sup> Norris Vitcheck. “Confessions of a Block-Buster”. In Christopher W. Wells (ed.). *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018: 43 (42-48)

<sup>79</sup> John Herbers. “Housing Shortage Leads to Upturn in Blockbusting”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Dec 24, 1969: 1. Accessed March 30, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

For one thing, residents of changing neighborhoods were forced to navigate the stigma that newly accompanied their zip codes. For instance, Patrick J. Kleaver, a white resident of the Old North St. Louis neighborhood during its transformation in the 1960s and 1970s, in his memoir *Growing Up in North St. Louis* (2012), repeatedly stresses the impact of the ‘blighted district’ designation that Old North St. Louis received in 1968. He implies that this designation, which would qualify the area for federal funding for urban redevelopment, ended up working as a self-fulfilling prophecy:

The next President whose policies negatively affected Old North was Lyndon B. Johnson in the mid-1960s. [...] in 1968, the neighborhood was declared a ‘Model City’ area and we were told we now lived in the ‘Murphy Blair District’. [...] With the name we also found out we were living in a ‘slum’ all this time (although we never *felt* like we lived in one). We viewed ourselves as a middle class (albeit, maybe, with a ‘low’ middle income) neighborhood and jokingly said we lived in ‘Lower Ladue’. As a result of this designation, we began to notice that when a house became vacant, no matter *what* condition it was in, it was *immediately* torn down.<sup>80</sup>

Why would officials designate Old North St. Louis as ‘blighted’ if its residents did not experience the area as such? This is because the neighborhood was located near St. Louis’s central business district (CBD). It was of considerable interest to the private enterprises located in this CBD to clear the residential neighborhoods that surrounded their offices and to replace them for further business development, as this would create space for expansion of headquarters and make the CBD as a whole more attractive to investors. Local urban planning officials were also attracted to such plans, because they believed that more economic activity would improve the general vitality of the city. Redevelopment, they believed, needed to consist of more than merely replacing blight with subsidized housing; it needed also to attract an entrepreneurial response. As a result, areas that received the ‘blighted’ designation, which was necessary to receive federal funding for slum clearance and urban redevelopment, were not necessarily the areas declining most profoundly and observably. Instead, they were frequently areas that had *some* problems, but could still be expected to attract private investors during the redevelopment process. Officials used two strategies to justify these designations. Often, they would stretch

---

<sup>80</sup> Patrick J. Cleaver. *Growing Up in Old North St. Louis*. St. Louis: Patrick J. Cleaver, 2012/2018: 120.



the definition of blight (the federal government had delegated the defining of blight to the individual states, and, in practice, local officials had considerable freedom in determining what counted as blighted). They would also stretch the redevelopment area itself; the larger the area, the easier it was to find blighted conditions inside it.<sup>81</sup>

In reality, these officials created a stigma through which urban decline was socially constructed and reinforced.<sup>82</sup> Thus, rather than paving the way for successful redevelopment, the ‘blight’ designation created a perception of decline, which then engendered more depopulation and, in extension thereof, actual, observable economic decline and physical decay. More broadly, the stigmatization of neighborhoods such as Old North St. Louis embodies a wider, cultural division that materialized along with the quantifiable economic and racial dichotomy along Delmar Boulevard. Today, for many inhabitants of South City, North City is considered a ‘no go area’. To them, the latter is known primarily through local news reports about crime.<sup>83</sup>

Conversely, inhabitants of North City too have a profound understanding of the meaning of their place of living within the city’s cultural geography. For instance, Debra J. Dickerson, a journalist and lawyer who grew up in a poor black family in North City during the 1960s and 1970s, writes the following about her youth in her memoir *An American Story* (2001):

On the other side of the Clark station was Kingshighway Avenue, running the length of the city north to south. We were very economical in our approach to it – we only used its northern end. To the south lay white St. Louis, as completely off-limits to us as if there were a second Grand Canyon, there where Kingshighway crossed Forest Park. No one had to warn me to stay out of the south side just as no one had to warn me not to touch a hot stove. I didn’t really understand that whites lived there, just that we couldn’t.<sup>84</sup>

Dickerson’s statement, as well as the other personal experiences referenced above, reveal that the Delmar Divide is as much a cultural code as a separation between two incommensurable

---

<sup>81</sup> Colin Gordon. “Blighting the Way: Urban Renewal, Economic Development, and the Elusive Definition of Blight”. *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 31.2 (2004): 305-337.

<sup>82</sup> This phenomenon is further explored in Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush. “Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of ‘Broken Windows’”. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 67.4 (2004): 319-342.

<sup>83</sup> Trivers and Rosenthal, “A Picture”, 199.

<sup>84</sup> Debra Dickerson. *An American Story*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001: 27.

economic and political realms. The structural analyses of the urban crisis in St. Louis that are discussed in the introduction of this thesis, on the other hand, reveal economic and political boundaries but not the cultural divide that accompanies them.

This is but one of the various insights and suggestions that the memoirs and newspaper articles examined in this chapter yield. It has also become clear that, unlike the existing historiography's suggestion that the discriminatory practices which helped constitute racial segregation occurred under the radar, the public was aware of these practices, and that affected residents actively resisted them. Furthermore, the examined memoirs and newspaper articles have generated three individual suggestions about redlining, zoning, and blockbusting. Thus, my investigation of civil and entrepreneurial reactions to redlining suggests that the political controversies surrounding the existence of redlining were consciously forged through lobbying on the part of private enterprises that engaged in redlining themselves. Moreover, my analysis of the Citizens Against Rezoning controversy suggests that discriminatory zoning was not exclusively motivated by racial dynamics, but rather by a complex entanglement of racial and socioeconomic factors. Finally, the existing historiography suggests that blockbusting was perceived as detrimental by blacks and whites alike. Both the blockbuster from Chicago and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editor John Herbers, however, testified that they viewed the practice as beneficial to racial dynamics.

Collectively, these insights illustrate that the existing, structuralist accounts of the urban crisis are shaped by, even produced through, a specific choice of source material. Different source material, such as the memoirs and newspaper articles explored here, can provide new perspectives and inspire revisions of existing accounts. More examples of this principle are provided in the next chapter, in which racial dynamics again form the central theme, but in a different setting: that of St. Louis's public housing.

## CH. 2: PUBLIC HOUSING: PRUITT-IGOE

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many American cities, including St. Louis, experienced an expansion of slums in the inner city. In response to this problem, the Truman administration introduced the Housing Act of 1949, which established a national housing objective and provided federal aid to cities for slum-clearance and low-rent public housing projects.<sup>85</sup> In the following years, St. Louis made use of this measure to finance the clearance of several blighted neighborhoods and the construction of several public housing projects, including the Wendell O. Pruitt Homes and the William Igoe Apartments in Mill Creek Valley. Collectively known as Pruitt-Igoe, these projects consisted of 2,870 apartments divided over thirty-three eleven-story apartment buildings, concentrated on a fifty-seven-acre site. It was originally intended for both white and black residents, segregated into different buildings. It was designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki and stood on St. Louis's north side, where it was completed in 1955.<sup>86</sup>

A 1950 opinionated article in a local newspaper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, reflects the philosophy behind public housing initiatives like Pruitt-Igoe. In a highly optimistic, technocratic fashion - typical of the prevailing *zeitgeist* of high modernism – journalist Richard G. Baumhoff argues that the problem of “blight” and “progressively worsening slums” can be addressed through the realization of new “neighborhood patterns”.<sup>87</sup> These patterns would consist of newly built apartment buildings in residential areas separate from commerce and industry and in close vicinity to highways, public transport, parking areas, parks, and playgrounds:

Within this pattern there would be no more slums, at last a minimum of blight. Instead, incentive for owners and users of homes and stores to keep them in good repair and appearance. Apartments and flats with plenty of light and air and green surroundings. Single dwellings on decent-sized lots, laid out to fit modern styles and shapes, no longer in archaic gridirons.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> “Housing Act of 1949”. In David Goldfield. *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*. Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007: 356-357.

