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The Edge and the Center: Gated Communities and the Discourse of Urban Fear

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## The Edge and the Center: Gated Communities and the Discourse of Urban Fear

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Across America, middle-class and upper-middle-class gated communities are creating new forms of exclusion and residential segregation, exacerbating social cleavages that already exist (Blakely and Snyder 1997; Higley 1995; Lang and Danielson 1997; Marcuse 1997). While historically secured and gated communities were built in the United States to protect estates and to contain the leisure world of retirees, these urban and suburban developments now target a much broader market, including families with children (Guterson 1992; Lofland 1998). This retreat to secured enclaves with walls, gates, and guards materially and symbolically contradicts American ethos and values, threatens public access to open space, and creates yet another barrier to social interaction, building of social networks, as well as increased tolerance of diverse cultural/racial/social groups (Davis 1992; Devine 1996; Etzoni 1995; Judd 1995; McKenzie 1994).

In this paper, I explore how the discourse of fear of violence and crime and the search for a secure community by those who live in gated communities in the United States legitimates and rationalizes class-based exclusion strategies and residential segregation. I examine whether residents of cities experiencing increasing cultural diversity are fleeing neighborhoods because they have experienced a "loss of place" and therefore feel unsafe and insecure (Altman and Low 1992). Some people are responding to this loss by choosing to buy into a defensive space, a walled and guarded community that they can call home. [*gated communities, United States, urban fear*]

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Contemporary anthropological studies of the city focus predominantly on the center, producing ethnographies of culturally significant places such as markets, housing projects, gardens, plazas, convention centers, waterfront developments, and homeless shelters that articulate macro- and micro-urban processes (Low 1999). These studies illuminate both the material and metaphorical power of spatial analysis for theorizing the city. One problem, however, is the perpetuation of an uneasy relationship between suburban and urban studies. The historical division between "rural" and "urban" exacerbates this tendency by sorting researchers into separate disciplinary and methodological camps.

The shift to a spatial analysis of the city requires reconsidering this separation in that contradictions and conflicts at the center are often drawn more vividly at the edge.<sup>1</sup> So we find that the suburban "mall of America" is a spatial counterpart of economic restructuring and the de-industrialization of central cities (Zukin 1991); and the cultural diversity and racial tensions of the center are reflected in the segregation and social homogeneity of the suburbs (Massey and Denton 1988). The gated residential development is particularly intriguing, mirroring changes in social values that accompany rapid globalization. Understanding this spatial form, its historical and cultural context, and

why residents choose to live there provides an important perspective on the central city that is often overlooked.

For a majority of Americans the distance from suburb to city, or from work to home, is maintained through a complex social discourse. Anti-urban sentiment is often expressed as fear of violence and crime that is said to pervade the city. Within gated communities, though, the intensity of the discourse of urban fear suggests other underlying societal explanations. In this study, I explore the complex interconnections between this discourse, loss of a sense of place, and increasing class separation. I suggest that adding walls, gates, and guards produces a landscape that encodes class relations and residential (race/class/ethnic/gender) segregation more permanently in the built environment (Low 1997). Understanding how this landscape is legitimated by a discourse of fear of crime and violence helps to uncover how this design form is materially and rhetorically created.

I use thematic content analysis to document the existence of urban fear in its many forms and its influence on residents' residential narratives. Critical discourse analysis provides a complementary methodology for decoding talk about urban fear as an acceptable, socially constructed discourse about class exclusion and racial/ethnic/cultural bias. The use of urban fear discourse reinforces residents' claims

for their need to live behind gates and walls because of dangers or "others" that lurk outside.

### Unlocking the Gated Community

Estimates of the number of people who live in gated communities within the United States vary from 4 million to 8 million (Architectural Record 1997). One-third of all new homes built in the United States in recent years are in gated residential developments (Blakely and Snyder 1997), and in areas such as Tampa, Florida, where crime is a high-profile problem, gated communities account for four out of five home sales of \$300,000 or more (Fischler 1998).

Systems of walls and class division are deeply ingrained in historic Europe as a means of wealthy people protecting themselves from the local population (Blakely and Snyder 1997; Turner 1999). In the United States, the early settlements of Roanoke and Jamestown and Spanish fort towns were walled and defended to protect colonists from attack. But with the virtual elimination of the indigenous population, the need for defensive walls ceased to exist (King 1990).

At the turn of the twentieth century, secured and gated communities in the United States were built to protect family estates and wealthy citizens, exemplified by New York's Tuxedo Park or the private streets of St. Louis. By the late 1960s and 1970s, planned retirement communities were the first places where middle-class Americans could wall themselves off. Gates then spread to resorts and country club developments, and finally to middle-class suburban developments. In the 1980s, real estate speculation accelerated the building of gated communities around golf courses designed for exclusivity, prestige, and leisure. This emerging social phenomenon of white, middle-class people retreating to new, walled private communities was reported in magazine articles (Guterson 1992), radio talk shows on National Public Radio, television talk shows such as Phil Donahue (Donahue 1993), and feature articles in the *New York Times* (Fischler 1998).

The first centers of construction activity were the Sunbelt states focusing on retirees moving to California and Florida during the 1970s, followed by Texas and Arizona in the 1980s. Since the late 1980s, gates have become ubiquitous, and by the 1990s they have become common even in the Northeast (Blakely and Snyder 1997).

