

2-2014

Jim Rockford or Tony Soprano: Coastal Contrasts in American Suburbia

Carl Abbott

Portland State University, d3ca@pdx.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_fac

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Citation Details

Abbott, C. (2014). Jim Rockford or Tony Soprano: Coastal Contrasts in American Suburbia. *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 1, pp. 1-23.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Jim Rockford or Tony Soprano: Coastal Contrasts in American Suburbia

CARL ABBOTT

The author taught urban history and planning in the Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. This was his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association, in Denver, Colorado, on August 10, 2013.

*Both in television shows such as *The Rockford Files* and *The Sopranos* and in the fiction of writers such as John Updike, Richard Ford, and Douglas Coupland, popular culture draws a distinction between Atlantic Coast and Pacific Coast suburbs. The differences revolve around two themes. The first concerns the roles of place and space. The second is the varying weight of history, often as manifested through families and social ties. Eastern suburbs and suburbanites are commonly depicted as embedded in place, rooted in time, and entangled in social networks. Western suburbs and suburbanites are often imagined as the opposite—isolated in space, atemporal, and free (or bereft) of social bonds.*

Key words: *suburbia, popular culture, Rockford Files, The Sopranos, John Updike, Richard Ford, Douglas Coupland*

“This is Jim Rockford. At the tone, leave your name and message. I’ll get back to you.” [*Beep*]

Each of the 122 episodes of the popular television series *The Rockford Files*, airing from 1974 to 1980, opened with Jim Rockford’s answering machine, followed by a tongue-in-cheek message:

“It’s Norma at the market. It bounced. You want me to tear it up, send it back, or put it with the others?” (Episode 101: Sept. 13, 1974)

“It’s Laurie at the trailer park. A space opened up. Do you want me to save it or are the cops going to let you stay where you are? (Episode 105: Oct. 11, 1974)

Jim Rockford is a suburbanite without roots, an intermittently employed private investigator who lives alone in a house trailer parked along the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu.¹ He makes his own way

1. Malibu is suburban by standard definitions. It was an unincorporated section of Los Angeles County at the time of the show and has been an incorporated municipality

with sporadic help from a handful of continuing characters. The opening credits emphasize his isolation, showing the inside of his trailer but no surroundings—a marked contrast with contemporaneous situation comedies and cop shows that used stock shots of landmarks and skylines to establish a sense of place.² In episode after episode, Rockford guns his 1970s muscle car along generic California streets and highways, far more concerned with executing dangerous maneuvers than with the passing scenery.

Tony Soprano is another suburbanite, but one who is deeply embedded in very specific networks and places. As a crime family boss, Tony can never truly be alone. He can scarcely act without juggling dozens of relationships from his stressful family life and even more stressful business world. He lives in a subscape that is assembled with careful detail from real places in northern New Jersey. Compulsive fans have tracked down scores of filming locations in a dozen cities and towns, including strip clubs doubling as strip clubs and markets doubling as markets. In eighty-six episodes of *The Sopranos*, which aired from 1999 to 2006, Tony Soprano lives, works, and kills in a thickly authenticized landscape.³

Jim Rockford and Tony Soprano are my launching pad for exploring differences in the ways that Americans have imagined East Coast suburbs and West Coast suburbs in multiple media, but particularly in literary fiction. The differences can be grouped around two themes. The first focuses on the roles of place and space. The second considers the varying weight of history, often as manifested through families and social ties. Eastern suburbs and suburbanites are commonly depicted as embedded in place, rooted in time, and entangled in social networks. Western suburbs and suburbanites are often imagined as the opposite—isolated in space, atemporal, and free (or bereft) of social bonds.

since 1991. The location for Jim Rockford's trailer, the Paradise Cove resort and mobile home park, has also been the site for episodes of *Baywatch*, *Sea Hunt*, and *Charlie's Angels* as well as surfer movies.