<sup>86</sup> Lawrence H. Larsen. *History of Missouri, Vol. 4: 1953-2003*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004: 61-63.

<sup>87</sup> For an explanation of high-modern and technocratic tendencies in the architecture of the mid-twentieth century, see Mary McLeod. “‘Architecture or Revolution’: Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change”. *Art Journal*, 43.2 (1983): 137-147.

<sup>88</sup> Richard G. Baumhoff. “Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 5, 1950. Accessed March 25 2019 at: <http://www.umsl.edu/virtualstl/phase2/1950/events/perspectives/documents/prog-decay1.html>.

Baumhoff conceived of this solution well aware of the racial imbalance in contemporary housing and poverty issues. He argues that these new residential patterns will provide “sincere recognition of the rights and needs of Negroes as American citizens – decent, pleasant housing; ample recreation; a chance to live normal, self-supporting lives in human dignity”.<sup>89</sup>



*Fig. 2: One of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings in 1954, shortly after its completion.<sup>90</sup>*

<sup>89</sup> Baumhoff, “Progress or Decay?”.

<sup>90</sup> Henry T. Mizuki. “Pruitt-Igoe”. *Missouri Historical Society*, mohistory.org, 1954. Accessed June 22, 2019 at <https://mohistory.org/collections/item/resource:227939>.

In the case of Pruitt-Igoe, the utopia that Baumhoff envisioned never materialized. The buildings were badly built, using only the cheapest materials, and had several design flaws, including skip-stop elevators that stopped only on the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth floors, which made residents easy targets for robbers hiding in corridors and staircases. The apartments were small and poorly equipped. There was no central air-conditioning, very few recreational features, and minimal public transportation. Because the projects were built on and around the ruins of demolished slums, it was difficult to access churches, schools, groceries, and general economic opportunities. In 1956, a Supreme Court decision forced desegregation, after which most white residents left and the projects rapidly became predominantly black. As suburbanization made the general housing shortage less pressing in the later 1950s, middle-class blacks who could now afford private housing also left Pruitt-Igoe in large numbers. By 1958, conditions had begun to decline, partly because the St. Louis Housing Authority (H.U.D.) depended on rent yield to fund maintenance, which decreased as both the occupancy rate and average tenant income were declining. As a result, elevators broke down and broken windows remained unrepaired. Throughout the 1960s, unaddressed flooding and leakage issues made conditions even worse. At the same time, drug use, vandalism, and violent crime proliferated on the premises. In 1969, a nine-month rent strike further depleted the H.U.D.'s maintenance budget. In 1971, only 600 people remained in the buildings. Around the same time, the H.U.D. decided that Pruitt-Igoe's problems were insurmountable; between 1972 and 1976, all of the buildings were demolished.<sup>91</sup>

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I touched upon the two traditional views in historical and sociological discourse about the failure of Pruitt-Igoe: the 'architectural explanation', which blamed the failure of the project on poor architectural design, and the 'culture of poverty' explanation, which blamed the failure of the project on the norms and values of its inhabitants. I also explained that both explanations have become controversial and have largely been replaced with a new structuralist literature in which the failure is blamed on unfortunate political and macroeconomic developments. Because historians and sociologists in the latter tradition – similar to most scholars of the urban crisis more generally – emphasize the primacy of structure over the importance of individual agency, they tend to make little to no use of documents that reflect personal experiences or opinions. The aim of this chapter is to fill that gap by analyzing personal testimonies of Pruitt-Igoe residents. Specifically, I revisit interviews that were published in Lee Rainwater's *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a*

---

<sup>91</sup> Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", 61-63.

*Federal Slum* (1970), and I use the interviews with former Pruitt-Igoe residents that were recorded for the 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*.<sup>92</sup> I highlight three aspects of Pruitt-Igoe that surface repeatedly in these interviews, but remain underexposed in the structuralist literature. These are, first, the significance of resident resilience to the history of the project; second, the role of the Great Migration in the cultural identity and memory of the residents; third, the ambivalent nature – neither predominantly negative nor overly positive – of experiences and memories of Pruitt-Igoe.

The most striking phenomenon that emerges from the interviews with Pruitt-Igoe residents may be conceptualized as resident resilience. That is, rather than passive victims, as some of the structure-focused literature suggests, Pruitt-Igoe residents actively used strategies to navigate the challenging circumstances in which they found themselves. Thus, residents employed countless innovative strategies to navigate the mundane challenges that daily life in Pruitt-Igoe entailed. For example, Jacquelin Williams recounts, in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, that her mother never had the money to buy school supplies, including paper. Instead, she went to the Central Hardware store one day, bought a can of black paint and painted the walls in her apartment black. She also bought chalk and an eraser. This allowed her children to use the walls to practice penmanship and mathematics.<sup>93</sup> In the same documentary, Mr. Sylvester Brown tells another interesting anecdote. Pruitt-Igoe’s “urine-smelled” elevators would often fail to work, sometimes when residents were using them. Brown describes how he and his brother learned to push the elevators’ doors open from the inside and find a cable through which they could pull themselves up to their floor. They later also learned how to get people out of the elevator from outside, and they became known as “the guys who people would call, when they needed to get somebody out of the elevator”.<sup>94</sup>

Residents also positioned themselves resiliently towards the paternalistic regulations that governmental institutions forced upon them. During the years that Pruitt-Igoe existed, housing subsidies in Missouri were given only to unemployed female heads of families who were abandoned by their husbands.<sup>95</sup> This persuaded some married couples with children, who lived in slums and wanted to move into public housing, to set up a fake divorce. The mother and children would then be able to register as official tenants of a project. The father would officially register as a resident in another state, as was stipulated by the Housing Authority, but

---

<sup>92</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls; The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*.

<sup>93</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 45:05.

<sup>94</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 18:40.