The literature on gated communities identifies a number of reasons for their increase in number and size. I argue elsewhere that gating is a response to late-twentieth-century changes in urban North America (Low 1997). Economic restructuring during the 1970s and 1980s produced a number of social and political changes as a consequence of uneven development resulting from rapid relocation of capital (Harvey 1990; Smith 1984). The shift to the political right during the Reagan years, and the mixture of conservatism and populism in U.S. politics, intensified an ideological focus on free market and capitalist values tilting

power, wealth, and income toward the richest portions of the population (Phillips 1991). While the income share of the upper 20% of Americans rose from 41.6% to 44% from 1980 to 1988, the average after-tax income of the lowest ten percent dropped 10.5% from 1977 to 1987 (Phillips 1991), producing a two-class system of "haves" and "have-nots" based on these structural readjustments to late capitalism (Mollenkopf and Castells 1991).

Mike Davis (1990, 1992) argues that the creation of gated communities, and the addition of guardhouses, walls, and entrance gates to established neighborhoods, is an integral part of the building of the "fortress city." He identifies the so-called militarization of Los Angeles as a strategy for controlling and patrolling the urban poor that is made up of predominantly ethnic—Latino and Black—minorities.<sup>2</sup> Susan Fainstein adds that large development projects in cities like New York and London produce this built environment by forming:

contours which structure social relations, causing commonalities of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class to assume spatial identities. Social groups, in turn, imprint themselves physically on the urban structure through the formation of communities, competition for territory, and segregation—in other words, through clustering, the erection of boundaries, and establishing distance. [1994:1]

The political and economic democratic practices mediating some forms of class separation in the United States, however, are not found in Brazil (Caldeira 1996; Carvalho 1997), other parts of Latin America (Low 1996), or South Africa (Western 1981) where gated condominiums and fortified enclaves are omnipresent. Teresa Caldeira examines São Paulo's economic transformation from 1940 through the 1980s that resulted in increased violence, insecurity, and fear, such that São Paulo became a "city of walls" (1999:87). Through field visits, I have observed the use of walls, gates, locks, and guards by the upper and middle classes in Nairobi, Accra, Dakar, Mexico City, and Caracas to protect residents from assault and property crime and/or the consequences of political upheaval (Low n.d.). Although the cross-cultural examples of gating appear similar, their histories and attributed causation vary tremendously: from racism in South Africa, to property vandalism in Accra, kidnapping and robbery in Mexico City, and car jacking and homicide in Nairobi.<sup>3</sup>

The processes that produce urban and suburban separation in the United States also have a long history based on racism and racial segregation. Blacks in U.S. cities continue to experience a high level of residential segregation based on discriminatory real estate practices and mortgage structures designed to insulate Whites from Blacks (Bulard and Lee 1994; Massey and Denton 1988). Nancy Denton (1994) argues that since the 1980s there has been a pattern of hyper-segregation in the suburbs, reinforced by patterns of residential mobility by race in that Blacks are

less likely to move to the suburbs in the first place, and then more likely to return to the city (South and Crowder 1997).

Sally Merry found that middle-class and upper-middle-class urban and suburban neighborhoods exhibit an increasing pattern of building fences, cutting off relationships with neighbors, and moving out in response to problems and conflicts. At the same time: "Government has expanded its regulatory role. . . . Zoning laws, local police departments, ordinances about dogs, quiet laws, laws against domestic and interpersonal violence, all provide new forms of regulation of family and neighborhood life" (1993:87). In this issue, Merry argues that the regulation of space through architectural design and security devices such as gated communities is generally understood as a complement to disciplinary penalty, and that this new spatial governmentality is fundamentally different in its logic and techniques. Thus, residential segregation created by prejudice and socioeconomic disparities is reinforced by planning practices and policing, implemented by zoning laws and regulations, and subsidized by businesses and banks.

The suburb as an exclusionary enclave where upper-class followed by middle-class residents search for sameness, status, and security in an ideal "new town" or "green oasis" reinforces these patterns (Langdon 1994; McKenzie 1994). Land speculation beginning with the street car suburbs of Philadelphia accelerated the growth of new middle-class enclaves (Jackson 1985). The expanding suburbs of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s generated "white flight" from densely populated, heterogeneous cities (Sibley 1995; Skogan 1995).

The development of common interest developments (CIDs) provides the legal framework for the consolidation of this form of residential segregation (Judd 1995). CID describes "a community in which the residents own or control common areas or shared amenities," and that "carries with it reciprocal rights and obligations enforced by a private governing body" (Louv 1985:85 as cited in Judd 1995:155). Specialized covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions (CC&Rs) create new forms of collective private land tenure and new forms of private government called "homeowner associations" (McKenzie 1994).

The "pod" and "enclave" suburban designs further refine the ability of land-use planners and designers to develop suburban environments where people of different income groups—even in the same development—would have little to no contact with one another (Langdon 1994). Resident behavior, house type, and "taste culture," however, are more subtle means of control (Bourdieu 1984). Nancy and James Duncan (1997) demonstrate how landscape aesthetics function as suburban politics of exclusion, and Evan McKenzie (1994) documents the growing number of legal proceedings in California courts as residents attempt to deregulate their rigidly controlled environments.

The psychological lure of defended space becomes more enticing with increased media coverage and national hysteria about urban crime (Flusty 1997; Judd 1995). News stories chronicle daily murders, rapes, drive-by shootings, drug busts, and kidnapping. An ever-growing proportion of people fear that they will be victimized, such that the fear of crime has increased since the mid-1960s even though there has been a decline in all violent crime since the 1980s (Colvard 1997; Judd 1995; Stone 1996). Violent crime (homicide, robbery, sexual assault, and aggravated assault) fell 12% nationally between 1994 and 1995, while property crime (burglary, theft, and auto theft) declined 9% (Brennan and Zelinka 1997).