2. Examples include the Milwaukee City Hall for *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–1983), Michigan Avenue and the Chicago elevated for *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972–1978), Cincinnati landmarks for *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978–1982), and aerial views and landmarks for *The Streets of San Francisco* (1972–1977).

3. For a description and analysis of Soprano country, see Dennis Gale, *Greater New Jersey: Living in the Shadow of Gotham* (Philadelphia, 2006), which emphasizes the close functional connections between New York and New Jersey and the role of organized crime families.

The analysis draws not only on these two iconic TV series but also on the work of three novelists who have set their stories and characters in suburbs of the later twentieth century. One of Tony Soprano's fictional neighbors is Frank Bascombe, the journalist turned realtor who is the central figure in the novels of Richard Ford's trilogy *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006). He lives in Haddam and then Sea-Cliff, New Jersey, the first a composite version of Princeton and nearby communities, the second of Seaside Heights and Seaside Park on the barrier island that forms Barnegat Bay.⁴ Each book centers on a few days leading up to a holiday—Easter 1984 in the first, July 4, 1988 in the second, and Thanksgiving 2000 in the third. Frank is a moderately successful middle-aged man, coping with children, lovers, wives past and present, co-workers, friends, and casual acquaintances, as he attempts the errands and routines of everyday life. Ford has made it clear that one of his goals is to try to understand suburbia on its own terms: “The conventional wisdom is that suburban life is eventless and risk-free. When I started *The Sportswriter*, I thought to myself—how about if I wrote a redemptive novel about the suburbs, a paean to New Jersey and its suburban life?”⁵

Fewer than a hundred miles from Haddam is Brewer, Pennsylvania, the stand-in for novelist John Updike's home community of Reading. Here among 300,000 others in the metropolitan area lives Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the often befuddled protagonist of *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).⁶ Given American traditions, Updike may have had an easier task in convincing readers to appreciate a declining industrial city than Ford did in promoting an appreciation of the Garden State, but Rabbit spends much of his time in suburbs even less enticing than

4. Charles McGrath, “A New Jersey State of Mind,” *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2006, at www.nytimes.com/2006/10/25/books/25ford.html?pagewanted=all; accessed Oct. 23, 2013. See Michael Ebner, “Experiencing Megalopolis in Princeton,” *Journal of Urban History*, 19 (1993), 11–55. In the interest of space, I give page numbers for the various novels of Richard Ford, John Updike, and Douglas Coupland in the text, rather than as notes. I used these editions of Ford's novels: Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York, 1986), Ford, *Independence Day* (New York, 1995), and Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (New York, 2006).

5. Phil Hogan, “To Be Frank,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 23, 2006, at www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/24/fiction.features; accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

6. The page numbers from the John Updike novels come from these editions: John Updike, *Rabbit Redux* (New York, 1971), Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich* (New York, 1981), and Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York, 1990).

those of central Jersey. Chronicled in snapshot episodes from Rabbit's early twenties to his death at age fifty-six is a life of moderate upward mobility, marital screw-ups, and frustrating efforts to keep up with a changing world.

On the other side of the continent, metaphorically cruising some of the same western highways with Jim Rockford, although more likely in a beat-up Saab than in a Pontiac Firebird, are the nomadic "Gen-Xers" with whom Douglas Coupland populated *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), *Shampoo Planet* (1992), *Microserfs* (1995), and *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998). These are freestanding novels with a common sensibility. Their settings are the suburbs of North America's Pacific Rim, from Palm Springs and Palo Alto in California, to Redmond and Richland, Washington, and North Vancouver, British Columbia (Richland or "Lancaster" in *Shampoo Planet* is not technically a suburb, but it is suburban in all its characteristics). Coupland experiments with form and format, but each book offers incisive, satirical looks at footloose young people as they try to form adult lives in unformed suburban environments.⁷