<sup>95</sup> Birmingham, “Reframing the Ruins”, 308.

would in reality move into the project illegally. In *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, Mr. Sylvester Brown remembers the anxieties that such an illegal existence inside a project would engender for the entire family:

I remember, vividly, my mother telling us, if white people come to the house, and ask you guys questions, tell them that your father is not here. Tell them that your father has never been here, you've not seen your father. I trusted her, I knew that there was a reason that we had to do this charade, and I participated in the charade... I sat there and looked those people in the eye and told them with pure earnestness that 'no I have not seen my father'. But I knew I was lying and that made me wonder 'who are this people?' and 'how'd they have the power to make my mother lie?'.<sup>96</sup>

Finally, the most prolific and organized act of resistance on the part of the residents was perhaps the 1969 rent strike. In November 1968, the St. Louis Housing Authority had announced rent increases in all of its public housing projects, including Pruitt-Igoe, of up to \$19 a month. In response, tenants of several projects (Carr Square, Clinton-Peabody, Cochran, Darst-Webbe, and Vaughn) organized a rent strike, which started in February 1969. In order to show that they were not simply striking to save a few months' rent, participants collected their withheld rent in a central fund. The central demand was that rent would not exceed 25% of a tenant's income. Pruitt-Igoe residents joined the strike one month later, in March 1969, because of internal disagreements between strike leaders.<sup>97</sup> In October 1969, the St. Louis Housing Authority gave in to the residents' demands and implemented a reduced rent schedule.<sup>98</sup> Comments by Mrs. Ruby Russel, in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, suggest that the strike represented an act of resilience, an exercise of agency, and a conscious strategy to mobilize political leverage. She compares the rent strike to the nonviolent protests for civil rights that had been organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the previous years. She looks back on the rent strike as follows:

Why are we paying rent if we can't get none of these things [maintenance] done? It's the housing authority's fault. [...] When you had a place like Pruitt-Igoe or any housing

---

<sup>96</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 34:05.

<sup>97</sup> "Rent Strike Spreads to Pruitt-Igoe". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 12, 1969. Accessed March 10, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com)

<sup>98</sup> E.S. Evans. "Housing Panel Studies Problems". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 30, 1969. Accessed March 10, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com)

project where there was a multitude of people, then you had political pull. Like the Martin Luther King march. Could've done nothing just with Martin Luther King marching by himself. [...] So handbills were passed out, meetings were held. Senior citizens, handicapped people, young people walking the streets and don't pay they rent. You got people registering to vote, and voting; you got people standing up for their rights who had never stand up before. You got people who seemed to be able to do something about it, I'll put it that way. It caught on fire, and while we weren't praised for it, it occurred.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to resident resilience, a recurring theme in the interviews with Pruitt-Igoe residents is the Great Migration. This notion refers to the mass movement (approximately four million) of black people out of the rural areas of the south and into industrial cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and California, between approximately 1910 and 1970. It is considered one of the most significant demographic events to occur in the United States during the twentieth century, with wide-ranging cultural, demographic, economic, and political impacts.<sup>100</sup> The historiography on Pruitt-Igoe hardly ever mentions the Great Migration as a notable antecedent of its construction and eventual decline.<sup>101</sup> Yet, the story of Pruitt-Igoe embodies the aftermath of the Great Migration in several ways.

First, in most of America's industrial cities, public housing was conceived as a solution to a massive housing shortage and slum formation in the years following World War II. The underlying assumption was that the private market had failed to provide reasonable housing at affordable costs for the working class, forcing them to live under impoverished conditions in slums. Governmental interference became necessary to fix this market failure. The housing shortage and subsequent slum formation that public housing policies tried to combat first emerged during the early Great Migration, as southern blacks (as well as European immigrants and rural whites) migrated to the nation's industrial centers. The problem became more urgent and visible when the housing market collapsed during the Great Depression. This was followed by was another wave of immigration by southern blacks as World War II reinvigorated the

---

<sup>99</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 1:00:15.

<sup>100</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay. "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003): 209. See also Isabel Wilkerson. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.

<sup>101</sup> E.g., the Great Migration remains unmentioned in both Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", Birmingham, "Refraining the Ruins", and the section on Pruitt-Igoe in Larsen, *History of Missouri*, 61-63,



economy. This further exacerbated the housing shortage. Historian D. Bradford Hunt has convincingly demonstrated the relation between the Great Migration and the housing crisis in Chicago.<sup>102</sup> He argues that the Great Migration had a similar effect on the housing market in other industrial cities, including St. Louis.<sup>103</sup>

Second, the Great Migration gave rise to a crisis in race relations between black newcomers and whites who feared for their jobs and property values. Such fears were prime motivators of racist policymaking, and in some places, they culminated in violent race riots (e.g., the 1918 East St. Louis riots, the 1943 Detroit riots).<sup>104</sup> Hirsch argues that public housing was one of the various governmental strategies mobilized to ‘contain’ black immigration into white neighborhoods.<sup>105</sup> Similar tensions surrounding black immigration into white neighborhoods, actively fostered by blockbusters, sparked white flight. A self-reinforcing mechanism ensued: the massive exodus of whites from the inner cities made it affordable for many middle-income blacks to move into abandoned private dwellings in the inner city, leaving only the poorest segment of the black population dependent on public housing. This, in turn, increased the stigma associated with public housing, contributing to its harmful reputation as a ‘second ghetto’ and a last resort for the absolute underclass.<sup>106</sup>

Third, and within the framework of this thesis, most importantly, the Great Migration played an important role in the cultural identity of Pruitt-Igoe residents. Two-thirds of the Pruitt-Igoe residents, including most of the subjects interviewed by Rainwater and his students, were born in the South and migrated to St. Louis later in their lives; most others were children of southern black migrants, themselves born in St. Louis.<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, this common migration background shaped the residents’ identities and ideologies. More specifically, cultural memory manifests itself in Pruitt-Igoe residents through a phenomenon that constitutes a returning theme in scholarly debates about migration and diaspora, namely that of *idealization*; the residents have a strong tendency to romanticize their “putative ancestral home” – the rural south – as a way to navigate or escape the challenges of their direct environment.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 9, 57, 71, 180, 190.

<sup>103</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 10.

<sup>105</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 10; Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*.

<sup>106</sup> Bristol, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”, 163-166; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 10-11; Larsen, *History of Missouri*, 61-63.

<sup>107</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 2636.

<sup>108</sup> Robin Cohen. “Diaspora and the State: from Victims to Challengers”. *International Affairs*, 72.3 (1996): 515; Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 4541.

One of Rainwater's interviewees was Mrs. Johnson, a fifty-year-old black woman, who had moved to St. Louis in the 1930s from rural Mississippi and then moved into Pruitt-Igoe after her previous home was torn down in a slum-clearance program. Worried by the teenage pregnancy of one of her daughters, Mrs Johnson reminisces about her growing up in the south:

People don't raise their children like they did when I was coming up down the Mississippi. [...] When I was comin' along, you didn't see boys and girls slipping around the way that they do today, because it wasn't possible for them to do it. [...] But times aren't like they were in the old days and we have to try to raise our children the best that we can now. [...] It's hard to raise a kid in a place like this, but where else can you go?<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, when Mr. Patterson, who had grown up in a black community in rural Arkansas and moved to St. Louis in 1948 to find employment, is asked by one of Rainwater's students whether he had a "happy home" in the South, he responds:

I would think so. Definitely speaking I think that a city life is more or less the life that has ruined so many children simply because a child is just like anything else that's small and don't have a stabilized mind.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, Rainwater's interviewee Mrs. Annette Madison, a 51-year-old black woman raised in St. Louis, expresses the following comparison between the south and the harsh realities in the urban destinations of the Great Migration:

You know what I would like to do? I would like to get down south and look around. Like to take a vacation and go down for a week or a month and just be down south and see how it is there. I feel so bound up here. That's it, I'm just bound up here all the time. About five years ago I took a vacation and went to Detroit for about a month, but that's no place to go – there's people all bound up there too. I don't want to go to no city. I got folks in Detroit and I got 'em in Chicago.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 4035-4038.

<sup>110</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 3201, 3243.

<sup>111</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 2103.