Barry Glassner (1999) points out that we are inundated with media reports about the prevalence of crime and violence creating a "culture of fear." But when the actual crime statistics are consulted, the reality is never as grim or devastating as the newspaper and television portrayal. For example, parents are overwhelmed by the amount of media attention given to child abduction and cyberporn. A *Time* article estimating that more than 800,000 children are reported missing every year perpetuated a national panic (Glassner 1999:61). According to Glassner, three out of four parents in a national survey said they fear their child will be kidnapped by a stranger. Criminal justice experts, however, estimate that only 200 to 300 children a year are abducted by non-family members and kept for long periods of time or murdered, while 4,600 (of 64 million children) are abducted and then returned. He makes the point that reporters overstate the actual threat to add drama, convince an editor, or justify more extensive media coverage. His answer to why Americans harbor so many fears is that "immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes" (Glassner 1999:xxviii).

There has been considerable research that links fear of crime to the physical environment. Although none of it focuses specifically on gated communities, it suggests how communities and individuals deal with fear within the context of a local neighborhood. Urban ethnographies suggest that familiarity, avoidance, and surveillance play important roles in allaying these fears. Sally Merry (1982) documents the interactions and perceptions of Black, White, and Chinese residents in a high-rise, low-income project in a large Northeastern city and concludes that lack of familiarity plays an important role in the perception of danger. Eli Anderson (1990) documents avoidance as a coping strategy in his study of "streetwise" behavior of Philadelphians in which residents cross the street when faced with oncoming young Black males. Philippe Bourgois (1995) dramatizes the fear and sense of vulnerability experienced by residents of El Barrio and depicts their strategies of avoidance and surveillance used to deal with street crime. These studies describe how fear is spatially managed in urban contexts,

and how avoidance and streetwise behavior are used by low- to middle-income people to mitigate their fears.

Environmental design studies also connect crime with the built environment beginning with Jane Jacobs's (1961) recommendations for creating safer streets and neighborhoods. But it was Oscar Newman (1972) who brought the relationship of crime and the physical environment to the attention of the public. He argues that the reason high-rise buildings are considered dangerous is that the people who live in them cannot defend—see, own, or identify—their territory. Newman proposes that gating city streets can promote greater safety and higher house values as long as the percentage of minority residents is kept within strict limits (Newman 1980). Timothy Crowe (1991), a criminologist who coined the phrase “crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED),” has instituted a widespread CPTED program that involves all local agencies—police, fire, public works, traffic, and administration—as well as planners in the formulation and review of neighborhood plans and designs implementing Newman's defensive space concepts.

These diverse studies depict a social world with increasing reliance on urban fortification, policing, and segregation. A number of legal solutions have emerged, such as common interest developments and homeowners associations, planning solutions such as pod and enclave development, design solutions such as crime prevention through environmental design, and behavioral solutions such as avoidance and surveillance of the street. Gated communities respond to middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals' desire for community and intimacy and facilitate avoidance, separation, and surveillance. They bring individual preferences, social forces, and the physical environment together in an architectural reality and cultural metaphor.

Upon completing a national survey of gated community residents, Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder come to a similar conclusion:

In this era of dramatic demographic, economic and social change, there is a growing fear about the future of America. Many feel vulnerable, unsure of their place and the stability of their neighborhoods. . . . This is reflected in an increasing fear of crime that is unrelated to actual crime trends or locations, and in the growing numbers of methods used to control the physical environment for physical and economic security. The phenomenon of walled cities and gated communities is a dramatic manifestation of a new fortress mentality growing in America. [1997:1–2]

## Methodology

### Research Setting

The study is based on two gated communities, each located at the edge of a culturally diverse city with publicized incidents of urban crime. San Antonio and New York City

are known for their multiculturalism, cultural inclusiveness, as well as interethnic conflicts resulting from rapid changes in neighborhood composition. Both cities have increasing socioeconomic disparities, a history of residential segregation, and a documented movement of middle-class residents moving to an ever widening outer ring of suburbs. They also provide excellent comparative cases because of differences between them in (1) population size and density, (2) history of gated community development, (3) scale and design of the gated communities, (4) legal and governmental structure, (5) crime rates for the region, and (6) cultural context and norms of behavior. Because of the complexity and size of New York City, I use Queens, the outer borough adjacent to the study site, to describe the cultural context, population size, and crime statistics relevant to this analysis. Many of the residents cited in this article moved from Queens to their gated community.

San Antonio is a medium-size city with an estimated population of 1,464,356 inhabitants in 1995. The city began in the eighteenth century as a cohesion of different Spanish missions and has retained much of its Mexican-Spanish heritage. Since 1990, Texas has accounted for 14% of all new jobs created in the United States, including rapid growth in high-tech manufacturing causing labor shortages of highly trained workers. Population growth in the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)<sup>4</sup> grew 21.5% from 1980 to 1990 and an additional 10.1% from 1990 to 1994 (America's Top-Rated Cities 1997). This increase in skilled jobs and numbers of residents stimulated construction of new middle-class suburbs and a downtown renovation project known as Riverwalk. It was in San Antonio that I first gained entrance to a number of homes located within a locked, gated, and walled community on the outskirts of the city and found young, white, middle-class teenagers discussing their fear of “Mexicans” who live nearby.