Ford, Updike, and Coupland have all been astute observers of metropolitan life, offering nuanced descriptions of the neighborhoods, workplaces, social customs, consumer goods, and products of popular culture from which their characters construct their lives.⁸

7. The page numbers from the Douglas Coupland novels come from these editions: Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (New York, 1991), Coupland, *Shampoo Planet* (New York, 1992), Coupland, *Microserfs* (New York, 1996), and Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (New York, 1998). For background on Douglas Coupland's settings, see Ryan Kray, "The Path to Paradise: Expropriation, Exodus, and Exclusion in the Making of Palm Springs," *Pacific Historical Review*, 73 (2004), 85–126; John Findlay and Bruce Hevly, *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the Atomic West* (Seattle, 2011); Carl Abbott, "Building the Atomic Cities: Richland, Los Alamos, and the American Planning Language," in Bruce Hevly and John Findlay, eds., *The Atomic West* (Seattle, 1998); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York, 2013); Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton, N.J., 2004); and Glenna Matthews, *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream: Gender, Class, and Opportunity in the Twentieth Century* (Stanford, Calif., 2002).

8. Available online is the syllabus for a University of Texas English seminar that has used the John Updike and Richard Ford novels to explore "the customs and concerns, successes and failures, assumptions and ambitions of American life from the 1950's to the end of the century. Particular attention will be given to the intersection of private and public realms, as Rabbit Angstrom and Frank Bascombe contend with the challenges of everyday life (career and money, marriage and family, friendship and faith) against the background of political, economic, and social change." See www.utexas.edu/cola/files/369465; accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

Their work falls in the tradition of writers who have tried to understand, document, and highlight the texture and pulse of middle-class Americans (and Canadians) in their most common environments. They work in the tradition of Anthony Trollope, Honoré de Balzac, and William Dean Howells. The latter is an author whom Updike explicitly admired and acknowledged, commenting that “It is, after all, the triumph of American life that so much of it should be middling. Howells’s great agenda remains our agenda—for the American writer to live in America and to mirror it in writing.”⁹

In theoretical terms developed by Michel de Certeau, these novelists are concerned with the tactics of everyday life—the specific decisions, behaviors, and routines by which individuals inhabit the economic, social, and physical settings in which they find themselves. My interest is in these details and in the social backstory and spatial “back-landscape” against which the characters live their moral lives. I set aside for others to analyze the moral progress of the individuals—Tony Soprano’s adventures in therapy, Harry Angstrom’s struggle to come to terms with failure, Frank Bascombe’s efforts to deal with death, the ways that Coupland’s people search for transcendence. Instead, I want to explore how they, and we, imagine the common places that undergird their individual labors and, in so doing, locate them within the flows and structures of space and of time.

Suburbs in space: Transects and fragments

The title sequence for *The Sopranos* is a good starting place. The ninety-six-second opening uses a collage of images that together represent the simultaneous connection and differentiation of New York and suburban New Jersey. Tony emerges from the Lincoln Tunnel, is fed onto the New Jersey Turnpike, passes an abandoned industrial building and Newark Airport, drives the streets of the town where he does business—constructed from fragments of North Arlington, Harrison, and Kearny—and pulls into a recently built suburban house in North Caldwell. From the mouth of the tunnel to the Bada Bing! club is ten miles or so, from there another dozen to “Sopranoville” in western Essex County.¹⁰

9. John Updike, *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism* (New York, 1991), 189. Also see *ibid.*, 182–183: “Men and circumstances are mightily mixed, and crises are generally averted or deflected, and life does not fall into plots. Howells’s novels press these truths upon us.”

10. The shooting location for Bada Bing! is a club in Lodi, New Jersey, eighteen miles from New York, although not on the direct route from Newark to North Caldwell.