These testimonies illustrate that the Great Migration did not only create the circumstances from which Pruitt-Igoe emerged but also continued to permeate the daily lives of Pruitt-Igoe residents. For these reasons, the historiography of Pruitt-Igoe could benefit from further incorporating the Great Migration as a significant context.

A third phenomenon that arises from the interviews with Pruitt-Igoe residents is an idealization of Pruitt-Igoe itself. Thus, nearly all the former residents that feature in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* exhibit a degree of nostalgia towards their time in Pruitt-Igoe. While these residents recognize that Pruitt-Igoe had its problems, they also make an elaborate mention of the positive aspects of life in Pruitt-Igoe. In particular, the interviewees tend to idealize the earlier years they spent there. Mrs. Ruby Russell, for instance, describes the Pruitt-Igoe of the 1950s as “a very beautiful place, like a big hotel resort, I’d say, with plenty of green grass, trees, shrubbery”.<sup>112</sup> She goes on to say:

It was like an oasis in the desert. All this newness. I’d be the first person to occupy this unit. That was a thrill for me. And then they put me on the eleventh floor. [...] Once I moved in to the eleventh floor with elevators, I called it poor man’s penthouse, I didn’t wanna live on another floor. I never thought I would live in that kind of a surrounding. When we first moved in, it was probably one of the most exciting things of my life.<sup>113</sup>

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams describes that her family of twelve had previously lived in a three-room house. The fact that “everybody had a bed” in Pruitt-Igoe made it feel like “another world”.<sup>114</sup> She goes on to say:

It was really nice. I tell you, when I drive down on Jefferson, I always have to park, and just look. It brings back wonderful memories. I’m very truthful when I say, my memories of Pruitt-Igoe are probably some of the best memories that I have.<sup>115</sup>

Similarly, Mr. Sylvester Brown has the following to say about his childhood in Pruitt-Igoe:

---

<sup>112</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 4:15.

<sup>113</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 13:40.

<sup>114</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 14:25.

<sup>115</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 15:30.

I remember a warm sense of family. A warm sense of community. Pruitt-Igoe was this place I remember of the warm smell of pies and cookies and cakes and all these eclectic dishes that were being cooked by the residents on the eleven floors. It was a place we played hard, ran up and down the breezeways and up and down the steps and running around, and so it was a place where kids could really have a chance to play hard.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, Ms. Valerie Sills says the following about her upbringing in Pruitt-Igoe:

We moved there really close to Christmas. It was like a Christmas present. Pruitt-Igoe was a safe place for me, I mean, I don't care what people said about it that lived outside it. If you didn't live in there, you thought it was a bad place, but growing up in there was... you knew the people, and you were never alone.<sup>117</sup>

These interviews were recorded for *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* in the late 2000s or early 2010s. As such, decades of partial forgetting could have accounted for these idealized views of Pruitt-Igoe. However, a similar ambivalent – sometimes negative but in many respects quite positive – view of life in the project is expressed by the subjects interviewed by Rainwater in the 1960s. The 19-year-old tenant Mrs. Coolidge, for instance, was asked in 1963 whether there was anything she liked about Pruitt-Igoe. She responded:

We have enough heat and we have a private bath. It's more convenient. We don't have to run out and catch the trash man; all we have to do is just take the garbage downstairs and dump it into the incinerator. When you move in here, there aren't any insects, rats, and so on, like the other place. In these apartments, after every tenant moves they clean up the apartment and repaint it.<sup>118</sup>

Similarly, Mrs. Madison said in 1963 that “I just like it here better than any place[,] I just think this is the finest place there is for me to live in”.<sup>119</sup> Another interviewee, the 15-year-old high school student Alice Walker, describes Pruitt-Igoe as a pleasant social environment for adolescents to grow up in: “most of the kids in this building are always downstairs and we just

---

<sup>116</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote starts at 15:50.

<sup>117</sup> *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, quote at 14:55; 16:20.

<sup>118</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 477.

<sup>119</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 1935.

start dancin’ and we start passing chairs around, we pass them back and forth and they be going to get some of their friends to come over and have a good time”.<sup>120</sup>

The fact that residents often had ambivalent, rather than purely negative, views of their lives in Pruitt-Igoe, is relevant in two ways. First, it reminds the historian that Pruitt-Igoe residents, more often than not, moved into the project in order to escape circumstances that were arguably worse. This is a less anachronistic context in which to view the conditions of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings than the comparison to current (public) housing standards that we tend to make unconsciously. Second, it underscores a recurring theme of this chapter, namely that Pruitt-Igoe residents were not only passive victims, but that they also actively tried to navigate their circumstances. This journey yielded both negative and positive experiences and memories.

In addition to this insight, the examination of personal testimonies of Pruitt-Igoe residents that I have conducted in this chapter has revealed two other points that the existing, structuralist historiography of the project misses. First, the historiography suggests that residents of Pruitt-Igoe were either passive victims or culpable accomplices in the failure of the project. In contrast, my research suggests that public housing residents, while indeed victims of circumstance, still reacted resiliently against the hostile environments in which they found themselves. Second, my research suggests that the Great Migration played an important role in the lives and experiences of Pruitt-Igoe residents. The existing historiography of Pruitt-Igoe has hitherto overlooked this variable.

In a critical review of Gordon’s *Mapping Decline*, historian David Schuyler argues that “if there is one aspect of the St. Louis saga worthy of greater elaboration, it is attention to what was happening on the ground”, and that “a few life stories of the projects and the people who experienced them [...] would bring public policy down to the level where it affected citizens”.<sup>121</sup> Schuyler is referring to the principle that the prevailing focus on structures in the literature on St. Louis’s urban crisis makes the experience of those confronted with oppression less visible; it “marginalize[s ...] dissident voices”.<sup>122</sup> The examples referred to in this chapter aim to illustrate that a similar mechanism affects the historiography of Pruitt-Igoe and to show that incorporating testimonies can help mitigate this bias. The next chapter engages in a similar project, but incorporates, as an additional element, a ‘decentering’ of the urban crisis phenomenon by looking at the St. Louis suburb of East St. Louis, Illinois.

---

<sup>120</sup> Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, 5581.

<sup>121</sup> David Schuyler. “Review: *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*”. *The American Historical Review*, 114.4 (2009): 1092.

<sup>122</sup> David A. Chappell. “Active Agents versus Passive Victims: Decolonized Historiography of Problematic Paradigm”. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 7.2 (1995): 303.