San Antonio's high rates of crime—7,993.9 crimes per 100,000 in the city compared to 3,906.3 per 100,000 in the suburbs in 1995—occur in poorer, urban neighborhoods and not in the suburban areas (U.S. Department of Justice 1995). In 1995, murder occurred almost four times more frequently in the city than in the suburbs—14.2 per 100,000 compared to 3.7 per 100,000; robberies occurred more than five times more frequently—234.5 per 100,000 compared to 42.4 per 100,000. Nevertheless, suburban residents feel afraid. They read about kidnapping and drive-by shootings, or they hear stories from their friends of burglaries in the suburbs. One resident called it a “crime movement” at one point in the interview—an interesting commentary that captures the “waves of crime” reported in San Antonio's only newspaper, the *San Antonio Express-News*.

New York City, in comparison to San Antonio, is a global city of more than 7 million inhabitants. Located on the eastern seaboard, New York City has been a major entryway

for immigrants from Europe, via Ellis Island, and more recently from Africa, parts of Asia, and the Middle East. Queens, the easternmost borough, is known for its cultural diversity and ethnic neighborhoods where over 138 languages are spoken (Sanjek 1998). Queens became incorporated into New York City in 1897, linked by both the Long Island Railroad and electric trolleys to Brooklyn, and to Manhattan-bound ferries from Long Island City (Gregory 1998). With a population of 1,966,685 in 1997, it provides a better comparison to San Antonio because of its scale and proximity to Long Island suburbs.

Even though Seagate in Brooklyn is an example of a gated community built more than one hundred years ago, and doorman buildings of Manhattan have guarded entrances, there are only a few gated residential developments in New York City. In Queens, there are only three gated condominium complexes comprised of townhouses and apartments. The loss of manufacturing jobs—10 million square feet of industrial space has been converted to retail, residential, or office space—as well as lower salaries and lack of available land for development may account for this slow growth. Although Queens is the most economically diverse of the New York City boroughs with manufacturing, transportation, trade, and service each accounting for at least 10% of private sector jobs in 1998, it has not experienced the same accelerated growth in the service sector as the rest of New York City (McCall 2000). Further, in the early 1990s, higher paying jobs were being replaced with lower paying ones as growth occurred in areas offering lower average salaries (McCall 2000).

Nassau County, Long Island, on the other hand, experienced a resurgence of residential development, some of it gated, following the decline of the real estate market in the early 1990s. With a population of 1,298,842 in 1997, Nassau County abuts the eastern boundary of Queens and provides a suburban comparison for the analysis of crime statistics.

Crime rates have fallen much faster around New York City than in the nation. From 1990 to 1995, violent crime had dropped 44.4% in New York City compared to a 6.5% drop for the nation as a whole. But the rate of violent crime is still double the national average, with 1,324 violent crimes per 100,000 for New York City and 685 violent crimes per 100,000 for the United States reported in 1996 (New York Times 1997). Property crime has experienced a similar drop with a decline of 47% in New York City compared to 9.7% for the nation from 1990 to 1995 (New York Times 1997). Urban crime rates, though, are still higher than those in the suburbs. For example, in 1997 the total number of crimes of all types was 95,751 for Queens with a population of 1,966,685 compared to 29,770 for Nassau County with a population of 1,298,842—about double<sup>5</sup> in the city compared to the suburb. For violent crimes, such as murder, the difference is even greater with 207 murders in Queens and 26 murders in Nassau County reported in 1997 (National Archive of Criminal Justice Data 1997).

New suburban housing developments with surrounding walls and restrictive gates located approximately thirty minutes drive from their respective downtown city halls were selected at the edge of each city. Single-family house



Figure 1. Gated entry.





**Figure 2.** Walls and wide streets. Author on-site.

prices ranged from \$650,000 to \$880,000 in New York and \$350,000 to \$650,000 in San Antonio in 1995.<sup>6</sup> Each gated community has its own regional style and distinctive design features, but all are enclosed by a five- to six-foot masonry wall broken only by the entry gates and monitored in person by a guard (New York) or by video camera from a central guardhouse (San Antonio) (Figure 1).

The New York development is situated on an old estate with the original manor house retained as a community center. The individual houses are large (approximately 3,500 to 4,500 square feet), mostly two-story structures, built in a variety of traditional styles: Hampton Cottage, Nantucket Village, Mid-Atlantic Colonial, and Western Ranch. Houses are organized along a winding thoroughfare with dead-end streets branching off, leading to groups of houses clustered quite close together on small lots of less than a third of an acre. The remaining property is landscaped to create a park-like atmosphere. Since the community was developed as a community interest development, all of the common grounds are maintained by the homeowners association. The final community will contain 141 houses, tennis courts, a swimming pool, and a clubhouse.

Not all the lots have been purchased, and houses are still being built.

The San Antonio gated community is part of a much larger northern suburban development centered on a private golf and tennis club with swimming pools, restaurant, and clubhouse. The subdivision includes 120 lots, a few fronting one section of the golf course, surrounded by a six-foot masonry wall (Figure 2). The main entrance is controlled by a grid-design gate that swings opens electronically by a hand transmitter or by a guard who is contacted by an intercom and video camera connection. The broad entrance road divides into two sections leading to a series of short streets ending in cul-de-sacs. The houses are mostly large (3,500–5,500 square feet), two-story brick Colonials or stucco Scottsdale designs (Figure 3) with a few one-story brick ranch-style houses. More than two-thirds of the houses have been built and occupied, while the remaining lots are currently under construction.