The sequence is what urban planners call a transect, a radial slice from city center to edge that reveals a range of social and physical habitats. The concept combines a standard research method from ecological and habitat science with the classic concentric zone model of urban neighborhoods developed by sociologist Ernest Burgess in the 1920s. In recent years, architect-planner Andres Duany has advocated the transect as a planning tool that can reveal the spatially layered development of U.S. cities. His prototypical American urban-to-rural transect is divided into six Transect Zones—urban core, urban center, general urban, sub-urban, rural, and natural—which develop and exist in organic relationship, each functioning as a specialized part of a larger whole.¹¹ Matching my own analysis, my colleague Ellen Shoskes has called the opening “a brilliant take on [a] transect through the New Jersey social-economic-cultural landscape.”¹²

Richard Ford adopts the same trope. In *The Lay of the Land*, we get exactly what the title promises. A drive across the waist of the state, from Sea-Clift to Haddam and on nearly to the Delaware River, makes a lateral east-west transect of the Garden State. The trip is a litany of suburban landscapes observed astutely in detail, but also in relationships. Subdivisions and neighborhoods connect together like ankle bones, leg bones, and knee bones. En route from the Jersey Shore, Frank passes white-and-pink bayside condos, clean cinderblock factories culturing human cells and turning out condoms, factory outlets and big boxes, “weathered pastel ranch-looking houses on curved streets,” and then, closer to Haddam, “fat yellow Colonial two-of-a-kinds and austere gray saltboxes” (p. 31). Beyond Haddam lies “old-style Jersey, with a tall white Presbyterian steeple beside a sovereign little fenced cemetery, just beyond that, a seventies-vintage strip development, with two pizza shops, a laundrette, a closed Squire Tax and an H&R Block” (pp. 34–35), and then, finally, “the peaceable town ’n country housing pattern New Jersey is famous for: deep two-acre lots with curbless frontage, on

11. See Andres Duany, Jeff Speck, and Mike Lydon, *The Smart Growth Manual* (New York, 2009); Center for Applied Transect Studies at www.transect.org/index.html; Gabriele Tagliaventi, “The European Transect: An Organic Way for Architecture to Develop Towns, Cities, and Metropolises,” *Places*, 18 (2006), at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4xc2j7qw>; accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

12. Ellen Shoskes, personal communication to author, Oct. 2, 2012.

which are sited large but not ominous builder-designer Capes, prairie contemporaries and Dutch-door ranches” (pp. 34–35).¹³

In another example, Frank Bascombe, on assignment for his magazine in *The Sportswriter*, visits another eastern city. He pilots his rental car from downtown Detroit to interview a retired football player in a distant suburb, noting the cityscape changes on the way.

[W]e get quickly out into the snowy traffic, weaving around dingy warehouse blocks and old hotels to Grand River, then head for the northwest suburbs. . . . Strathmore, Brightmore, Redford, Livonia, another Miracle Mile. We speed through the little connected burgs and townlets beyond the interior city, along white-frame dormered-Cape streets, into solid red-brick Jewish sections until we emerge onto a wide boulevard with shopping malls and thick clusters of traffic lights, the houses newer and settled in squared-off tracts. . . . Ten minutes later we are into the rolling landscape of snowy farmettes and wide cottage-bound lakes beyond the perimeter of true suburbia, the white-flight areas stretching clear to Lansing. (pp. 149–151)

Back in New Jersey, all roads lead to (or from) Haddam. It is a place that is embedded in *places*. Locals can take Amtrak’s “Merchants’ Special” to Philadelphia (*Independence Day*, p. 1) or commute by rail to New York (*Sportswriter*, pp. 347–351). A nighttime journey from central New Jersey to and through New York to suburban Connecticut takes a slice through the entire metropolis, with bleary-eyed Bascombe reeling off the freeways, bridges, and parkways with which he has to contend (*Independence Day*, pp. 195–197). After hours on the road, Frank has driven a full transect from edge to center to edge, just as an ecological scientist might catalog the landscape from ridgeline to valley floor to opposite ridgeline.¹⁴

13. Dennis Gale’s term “crustal urbanization” applies here—continuous urban and suburban development that creates a “sprawling amoeba-like crust” of development over the landscape. Gale, *Greater New Jersey*, 64–65.