### CH. 3: DEINDUSTRIALIZATION: EAST ST. LOUIS, IL

The inner-ring suburb of East St. Louis, located directly across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, in the Illinois region of the metropolitan area, was once a thriving industrial center. By 1910, it had become a major national railroad hub second only to Chicago, with a diverse industrial economy that included food processing plants and iron, steel, and glass factories.<sup>123</sup> Industry continued to flourish until well into the 1950s, when local factories began to scale down, close, or move elsewhere and railroads stopped operating, which eventually led to the loss of almost all manufacturing jobs in the city.<sup>124</sup> Subsequently, akin to several other areas in the St. Louis metropolitan area, East St. Louis came to bear many characteristics of the urban crisis. As deindustrialization set in during the 1950s, the city also began suffering from white flight. In 1930, the city's population was 84.5% white. By 1970, its black population had risen to 69%. In 2010, black people made up 98% of the population. Between 1950 and 2010, its overall population declined from 82336 in 1950 to only 27006 in 2010. The black population peaked in 1980 at 52781.<sup>125</sup> The city now claims high rates of poverty (33% of families live below the poverty level of income), unemployment (50%-60% of those over sixteen), and crime (a murder rate of 77.8 per 100000 inhabitants, compared to 8 per 100000 in the entire St. Louis metropolitan area).<sup>126</sup> Education is of poor quality, much of the city is visibly blighted, and the remaining residents face an alarming level of pollution.<sup>127</sup>

Viewed from the perspective of these statistics, the East St. Louis case is not much different from the situation in St. Louis itself or in any other Rust Belt city. A structuralist history of East St. Louis's urban crisis analogous to Sugrue's *Origins* or Gordon's *Mapping Decline* (which hitherto is lacking), then, would probably construe the city as just another typical case. What sets the history of East St. Louis apart, however, is the fact that it takes place in a suburb. As historian Jennifer Hamer notes:

---

<sup>123</sup> Charles L. Lumpkins. *Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945*. N.p. (unpublished PhD dissertation), 2006: 2. Accessed March 26, 2019 at [https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final\\_submissions/1032](https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/1032).

<sup>124</sup> Jennifer Hamer. *Abandoned in the Heartland: Work, Family and Living in East St. Louis*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012: 27-28; Lumpkins, *Black East St. Louis*.

<sup>125</sup> Francis C. Odemerho and Erica M. Spells. "The Perception of Africa by African Americans in the Predominantly Black Community of East St. Louis". *African Geographical Review*, 32.2 (2013): 175.

<sup>126</sup> Odemerho and Spells, "Perception of Africa", 175; Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland*, 27.

<sup>127</sup> Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland*, 27-28.

East St. Louis, Illinois, embodies at least three core elements of American national life: it is a suburb in the heartland, it is predominantly African American, and it is poor. Taken together, these three elements overlap one another and overwhelm the popular imagination, for they also, counterintuitively, contradict one another.<sup>128</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to examine this complex urban condition by looking at documents that reflect the personal experiences or opinions of East St. Louisans. With various examples from interviews with residents, I will argue that the East St. Louis experience has been both idiosyncratic and heterogeneous, and that it has been deeply marked by the geo-cultural space in which it occurs.

In its industrial heydays, East St. Louis was a popular destination for black southerners who migrated north to attain economic opportunities, political rights, and political power. Black people had lived in the area since colonial times, and southern blacks began moving to the area from the 1870s onward. During World War I, the booming wartime economy and cessation of European immigration further increased employment opportunities for black people in northern and Midwestern industrial cities, including East St. Louis. Abundant employment opportunities set in motion a massive wave of black immigration from the rural south, the Great Migration, which continued until the 1960s in East St. Louis. During World War I, increasing black political influence in the City Hall, combined with continued black immigration, increased white resentment and the fear of black people as competitors for jobs and housing. White fears culminated in the infamous 1917 East St. Louis race riots, an episode of mass violence by whites that caused the death of anywhere between 40 and 250 black people and left another estimated 6000 blacks homeless. Miles Davis, the black jazz musician who had grown up in East St. Louis before relocating to New York City in 1944, suggests in his autobiography that this event had a profound and intergenerational effect on race relations and on the cultural memory of black people in East St. Louis:

Another thing I think about with East St. Louis is that it was there, back in 1917, that those crazy, sick white people killed all those black people in a race riot. See, St. Louis and East St. Louis were— and still are—big packing-house towns, towns where they slaughter cows and pigs for grocery stores and supermarkets, restaurants and everything else. [...] That's what the East St. Louis race riot in 1917 was supposed to be about:

---

<sup>128</sup> Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland*, 12.

black workers replacing white workers in the packing houses. So, the white workers got mad and went on a rampage killing all them black people. That same year black men were fighting in World War I to help the United States save the world for democracy. They sent us to war to fight and die for them over there; killed us like nothing over here. And it's still like that today. Now, ain't that a bitch. [...] The way they killed all them black people back then—just shot them down like they were out shooting pigs or stray dogs. Shot them in their houses, shot babies and women. Burned down houses with people in them and hung some black men from lampposts. Anyway, black people there who survived used to talk about it. When I was coming up in East St. Louis, black people I knew never forgot what sick white people had done to them back in 1917.<sup>129</sup>

In the aftermath of the East St. Louis race riots, black people in this area continued to experience increasing labor discrimination and segregation. Davis characterizes interbellum East St. Louis as “racist to the bone”.<sup>130</sup> However, black people continued to immigrate to the city and campaign for economic and political opportunities. After World War II, more blacks migrated to East St. Louis than during the two World Wars and the interbellum combined. During these postwar years, the civil rights movement gained a foothold in local politics. As such, in 1949, the city’s schools were desegregated, and in 1971, James Williams became the city’s first black mayor.<sup>131</sup>

In the late 1950s, the urban crisis began to manifest itself in East St. Louis. The PBS documentary *Made In USA: The East St. Louis Story* highlights the experience of urban crisis of James and Beverly Gause, a black married couple who spent their whole lives in East St. Louis.<sup>132</sup> James Gause’s ancestors had migrated from the south to East St. Louis during the Great Depression; the family of his wife, Beverly Gause, had moved to the city from Mississippi in the early Great Migration around World War I. The Gauses had grown up during a time when southern blacks proliferated in East St. Louis in search of jobs in its industries. Through redlining, black residents and newcomers were confined to living together in a limited number of neighborhoods.

The Gauses began to notice change in the late 1950s. The civil rights movement successfully advocated for the desegregation of housing and public amenities. “I thought it was

---

<sup>129</sup> Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe. *Miles: The Autobiography*. New York: Touchstone, 1989: 15-16.

<sup>130</sup> Davis and Trope, *Autobiography*, 38.

<sup>131</sup> Lumpkins, *Black East St. Louis*.

<sup>132</sup> *Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story*. Directed by Jim Kirchherr, aired July 19, 2017 on PBS. Accessed March 30, 2019 at <https://www.pbs.org/video/made-in-usa-the-east-st-louis-story-ccgfta/>.



really something to go to the Majestic Theatre because that was not allowed when I went into the military”, says James about his return from the military in 1959.<sup>133</sup> Around the same time, deindustrialization set in and whites increasingly left the city in search of jobs elsewhere. These circumstances made it possible for black people, including the Gauses, to move to previously white districts in the center of East St. Louis. “I was a bit afraid to move into this neighborhood”, says James. “I wasn’t scared”, says Beverly, “because my parents and my grandparents, they were always proud people, and they had always taught us that you’re not less than anybody and you have the right to be anywhere that you can afford”.<sup>134</sup> Blacks moving away from the districts that they had been forced into during the Great Migration into previously white districts immediately spawned white flight. After they had moved, the Gauses’ new white neighbors started holding meetings to discuss what they should do about the influx of black people; over time, all white families fled to other St. Louis ‘Metro East’ suburbs such as Belleville, Illinois, and the entire East St. Louis district became black. From the 1960s, as deindustrialization continued to deplete employment, the Gauses’ neighborhood began deteriorating as its tax base shrunk, and those blacks who could afford to leave left as well.