### **Research Design and Specific Methods**

Field methods included open-ended interviews with residents, participant-observation within and around the



**Figure 3.** Scottsdale-style house.

communities, interviews with key informants such as the developers and real estate agents, and the collection of marketing, sales, and advertising documents. An unstructured interview guide was developed to elicit residents' decision-making processes concerning their move to the gated community. The research team<sup>7</sup> collected field notes and interviews in the New York area, while I worked alone in San Antonio. The interviews lasted between one to two hours, depending on whether the interviewer was taken on a tour of the house. We did not ask to be taken on a tour, but many times interviewees offered, and we used the tour to learn more about the person's tastes, interests, and preferences.

It was difficult to obtain entry into these communities and to contact residents. A sales manager in the gated community outside of New York City helped by contacting two residents she thought would be willing to speak with us. We then used introductions either from the sales manager or from other interviewees to complete the first ten interviews. In San Antonio, a local resident provided entree by contacting two residents; those residents referred four others, and I met three interviewees strolling on the golf path on the weekends.

Opportunities for participant-observation were limited, but it was possible to talk with people while they were exercising or walking their dogs, attending homeowner and club meetings, and participating in neighborhood celebrations. Further, spending time in the local commercial areas—shopping, going to restaurants, and visiting real estate agents—provided other contexts for learning about everyday life.

Open-ended, unstructured interviews were conducted in the home with the wife, husband, or husband and wife together over a three-year period from 1995 to 1998. The majority of the interviewees were European Americans and native born, however, three interviews were in households where one spouse was born in Latin America, one interviewee was born in the South Pacific, and one interviewee's spouse was born in the Middle East. Interviewees were aged 27 through 75; all husbands were either professionals such as doctors or lawyers, businessmen, or retired from these same pursuits. In most cases the wives remained at home, while the husband commuted to his place of work. A few women worked part-time.



## Analysis

### *Ethnographic analysis*

The ethnographic analysis of participant-observation field notes focused on identifying empirical evidence of changes in the local environment. Further, it produced data on casual conversations and everyday observations that naturally occurred and provided a test of ecological validity for data collected through the interviews. Field notes were coded by the themes that emerged during the research process.

### *Content analysis*

A thematic content analysis of the interviews and documents collected from the media, marketing, and sales materials provided both a qualitative and quantitative understanding of the range of discourse available. The interviews were coded based on themes identified in the interviews and in the ethnographic fieldwork. The list of themes provided a qualitative presentation of the data. Depending on the number and specificity of the themes, they were consolidated to allow for a quantitative presentation (ranking, numbering, calculation of percentages) of the expression of those themes.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

A critical discourse analysis of the 20 interviews identified covert concerns with social order, social control, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, class consciousness and status anxiety, social mobility, and racism, as well as fear of crime and violence, and overt expressions of a desire for a new home, beautiful setting, and sense of community. Following Fairclough (1995), I assume that language is a form of social practice that is historically situated and dialectical to the social context, that is, language is both socially shaped and socially shaping. Since language is widely perceived as transparent, it is difficult to see how language produces, reproduces, and transforms social structures and social relations. Yet, it is through texts that social control and social domination are exercised—through the everyday social action of language. Thus, it is necessary to establish a “critical language awareness” (Fairclough 1995: 209) to uncover the social and political goals of everyday discourse. Critical discourse analysis, through (1) the analysis of context, (2) the analysis of processes of text production and interpretation, and (3) the analysis of the text, reinterprets traditional models of interview analysis. For instance, in Fairclough’s theory, urban fear of crime and violence could be a discursive practice used to “naturalize” social and physical exclusionary practices, as well as a statement of emotion and/or explanation for an action or decision. Charles Briggs’s (1986) emphasis on reflexivity

and the relationship of politics to methodology also informs my analysis.

Nineteen of the twenty interviews were transcribed in full.<sup>8</sup> Next, I read through the interview transcripts and systematically noted all instances in which the covert concerns (see above) were discussed or alluded to. This process produced the body of the data set. In the final stage, I identified different strategies used to talk about living in a gated community. The details of the linguistic constructions with their immediate functions produced an outline of the ideological structure of the conversation. The goal was not to quantify the occurrence of particular themes or rhetorical strategies, but, more importantly, to illustrate their situated effects (Dixon and Reicher 1997:368).

## The Search for Safety and Security

A majority of interviewees perceive an increase of the crime in their urban neighborhoods before moving to a gated community. Eighteen of the twenty interviews include discussions of residents’ search for a sense of safety and security in their choice of a gated community, and their relief upon settling in that they did feel safer and more secure with the addition of gates, walls, and guards. Many interviewees mention changes in social composition of the surrounding areas as a primary motivation for moving, and the loss of local amenities, particularly in the New York area. Interviewees also talk about the investment value of the house, the status implications of their move, and their need for more space and privacy, but these concerns are not examined in this analysis.

One noteworthy finding is that once a person lives in a gated community, they say that they would always choose a gated community again, even if safety was not the basis of their initial decision. Three of the twenty interviewees had lived previously in gated developments: one family lived in Latin America where they enjoyed the security of a gated and guarded compound; one family retired first in Florida where most retirement communities are gated; and one newly married woman had lived in a gated condominium complex. These couples did not even consider a non-gated community when looking for a new home.

### New York

Nine of the ten interviewees in New York mention urban crime as a major reason for selecting a gated community. The tenth interviewee, although she says that crime and safety had no bearing on why they moved, mentions that in her old neighborhood her car had been stolen from outside her door.