14. These journeys by Frank Bascombe and Tony Soprano have a distinguished literary ancestry. Sinclair Lewis set his novel *Babbitt* (New York, 1922) in motion by sending businessman George F. Babbitt on his daily three-mile commute from his green and white Dutch Colonial house in the bright new subdivision of Floral Heights into the center of the thriving city of Zenith. Behind the wheel of his new motor car, Babbitt admires each part of the city in turn:

The one-story shops on Smith Street, a glare of plate-glass and new yellow brick; groceries and laundries and drug-stores to supply the more immediate needs of East Side housewives. The market gardens in Dutch Hollow, their shanties patched with corrugated iron and stolen doors. Billboards with crimson goddesses nine feet tall advertising cinema films, pipe tobacco, and talcum powder. The old “mansions” along Ninth Street, S.E., like

Frank connects to central New Jersey not only by his careful observations of landscape but also by current networks of reputation and affiliation that tie him laterally in place. He drinks and takes weekend excursions with a set of middle-aged men (not all of whom he necessarily likes). He interacts with co-workers, clients, and tenants for a handful of rentals. He serves on the board of Haddam's theological seminary. In *The Lay of the Land*, eight years after moving to Sea-Clift, he keeps his "Haddam affiliations alive and relatively thriving," maintains his Haddam Realty license current, and does "some referrals and appraisals for United Jersey, where I know most of the officers" (p. 13). He also participates in an organization called Sponsors, a group of Jersey citizens who provide non-professional listening ears for people—strangers—who need to talk through a problem and get some friendly advice.

Reputation is equally important for Tony Soprano and Harry Angstrom. A crime boss rules by fear as much as by enforcement. Tony draws on local networks and depends on his reputation with other mob leaders and soldiers, with customers, with law enforcement people. In an early episode, older sister Meadow explains to her brother AJ why his experience at school is a little bit strained—nobody wants to cross or get too close to a *capo's* kid. Rabbit carries a different reputation from his fame as a high school basketball star, although the reputation and its ability to bring in Toyota buyers fades as he ages. It is a premonition of his death when his son removes the display of yellowing old clippings from the automobile showroom in *Rabbit at Rest*.

Rabbit is also deeply embedded—mired—in his local environment. His bus ride from workplace in Brewer to home in the Penn Villas subdivision in *Rabbit Redux* is another radial slice through an urban region. In July 1969, at the end of a long working day, his bus takes him outward through rings of decay, starting in a declining business district with "its tired five and dimes . . . Kroll's Department Store . . . and its flowerpotted traffic circle where the trolley tracks used to make a clanging star of intersection." A few blocks farther

aged dandies in filthy linen; wooden castles turned into boarding-houses, with muddy walks and rusty hedges, jostled by fast-intruding garages, cheap apartment-houses, and fruit-stands. . . . Across the belt of railroad-tracks, factories with high-perched water-tanks and tall stacks—factories producing condensed milk, paper boxes, lighting fixtures, motorcars. Then the business center, the thickening darting traffic, the crammed trolleys unloading, and the high doorways of marble and polished granite. (p. 31)

out are “empty dusty windows where stores have been starved by the suburban shopping malls and the sad narrow places that come and go called Go-Go or Boutique . . . and the surplus outlets and a shoe parlor that sells hot roasted peanuts and Afro newspapers printed in Philly.” Although Brewer’s black residents number only a few thousand, they puzzle Rabbit and set the entire city on edge as Brewerites remember the explosive race riots of recent years in every major American city. Beyond the city limits, Rabbit’s bus deposits its last black passengers. The landscape is now suburban, with “the twirlers of a car lot, the pumps and blazoned overhang of a gas station, the lakelike depth of a supermarket parking lot crammed with shimmering fins.” Rabbit’s destination is 26 Vista Crescent, a house faced with apple-green aluminum siding and “flagstone porchlet.” He enters to news of a much longer commute that puts his own into perspective. “Hey Dad,” his son calls as he steps into the living room to news about Apollo 11. “They’ve left earth’s orbit! They’re forty-three thousand miles away” (pp. 13–15).