In the 1970s and 1980s, East St. Louisans’ reactions to continuing urban decline varied starkly. Some inhabitants remained outspokenly optimistic, praising the resilient spirit of the city’s population. In 1977, city planner William Mitchom said:

East St. Louis is a very congenial city. It still has its southern hospitality. Naturally, there’s the criminal element, but most people in East St. Louis don’t think they’re doing that badly.<sup>135</sup>

Similarly, Willie Walker, the director of the city’s skills center, said in the same year:

I see people trying. I see them at SIU-Edwardsville and the State Community College taking courses. I see them going to the library. I see the spirit is not dead. The unique thing about East St. Louis is that the door has been shut in their face, a door as real as a jail door, and people are still trying.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> *Made in USA*, quote starts at 46:55.

<sup>134</sup> *Made in USA*, quote starts at 48:05.

<sup>135</sup> George E. Curry and Roy Malone, “East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 23, 1977: 1, 16. Accessed June 19, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>136</sup> Curry and Malone, “East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay”, 16.

Others were more pessimistic, blaming grim prospects for East St. Louis's future on unresolved corruption issues among local politicians. Ms. Victoria Bell, for example, who had fled East St. Louis for St. Louis proper in 1975, remarked in 1977:

Half of politicians are rip-offs. They have to change. They are out for what they can. It's not excusable – they have good jobs that pay well – but they are trying to take money on the side. The city is going down. They make a big deal over paving the streets. There are no theaters and nothing to offer in terms of recreation. They have one skating rink and it has a concrete floor. There are no respectable discos. When I think of East St. Louis, I think of the ruins. When you go across the free bridge all you see is ruins. Everywhere you look, something has been torn down.<sup>137</sup>

Warrington Hudlin, a black insurance agent, said in the same year:

If we turn East St. Louis around, it will be because of people, not money. If we had local leadership that was honest and effective, this would attract outside money.<sup>138</sup>

In 1988, local lawyer Rex Carr said that:

It's impossible to be optimistic about East St. Louis. I haven't been optimistic since I was a child growing up here. It has been the rear end of the greater St. Louis area since its inception.<sup>139</sup>

In 1989, an anonymous author of an opinionated piece in the *Southern Illinoisan* wrote that “as long as [East St. Louis mayor] Carl Officer is hell-bent on taking care of Carl Officer and not the needs of his constituents, then East St. Louis will die”.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Curry and Malone, “East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay”, 16.

<sup>138</sup> Curry and Malone, “East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay”, 16.

<sup>139</sup> Patrick. E. Gauen. “Future ‘Not in Our Hands’, Adviser to Officer Says”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 3, 1988: 1. Accessed 20 June, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>140</sup> “Why Bother With Interview When Deck’s Been Stacked?”. *Southern Illinoisan*, August 5, 1989: 11. Accessed June 21, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.



*Fig. 3: 2008 photograph of abandoned apartments in East St. Louis.*<sup>141</sup>

Interestingly, during the 1970s, many black inhabitants of East St. Louis adhered to a conspiracy theory according to which a number of whites were out to drive the city of East St. Louis into a state of complete abandonment and bankruptcy. Then, as the theory goes, once black people no longer have political control over the city, whites will come back, reclaim the city, and buy large areas of land at low prices.<sup>142</sup> This theory may have originated after Paul Latham, a local black activist, was shot by an unidentified assailant on October 11, 1972. In response, Frank Smith, leader of the East St. Louis chapter of the Black United Front, a coalition organization formed in 1968 with the aim to convince local governments to start addressing poverty among black people, addressed the East St. Louis City Council. In his speech, Smith claimed that there was a conspiracy to “eliminate” Latham because of his role in organizing protests at construction sites to obtain more jobs for blacks:

---

<sup>141</sup> Tyson Blanquart. “Abandoned Apartments Along IL Route 15 in East St. Louis”. *Wikimedia Commons*, commons.wikimedia.org, 2008. Accessed on June 22, 2019 at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EastStLouis\\_Abandoned\\_Apartment.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EastStLouis_Abandoned_Apartment.jpg).

<sup>142</sup> Curry and Malone, “East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay”, 1, 16.

The police, politicians, the judicial system and area contractors are part of the conspiracy to destroy the true leaders of this community. They can't get us in court so they try to remove us and our influence from the community by shooting us down.<sup>143</sup>

T. Spencer Lewis, a black East St. Louis lawyer, elaborated on this conspiracy theory in 1977:

You hear talk about the abandoned buildings, but when you inquire about purchasing them you learn that few of them are for sale. The city will definitely be redeveloped. It's like the Chicago Loop. All your major interstates – 40, 64, 55, 70 – meet in East St. Louis. It's an ideal location. There is more than an ample labor supply and it has good barge transportation.<sup>144</sup>

As diverse as East St. Louisans' reactions to the decline of their city were, a common thread runs through most of them, namely the distinctively suburban nature of East St. Louis's urban crisis experience. In 1977, for instance, an anonymous city planner remarked that "we must accept the fact that we're a small city and we must do our development as a suburb might do its".<sup>145</sup> With this comment, the city planner illustrates the contradictory experience that East St. Louis both *is* a suburb (in a geographic sense) and can only strive to *become* one (in a cultural and economic sense). This complex geo-cultural position has a profound effect on the daily life of East St. Louisans. Just like other suburbanites, East St. Louisans seek employment primarily in the service industry – except that few service jobs within the reach of their education levels and transportation access are available. Similarly, just like other suburbanites, East St. Louisans are dependent on automobiles to function – except that the living conditions in East St. Louis present severe economic and social barriers to car ownership.<sup>146</sup>

East St. Louis's suburban location makes transportation, in particular, a pressing cultural and political issue. This became prominently visible in 1993, when the Greater St. Louis area opened MetroLink, a light rail system connecting one stop in East St. Louis with several stops in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. At the same time, the Bi-State Development Agency

---

<sup>143</sup> "East St. Louis Black Leader: 'Conspiracy' Charged After Latham Is Shot". *The Edwardsville Intelligencer*, October 13, 1972: 3. Accessed June 21, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com)

<sup>144</sup> Curry and Malone, "East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay", 16.

<sup>145</sup> George E. Curry and Roy Malone. "How Can East St. Louis Survive? Question Brings Suggestions Aplenty?" In *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 27, 1977: 1,9. Accessed June 1, 2019 via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>146</sup> Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland*, 12-13.

proposed to end bus services between downtown St. Louis and East St. Louis, forcing East St. Louisans dependent on buses to transfer to the new light rail system. This measure would make travelling to downtown St. Louis more expensive, and for many East St. Louisans, transferring to MetroLink would lead to a significantly prolonged commute time. In response, black East St. Louisans united in protest and threatened to organize a boycott, underscoring the crucial role that public transport had to their daily functioning.<sup>147</sup> One commuter, the 54-year-old black woman Earlie Beck, would now have to transfer twice and take two buses and the MetroLink. She construed the measure as racist, because similar bus routes serving predominantly white communities were *not* scheduled to be eliminated. She protested as follows:

I don't drive, and this is the only transportation I have. I don't have anything against MetroLink. But Bi-State should give East St. Louis a choice like everyone else.<sup>148</sup>

Jennifer Hamer, who conducted a series of interviews with East St. Louis residents in the early 2010s, describes a comparable story about Curvis Shore, a thirty-eight-year-old East St. Louisan and the owner of a 1980 Ford Fiesta. One day, Curvis wanted to buy jeans in a local mall. Because it was so difficult to get the engine of his car to work, he left the engine running while visiting the mall, so that he would not have to start it again upon departure. Rather than being worried about theft – the car was bright yellow and had absolutely no economic value – he worried about police officers waiting for him when he returned, because they might have asked him for his license or insurance papers – none of which he possessed.<sup>149</sup>