Nine of the ten interviewees are from the local area and moved from New York City or a nearby Long Island urban center. Many are quite vocal about the changes that they experienced in their original neighborhoods. For instance,

Sharon is willing to “give up community convenience for safety.” She says that increased local political corruption and neighborhood deterioration left her feeling uncomfortable in the house where she had lived for more than twenty-five years. Even though she knew everyone in her old neighborhood and enjoyed walking to the corner store,

when Bloomingdale’s moved out and Kmart moved in, it just brought in a different group of people . . . and it wasn’t the safe place that it was. . . . I think it’s safer having a gated community. . . . They are not going to steal my car in the garage. . . . [In the old neighborhood] every time we heard an alarm we were looking out the window. My daughter and son-in-law lived next door and their car was stolen twice.

Barbara and her husband Alvin express it differently:

**Alvin:** [Our old neighborhood was] a very, very educated community. You know so every one goes on to college, and it stressed the role of family, and you know, it’s just a wonderful community. But it is changing, it’s undergoing internal transformations.

**Barbara:** It’s ethnic changes.

**Alvin:** Yeah, ethnic changes, that’s a very good way of putting it.

**Interviewer:** And is this something that started to happen more recently?

**Barbara:** In the last, probably, seven to eight years.

Cynthia also is concerned about staying in her old neighborhood. At first she did not want to live in a house at all since she would feel afraid being alone. She had grown up in Queens and would never live in a house there, because they had been robbed. Her childhood home had been in a nice neighborhood where thieves knew they could find valuable things to steal:

**Cynthia:** And then I have a lot of friends who live in a neighborhood in Queens, and there’s been more than 48 robberies there in the last year and a half. And I said to myself, those are homes with security and dogs and this and that. . .

**Interviewer:** And are they gated?

**Cynthia:** No, they’re not gated. They had alarms, and they were getting robbed because they were cutting the alarms, the phone wires outside. So I’m saying to myself, all this is in my mind, and I’m saying . . . I can get robbed. That’s why I moved. . .

Sally also feels that the neighborhood where she lived was changing: she was having problems finding a place to park, and people were going through her trash at night. Her bicycle was stolen off her terrace, and her friend’s car was stolen. Her husband began to travel a lot, and she could not accompany her husband on his trips because she was worried about being robbed. They loved their old neighborhood, but it no longer offered safety and comfort. So they decided to move to a gated community that would provide the security that she felt they now needed. Once having made the decision and completed the move, she said that she loved her newly found freedom from house responsibilities and parking problems. As she put it:

I got to feel like I was a prisoner in the house. . . . You didn’t park on the street too long because you are afraid your car is going to be missing something when you get out, or the whole car is missing. . . . So there’s a lot of things we have the freedom here to do that we didn’t do before. . . .

Helen comments that it was “very nice at night to come in . . . and to have a gate and there’s only one entrance to the property, so I think that makes for possibly less robberies. . . .” For her, safety is:

not a main concern, but a concern. Otherwise, if I bought something . . . on two acres of land, I would have been very uncomfortable there . . . no children around . . . just being alone now in the dark . . . and my husband would get home later. I just didn’t want to be surrounded by two acres of land.

She has friends (in the old neighborhood) who were burglarized and had become more distressed. She feels the guards at the entrance are not careful, but it is still difficult for thieves to escape. Her mother and her children also live in gated communities.

## San Antonio

Nine of the interviewees in San Antonio mention crime and a fear of “others” as a reason for moving. Stay-at-home mothers like Felicia and Donna worry about threats to their children. Felicia states her feelings about her fear of crime and other people very clearly:

**Setha:** . . . has it changed how you feel about being in the gated community?

**Felicia:** Yes. It allows a lot more freedom for my daughter to go outside and play. We’re in San Antonio, and I believe the whole country knows how many child kidnappings we’ve had. . . . And I believe that my husband would not ever allow her outside to play without direct adult supervision unless we were gated. It allows us freedom to walk at night, if we choose to. It has, you know, it does have a flip side.

**Setha:** What flip side?

**Felicia:** Several things. First of all, it’s a false sense of safety if you think about it, because our security people are not “Johnny-on-the-spot,” so to speak, and anybody who wants to jump the gate could jump the gate. . . . There’s a perception of safety that may not be real, that could potentially leave one more vulnerable if there was ever an attack.

\* \* \*

**Setha:** Who lives in your community?

**Felicia:** People who are retired and don’t want to maintain large yards. . . . People who want to raise families in a more protected environment [long pause].

**Setha:** What do you mean by that?

**Felicia:** There are a lot of families who have, in the last couple of years, after we built, as the crime rate, or the reporting of that crime rate, has become such a prominent part of the news of the community, there’s been a lot of “fear flight.” I’ve mentioned that people who were building or going to build based

on wanting to get out of the very exclusive subdivisions without a gate, solely for the gate.

**Setha:** Really. There has been?

**Felicia:** Oh, yeah. I was telling you about a family that was shopping [for a house in Felicia's gated community] because they had been randomly robbed many times.

\* \* \*

**Felicia:** When I leave the area entirely and go downtown [little laugh], I feel quite threatened, just being out in normal urban areas, unrestricted urban areas. . . . Please let me explain. The north central part of this city, by and large, is middle class to upper middle class. Period. There are very few pockets of poverty. Very few. And therefore if you go to any store, you will look around and most of the clientele will be middle class as you are yourself. So you are somewhat insulated. But if you go downtown, which is much more mixed, where everybody goes, I feel much more threatened.

**Setha:** Okay.

**Felicia:** My daughter feels very threatened when she sees poor people.

**Setha:** How do you explain that?

**Felicia:** She hasn't had enough exposure. We were driving next to a truck with some day laborers and equipment in the back, and we were parked beside them at the light. She wanted to move because she was afraid those people were going to come and get her. They looked scary to her. I explained that they were workmen, they're the "backbone of our country," they're coming from work, you know, but . . .

Donna's concerns with safety also focus on her child and his reactions to the city. She, like Felicia, is aware that a false sense of security develops living inside the gates putting her and her children in greater danger:

**Donna:** You know, he's always so scared. . . . It has made a world of difference in him since we've been out here.

**Setha:** Really?

**Donna:** A world of difference. And it is that sense of security that they don't think people are roaming the neighborhoods and the streets and that there's people out there that can hurt him.

**Setha:** Ah . . . that's incredible.

**Donna:** . . . That's what's been most important to my husband, to get the children out here where they can feel safe, and we feel safe if they could go out in the streets and not worry that someone is going to grab them. . . . We feel so secure and maybe that's wrong too.

**Setha:** In what sense?

**Donna:** You know, we've got workers out here, and we still think "oh, they're safe out here". . . . In the other neighborhood I never let him get out of my sight for a minute. Of course they were a little bit younger too, but I just, would never, you know, think of letting them go to the next street over. It would have scared me to death, because you didn't know. There was so much traffic coming in and out, you never knew who was cruising the street and how fast they can grab a child. And I don't feel that way in our area at all . . . ever.

Other San Antonio interviewees are less dramatic in expressing their concerns with safety and concentrate more

on taxation and the quality of the security system and guards. Harry and his wife feel that the biggest difference with gating is "not just anyone can come by." They are more upset about the way that the government treats private gated communities in terms of taxation. Karen was not even looking for a place in a secured area:

**Karen:** It was just by accident that it was [gated]. . . . But after living here, if we moved it would be different.

**Setha:** And why is that?

**Karen:** Because after seeing . . . this is a very nice neighborhood and after seeing that there are so many beautiful neighborhoods here and in other parts of the country that are not in a secure area, that's where burglary and murders take place, not here, because it's an open door [there] . . . come on [in]. Why should they try to do anything here when they can go somewhere else first? It's a strong deterrent, needless to say.

Other residents are not so sure that the gates are an adequate deterrent. Edith talks about her problems with the security guards who supposedly patrol at night and monitor the gates with security cameras. She feels the guards do not do their job. Another interviewee points out that with any gate monitored by a security camera and a guard in a remote station, two cars can enter at the same time creating an unsafe situation.

There seems to be no end to residents' concern with safety and security. In both New York and San Antonio, most residents have burglar alarms they keep armed even when home during the day.

### Critical Discourse Analysis Findings

In order to get at underlying social values, I selected sections of the interviews that refer to "others" (see Felicia and Barbara and Alvin excerpts presented above). I am trying to get at what Michael Billig calls "the dialogic unconscious," a concept by which the processes of repression can be studied discursively (1997:139). I assume that some of the evidence I am looking for is "repressed," that it is hidden not only from the interviewer, because it is socially unacceptable to talk about class and race, but from the interviewee as well because these concerns are also psychologically unacceptable. According to Billig (1997), conversational interaction can have repressive functions as well as expressive ones, so what is said can be used to get at what is not said.

Using John Dixon and Steve Reicher's article "Intergroup Contact and Desegregation in the New South Africa" as a model, I focus on the rhetorical dimension of intergroup contact to elicit narratives about maintaining, justifying, or challenging racist (or elitist) practices (1997:368–369). For instance, Dixon and Reicher identify a number of "disclaiming statements" about their interviewees' racist attitudes they were able to elicit by asking their respondents about their new Black neighbors in a legalized squatter settlement. In the interviews, similar questions were asked,

about “Mexican laborers” in San Antonio or “recent immigrants” in New York, to produce disclaiming statements and lead to a better understanding of the social categories used by gated community residents.

For instance, after a long discussion identifying middle-class spaces in the city, Felicia tells a story about her daughter feeling threatened by day laborers. She ends the story with a disclaiming statement, explaining to her daughter in the story (and indirectly to me) that they are “workmen,” the “backbone of our country.” Her disclaiming statement highlights her acute understanding of social categories and how she uses those categories to legitimate her discursive goals.

Another example of disclaiming occurs when the husband and wife in New York begin talking about the deterioration of their urban neighborhood. Barbara offers “it’s ethnic changes” to Alvin who is trying to articulate what happened that made them leave. He then repeats her term, “ethnic changes,” to characterize the more elusive transformations that he was trying to get at.

In a recent presentation, Collette Daiute (2000) suggests that there are five ways to interrogate a narrative: (1) as reporting an event, (2) as evaluating the event, (3) as constructing the meaning of the event, (4) as a critique of the event, and (5) as socially positioning the speaker. I have found her method helpful in identifying otherwise unarticulated discursive goals of the interviewees. For instance, Cynthia reports that there were more than 48 robberies in her neighborhood in Queens last year. She then evaluates those robberies by pointing out that they were of homes with security and dogs, but not with gates. She then uses the logic of these two statements to construct the meaning of her move to a gated community. Finally, she critiques her own understanding: “so I’m saying to myself, all this in my mind, and I’m saying. . . . I can get robbed,” and positions herself with people inside the gated community (the smart ones) rather than with those living outside (those who are vulnerable to robberies).

### Discussion

In New York, residents are fleeing deteriorating urban neighborhoods with increased ethnic diversity and petty crimes, concluding that the neighborhood is “just not what it used to be.”<sup>9</sup> New Yorkers cite changes in the local stores, problems with parking and securing a car, and frequent robberies of bicycles and cars. In San Antonio there is a similar pattern, but here the emphasis is on a fear of kidnapping and illegal Mexican workers. Residents cite newspaper stories of children being kidnapped, drive-by shootings, neighbors being burglarized, and talk about the large number of “break-ins.”