Curvis's relation to his car, much like Earlie Beck's relation to public transportation, encapsulates the complexity of living in suburbia without access to the features that usually facilitate a suburban lifestyle. Conversely, their East St. Louis experience can challenge pervasive traditional notions of the American suburb as a "fairly stagnant and monolithic space", a "homeowner's utopia", and a signifier of "success and individual achievement".<sup>150</sup> In a different, suburban setting, East St. Louisans navigate many of the same conditions as, for

---

<sup>147</sup> The threat of a boycott proved successful; the Bi-State Development Agency quickly decided not to implement the measure after all. See Margaret Gillerman. "Downtown – East St. Louis Bus Route: Agency Head Apologizes in Wake of Racism Complaint". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1993: 3A. Accessed June 18, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>148</sup> Margaret Gillerman. "East St. Louisans Protest Bi-State Plan to Cut Buses for MetroLink". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 24, 1993: 7A. Accessed June 18, 2019 via *newspapers.com*.

<sup>149</sup> Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland*, 58-59.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph George. *Postmodern Suburban Spaces: Philosophy, Ethics, and Community in Post-War American Fiction*. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 7.

instance, Patrick J. Kleaver and Debra Dickerson, the North St. Louis memoirists whose experiences I reconstructed in chapter 1: shifting racial boundaries, declining economic conditions, and a decaying urban landscape. Reactions to such conditions are multifarious. Some East St. Louisans adopt an optimistic and resilient attitude; others are more pessimistic; and some of those who can afford it, leave the city altogether.

In the larger scheme of this thesis, it is important to note that it is the specific source material I use in this chapter – interviews with residents – that renders the eccentric, heterogeneous, and distinctly suburban nature of the East St. Louis experience visible. In contrast, if I would have reconstructed East St. Louis’s history based purely on economic and statistical sources, I would likely arrive at a picture that portrays East St. Louis as emblematic of the larger urban crisis, but leaves its suburban idiosyncrasies underexposed.

## CONCLUSION

“It is necessary to consider the claim that historians and ethnographers are as much in the business of fiction as are novelists and poets; in other words, they too are producers of ‘literary artefacts’ according to rules of genre and style”, asserts Peter Burke.<sup>151</sup> The historiography of the urban crisis too adheres to such rules: it postulates the primacy of historical structures over the agency and experience of the individual and it values specific sources (demographic statistics, political records) as superior. In this thesis, I have circumvented these rules – which I assumed are the product of power-knowledge relations – by examining the urban crisis from a cultural and social, bottom-up perspective. Specifically, I have examined the potential of various forms of personal testimonies (memoirs, interviews, and opinionated articles in newspapers). This has yielded various new insights, which sometimes contradict the existing historiography.

The historiography suggests that the discriminatory practices used to bolster racial segregation in residential areas (redlining, zoning, and blockbusting) occurred by and large out of public eye. My examination of these practices, on the other hand, suggests that they deeply permeated public awareness. In the political sphere, enterprises that engaged in these practices sometimes lobbied in order to construe the existence of racialized policies as controversial. In the public sphere, however, there was a great deal of awareness of and resistance against them. Interestingly, the practice of blockbusting received a mixed, rather than purely negative reaction; both blockbusters themselves and commentators sometimes interpreted the practice as advantageous to black people.

Furthermore, my research suggests that urban renewal policies, rather than combat urban decline, often helped construct and reinforce it through stigmatization. The memoirs of North St. Louis residents Patrick J. Kleaver and Debra Dickinson illustrate the far-reaching impact of stigmatization on the daily lives of residents of declining areas. Their memoirs also shine light on the deep cultural division that accompanied the economic and political dichotomies of residential segregation. The implications of that cultural divide were intuitively understood by residents on both sides of the dividing line.

My investigation of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing projects has yielded three main suggestions. First, public housing residents, while indeed victims of circumstance, reacted resiliently against the hostile environments in which they found themselves. This is significant

---

<sup>151</sup> Burke, *History and Theory*, 124.

because the existing historiography usually portrays residents of public housing as either passive victims or culpable accomplices in the failure of these projects. Second, my research reveals that the Great Migration played an important role in the lives and experiences of Pruitt-Igoe residents. The existing literature on this particular project overlooks this variable. Third, my research shows that residents of failing public housing projects did not have entirely negative experiences; both negative and positive experiences and memories mark their years in these projects.

Finally, my investigation of the experience of the urban crisis in East St. Louis has generated two main insights. First, reactions to urban decline in East St. Louis varied from person to person. Whereas some residents retained their optimism, others viewed the situation as hopeless. Second, experiences of urban decline in East St. Louis were often shaped by the city's paradoxical status as both a suburb and a locus of post-industrial decline, poverty, and racial unrest. Residents of East St. Louis live in suburbia, but do not have access to the infrastructure that is necessary to make ordinary suburban life possible and enjoyable. Transportation, in particular, presents a major challenge for many suburbanites in East St. Louis. This dynamic can be used to challenge the existing historiography's tendency to essentialize spatial categories such as suburbs and inner cities.

On a methodological level, it is important to note that the discrepancy between my findings and those of the existing historiography stems from my use of documents that reflect personal experiences or opinions instead of more common source materials such as political records and demographic statistics. Notably, the fact that historians' choice of source material, which again is arbitrary, informs research findings does not entail relativism. As Peter Burke argues:

Whether they use documents or construct their accounts out of interviews, conversations and personal observation, [historians] follow a research strategy which includes criteria of reliability, representativity and so on. What needs to be discussed is the compatibility or conflict between these criteria and different forms of text or rhetoric, rather than the old oppositions between fact and fiction, science and art.<sup>152</sup>

The aim of this thesis was exactly that: to examine the extent to which structure-based accounts of the urban crisis are compatible with cultural and social histories of the same topic. As I

---

<sup>152</sup> Burke, *History and Theory*, 127.



summarize above, my case study – a bottom-up history of the urban crisis in St. Louis – reveals a significant degree of incongruity. However, as Burke implies, rather than rejecting the possibility of (urban) history on the basis of these contradictions, urban historians should incorporate contradictions into their discourse. Only then can the urban crisis be represented holistically, with all of its complex and contradictory layers, all of its conflicting perspectives, and all of the texts and poetics that can be employed to represent it. Moreover, only then can the legacy of urban crisis with which residents of American cities are confronted on a daily basis and which recently culminated in the Ferguson riots be properly understood and addressed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary sources