The intensity of the language and underlying social discourse seems more intense in San Antonio. As a younger, sprawling, Southern city it has much greater horizontal

spatial segregation than the older boroughs and Long Island suburbs of New York City. As Felicia explains, residents of the northern outskirts of San Antonio are physically insulated from the poorer sections of the city. In New York City this kind of spatial and social insulation is much harder to achieve. Nonetheless, in both cities, residents move to gated communities based on what Felicia calls “fear flight,” the desire to protect oneself, family, and property from dangers perceived as overwhelming them. Yet gating offers a kind of incomplete boundedness<sup>10</sup> in that workers from feared groups enter to work for residents, and residents themselves need to leave to shop.<sup>11</sup>

Whether it is kidnapping or bike snatching, Mexican laborers or “ethnic changes,” the message is the same: residents are using the walls, entry gates, and guards in an effort to keep the perceived dangers outside of their homes, neighborhoods, and social world. The physical distance between them and the “others” is so close that contact incites fear and concern, and in response they are constructing exclusive, private, residential developments where they can keep other people out with guards and gates. The walls are making visible the systems of exclusion that are already there, now constructed in concrete.

### Conclusions

From these interviews there appears to be a wealth of data about fear of crime, increased social diversity, and neighborhood change. Residents talk about their fear of the poor, the workers, the “Mexicans,” and the “newcomers,” as well as their retreat behind walls where they think they will be safe. But there is fear even behind the walls. As the two mothers from San Antonio point out, there are workers who enter the community everyday, and they must go out in order to buy groceries, shop, or see a movie. The gates provide some protection, but they would still like more. I wonder what “more” would be? Even though the gates and guards exclude the feared “others” from living with them, “they” can slip by the gate, follow your car in, crawl over the wall, or worse, the guard can fall asleep or be a criminal himself. Informal conversations about the screening of guards and how they are hired, as well as discussions about increasing the height and length of the protective walls as new threats appear, are frequent in the locker room of the health club, on the tennis court, and during strolls in the community in the evening. What would be the next step in this progression?

In this paper, I have not considered why developers are building gated communities, yet even without an analysis of marketing strategies, the allure of the gated community is clear. Even residents who did not select the community for its gates now would only live behind protective walls. Further, during the day residents are primarily women who do not work. Is the gated community creating new patterns of gendering in these spaces? What about the men who go

outside the community by day to work? Are they the ones who primarily find a refuge from diversity when coming home? And gates and walls also have an impact on children and their relationship to other people and environments. Will the children who grow up in these new communities depend on walls for their sense of security and safety? What does it mean that 17 teenage heroin overdoses occurred in the suburban gated communities of Plano, Texas, in 1998 (Durrington 1999)? Will the walls and gates become standard for any middle-class home? And with what consequence for the future?

This paper suggests that the discourse of urban fear encodes other social concerns including class, race, and ethnic exclusivity as well as gender.<sup>12</sup> It provides a verbal component that complements, even reinforces, the visual landscape of fear created by the walls, gates, and guards. By matching the discourse of the inhabitants with the ideological thrust of the material setting, we enrich our understanding of the social construction and social production of places where the well-to-do live (Low 2000; Tuan 1979).<sup>13</sup>

Urban fear, and its relationship to new forms of social ordering, needs to be better understood in the context of the entire metropolis. The spatial ordering of the edge responds to the social dialectic of the center, played out in an ever changing suburban landscape.

## Notes

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1. Kristin Koptiuch contributed this idea during a discussion of this paper at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Chicago. I greatly appreciate her sharing her insight.

2. I would like to thank Ivelisse Rivera-Bonilla for linking Mike Davis's concept of militarization to the racial/ethnic segregation of Los Angeles.

3. These observations are based on visits to each of these cities and brief interviews with either experts or residents. They provide some cross-cultural perspective, but the empirical

data must still be collected. I am currently analyzing ten interviews collected in a gated community in Mexico City.

4. Includes unincorporated suburbs.

5. When the crime rates are adjusted for population, they are 43/1000 for Queens vs. 22/1000 for Nassau County.

6. The disparity in prices reflects the considerable differences in the housing markets rather than any substantive differences in socioeconomic status and quality of life of the residents or the nature of the homes.

7. The research team was made up of Elena Danaila, a graduate student in Environmental Psychology, and Suzanne Scheld, a graduate student in Anthropology, and the PI.

8. One interview could not be fully transcribed because of problems with the tape recording. The transcribed portion was used whenever possible, otherwise we relied on the field notes of the interview. All interviews were recorded and field notes were taken as a precaution.

9. Ivelisse Rivera-Bonilla (1999) makes the distinction between "neighborhood" and "community" because one doesn't necessarily imply the other. She comments that in the gated residents' narratives about their former neighborhoods they talk about the corner store, yet when they talk about their present surroundings they seem to refer more to their immediate families rather than their neighbors and community. This could be because the gated communities are relatively new, and to answer this question they must be examined over time.

10. I would like to thank one of the reviewers of this article for suggesting that the boundedness is incomplete.

11. Kevin Birth suggests that looking at the ethnic backgrounds of the home health care workers, groundskeepers, and nannies in the gated communities might tell something more about how often residents encounter non-Whites in their everyday lives.

12. Kevin Birth also suggests that age may play a role in structuring these communities, especially the age of those who are feared.

13. I would like to thank one of the reviewers of this article for pointing out the strength of the verbal and visual components reinforcing one another in this setting.

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