- Baumhoff, Richard G. "Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 5, 1950.
- Blanquart, Tyson. "Abandoned Apartments Along IL Route 15 in East St. Louis". *Wikimedia Commons*, 2008.
- Cleaver, Patrick J. *Growing Up in Old North St. Louis*. St. Louis: Patrick J. Cleaver, 2012/2018.
- Curry, George E., and Roy Malone. "East St. Louis: Optimism Amid Blocks of Decay". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 23, 1977.
- Curry, George E., and Roy Malone. "How Can East St. Louis Survive? Question Brings Suggestions Aplenty?" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 27, 1977.
- Davis, Miles, and Quincy Troupe. *Miles: The Autobiography*. New York: Touchstone, 1989.
- Dickerson, Debra. *An American Story*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001.
- "East St. Louis Black Leader: 'Conspiracy' Charged After Latham Is Shot". *The Edwardsville Intelligencer*, October 13, 1972.
- Ellis, James E. "Anger Meets Study Denying Redlining Here. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 8, 1979: 11C.
- Evans, E.S. "Housing Panel Studies Problems". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 30, 1969.
- Gauen, Patrick E. "Future 'Not in Our Hands', Adviser to Officer Says". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 3, 1988.
- Gelles, Jeff. "How 'Mini-West Port' Became Discount Store". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 21, 1977.
- Gibson, Campbell and Kay Jung. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States". *US Census Bureau*, Census.gov, 2005.
- Gillerman, Margaret. "Downtown – East St. Louis Bus Route: Agency Head Apologizes in Wake of Racism Complaint". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1993.
- Gillerman, Margaret. "East St. Louisans Protest Bi-State Plan to Cut Buses for MetroLink". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 24, 1993.
- Herbers, John. "Housing Shortage Leads to Upturn in Blockbusting". *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 24, 1969.
- "Housing Act of 1949". In David Goldfield. *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*. Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007: 356-357.
- Koyaanisqatsi*. Directed by Godfrey Reggio. 1983.
- Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story*. Directed by Jim Kirchherr, aired July 19, 2017 on PBS.

- “Map of the City of St. Louis: Distribution of Negro Population, Census of 1930. (Realtors’ Red Line Map.)”. *Missouri Historical Society*, 1934.
- Mizuki, Henry T. “Pruitt-Igoe”. *Missouri Historical Society*, 1954.
- “Overcoming History”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 28, 2014.
- Prost, Charlene. “High-Risk Area Complaints on Insurance Rates”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 10, 1977.
- The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History*. Directed by Chad Freidrichs. 2011.
- Rainwater, Lee. *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (Kindle edition). London/New York: Routledge, 1970.
- “Rent Strike Spreads to Pruitt-Igoe”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 12, 1969.
- “To Halt Blight”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 14, 1946: 4A.
- United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Decennial Census”.
- Vitcheck, Norris. “Confessions of a Block-Buster”. In Christopher W. Wells (ed.). *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018: 42-48.
- “Why Bother With Interview When Deck’s Been Stacked?”. *Southern Illinoisian*, August 5, 1989.

### Secondary sources

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York City: The New Press, 2010.
- Baggerman, Arianne, Rudolf Dekker, and Michael Mascuch (eds.). *Memory, Family, and Self: Tuscan Family Books and Other European Egodocuments (14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century)*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014.
- Banfield, Edward C. *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*. Boston: Little Brown, 1968.
- Birmingham, Elizabeth. “Reframing the Ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, Structural Racism, and African American Rhetoric as a Space for Cultural Critique”. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63.3 (1999): 291-330.
- Bristol, Katharine. “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44.3 (1991): 163-171.
- Bruegmann, Robert. *Sprawl: A Compact History* (paperback edition). Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2005/2006.
- Burke, Peter. *History and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.
- Callinicos, Alex. *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014.
- Cambria, Nancy, e.a. *Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide*. St Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis, 2018.

- Chappell, David A. "Active Agents versus Passive Victims: Decolonized Historiography of Problematic Paradigm". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 7.2 (1995): 303-326.
- Cohen, Robin. "Diaspora and the State: from Victims to Challengers". *International Affairs*, 72.3 (1996): 507-520.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Nation; Some Implications for Black Family Studies". *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29.1 (1998): 27-36.
- Cubitt, Geoffrey. *History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Dreier, Peter. "How Banks Color Community Development". *Challenge*, 34.6 (1991): 15-23.
- Florida, Richard. *The New Urban Crisis: Gentrification, Housing Bubbles, Growing Inequality, and What We Can Do About It*. London: OneWorld, 2017.
- Frazier, Franklin E. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1939.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*. (transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith) New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol 1: An Introduction*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Gans, Herbert J. "From 'Underclass' to 'Undercaste': Some Observations About the Future of the Post-Industrial Economy and its Major Victims". In Enzo Mingione (ed.). *Urban Poverty and the Underclass*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996: 141-152.
- George, Joseph. *Postmodern Suburban Spaces: Philosophy, Ethics, and Community in Post-War American Fiction*. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Gordon, Colin. "Blighting the Way: Urban Renewal, Economic Development, and the Elusive Definition of Blight". *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 31.2 (2004): 305-337.
- Gordon, Colin. *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Gotham, Kevin Fox. *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014.
- Greenberg, Daniel L., Lauren L. Deasy, and Amelia L. Zasadski. "Autobiographical Memory". In: James D. Wright (ed.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Volume 2. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015: 282-288.
- Hamer, Jennifer. *Abandoned in the Heartland: Work, Family and Living in East St. Louis*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012.
- Hirsch, Arnold R. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998.
- Henderson, A. Scott. "'Tarred with the Exceptional Image': Public Housing and Popular Discourse, 1950-1990". *American Studies*, 36.1 (1995): 31-52.
- Hunt, Bradford D. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Jencks, Charles. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1977.

- Larsen, Lawrence H. *History of Missouri, Vol. 4: 1953-2003*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004.
- Lewis, Oscar. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
- Locke, Terry. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London/New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Lumpkins, Charles L. *Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945*. N.p. (unpublished PhD dissertation), 2006.
- McDonald, John F. *Urban America: Growth, Crisis and Rebirth*. London: M.E. Sharpe, 2008.
- McLeod, Mary. “‘Architecture or Revolution’: Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change”. *Art Journal*, 43.2 (1983): 137-147.
- Neumann, Tracy. *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transition of North America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Newman, Oscar. *Defensible Space*. New York: MacMillan, 1972.
- Odemerho, Francis C., and Erica M. Spells. “The Perception of Africa by African Americans in the Predominantly Black Community of East St. Louis”. *African Geographical Review*, 32.2 (2013): 172-186.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.
- Orser, W. Edward. *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994.
- Pendall, Rolf. “Local Land Use Regulation and the Chain of Exclusion”. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66.2 (2000): 125-142.
- Rainwater, Lee. *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum*. New York: Routledge, 1970.
- Rothstein, Richard. “The Making of Ferguson”. *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Developmental Law*. 24.2 (2015): 165-204.
- Sampson, Robert J., and Stephen W. Raudenbush. “Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of ‘Broken Windows’”. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 67.4 (2004): 319-342.
- Self, Robert O. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Schuyler, David. *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, 1940-1980*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002.
- Schuyler, David. “Review: *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*”. *The American Historical Review*, 114.4 (2009): 1091-1092.
- Shapin, Steven. *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

- Simawe, Saadi A. "Introduction: the Agency of Sound in African American Fiction". In Saadi A. Simawe (ed.). *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Tighe, J. Rosie, and Joanna P. Ganning. "The Divergent City: Unequal and Uneven Development in St. Louis". *Urban Geography*, 36.5 (2015): 654-673.
- Tolnay, Stewart A. "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003): 209-232.
- Trivers, Ian, and Joanna Rosenthal. "A Picture is Worth 930 Words: The Delmar Divide". *Focus on Geography*, winter issue (2015): 199-200.
- Vicino, Thomas J. *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Wilson, William Julius. "The Black Underclass". *The Wilson Quarterly*, 8.2 (1984): 88-99.