Udpike pairs his cityscapes. The highway strip with the in-laws’ Toyota dealership where Rabbit finally makes some money is juxtaposed against downtown Brewer and Rabbit’s vanished job as a linotype operator. The new development of Penn Villas where he buys his first house contrasts with the old suburb of Mount Judge where Rabbit grew up. His mother-in-law’s fusty old house, to which Rabbit moves his family when arsonists torch his Penn Villas ranch house, is balanced by upscale Penn Park where Rabbit moves in late middle age. The new country club that Rabbit and his friends are able to join substitutes for the established club for Brewer’s old-money families. The pairs are complementary and constitutive, each part offering meaning and identity to the other.

When Douglas Coupland juxtaposes suburb and city, in contrast, his purpose is to emphasize the difference and separation of Redmond from Seattle or Silicon Valley from San Francisco.¹⁵ He narrates no connecting journeys and describes no transects. Instead, his Generation X and Generation Y protagonists inhabit freestanding

15. Tom Foster also notes that Coupland’s Silicon Valley is an edge city/postsuburban environment that “no longer has a symbolic relationship with the urban core.” However, I suggest that he may misread both the author and the social facts in arguing that Coupland presents Redmond and Palo Alto as different sorts of places. Tim Foster, “‘A Kingdom of a Thousand Princes But No Kings’: The Postsuburban Network in Douglas Coupland’s *Microserfs*,” *Western American Literature*, 46 (2011), 302–324.

islands of suburban culture. In *Generation X*, there's a sketchy bungalow court on the edge of a city that is simultaneously a Los Angeles satellite and an island in the desert. *Girlfriend in a Coma* takes place in a hillside suburb that backs up on the British Columbia wilderness. Seattle's self-contained and self-regarding eastside suburbs full of software specialists are themselves a mosaic of transient neighborhoods and office parks.¹⁶ *Shampoo Planet's* Lancaster, like the real Richland, is entirely a postwar city that is fully suburban in character and isolated "in the dry plains of southeastern Washington State, scientifically and strategically located so as to be as far away as possible from anywhere meaningful or fun" (pp. 9–10).

Coupland's young suburbanites are people who have stronger relationships with things than with people—and with *ersatz* at that. They peddle brand-name knock-off merchandise and pretend to live in a Dungeons and Dragons world in *Shampoo Planet*, create video games in *Microserfs*, and entertain each other in *Generation X* by making up stories like the young Florentines in *The Decameron*. One of the characters in *Microserfs* comments on the thinness of Silicon Valley as a society and the lack of any deeply articulated place with which to connect: "There is no center to the Valley in any real sense of the word. There is no one watching; it's pretty, but it's a vacuum" (p. 136).

These free-floating suburban settings draw on a distinctive trope in western (meaning largely California) fiction in which residential subdivisions appear as worlds in themselves rather than parts of a larger whole. For examples, see the Pierce Homes subdivision that Herbert Pierce built on a 300-acre ranch on the edge of Glendale in the backstory that James M. Cain devised for *Mildred Pierce* (1941). Readers can visualize its Spanish-style houses with their crimson drapes but not their specific placement in the metropolis. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), we first visit San Narciso when Oedipa Maas squints into the sunlight to see "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway."¹⁷

16. The Redmond-Bellevue that Coupland describes bears a striking resemblance to the Puget Sound metrocape analyzed in Anne Vernez Moudon and Paul Mitchell Hess, "Suburban Clusters: The Nucleation of Multifamily Housing in Suburban Areas of the Central Puget Sound," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66 (2000), 243–264.

17. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York, 1999), 12, 13.

Coupland's coastal suburbia echoes the ideas of the "Los Angeles School" of urban studies, a cluster of geographers, sociologists, and urban planners who have argued that the classic model of a uni-centric metropolis articulated by sociologists at the University of Chicago in the 1910s and 1920s no longer holds.¹⁸ Instead, the new metropolis, as epitomized in Southern California, is multicentered, segmented, fragmented, and fluid—in a word, post-modern rather than modern. An example is geographer Edward Soja's feverish description of "exopolitan" Orange County, California, as scraps and shards in search of a city. "Perched beyond the vortex of the old agglomerative nodes, the exopolis spins new whorls of its own, turning the city inside-out and outside-in. . . . The metropolitan forms that have become so familiar to us . . . are now undergoing radical deconstruction and reconstruction, exploding and coalescing today in multitudes of experimental communities of tomorrow . . . [where] the solid familiarity of the urban melts into air."¹⁹

Soja's phrase riffs directly on Karl Marx, for the Los Angeles School emphasizes the dialectic of continually redefined conflict rather than the functional stability that the Chicagoans found. It also resonates with the judgments of Eurocritic Umberto Eco and literary scholar Fredric Jameson who see the American cultural landscape—epitomized in California—as detached and insulated from the real. Such observers uncover a variety of implications in the supposed lack of historical and societal depth. Jameson draws on neo-Marxist ideas to see the California landscape as an alienating product of a distinct stage of capitalism. In contrast, Jean Baudrillard found a certain amount of freedom, or at least an absence of constraint, in California's suburban superficiality.²⁰

18. Michael Dear, "The Los Angeles School of Urbanism: An Intellectual History," *Urban Geography*, 24 (2003), 493–509.

19. Edward Soja, "Inside Exopolis: Scenes from Orange County," in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York, 1992), 95. Also see Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II* (Berkeley, 1991). For Edward Soja as context for Coupland, see Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester, U.K., 2007), 109.

20. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York, 1988). The Baudrillard reference is common in critical writing about Coupland: Robert McGill, "The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's *Geography of Apocalypse*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 70 (Spring 2000), 252–276; Will Katerberg, *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (Lawrence, Kans., 2008), 40–41, 235 n. 4, 236 n. 25.

TABLE 1.

Comparison of populations in 1940 and 2000 for key places in Douglas Coupland novels; derived from U.S. Bureau of the Census figures.

	1940 Population	2000 Population
Richland, Washington	500	39,000
Palm Springs, California	3,000	43,000
Palo Alto, California	17,000	59,000
Redmond, Washington	800	45,000
Bellevue, Washington	1,200	110,000

Suburbs in time: Weighty and weightless pasts

As we shift attention from space to time, consider Jim Rockford, a man who has been cut loose from history. Five years in San Quentin Prison and a pardon for unjust incarceration have drawn a curtain across his earlier life, leaving him to build a new business from scratch. His father Rocky functions as a comic sidekick, not a link to family memory, and a second friend/sidekick is a con artist whose connection dates back only to prison. His lawyer/love interest disappears after the fourth season (contract disputes). As was standard for 1970s television, the episodes feature continuing characters but self-contained plots that do not build a storyline from show to show—an obvious contrast with *The Sopranos*.

Coupland's characters are equally adrift from time, inhabitants of communities with shallow histories (Table 1). Palm Springs was a winter resort from the 1920s and 1930s but evolved into a year-round city only in the age of air-conditioning since the 1960s. Lancaster/Richland is entirely a creation of the atomic age, and Silicon Valley is an artifact of the even more recent electronic age. Richard Dorland and his friends in *Girlfriend in a Coma* live in a 1960s and 1970s suburb of the not-very-old city of Vancouver, where growth did not kick off until the 1880s and the entire metropolis is “a city so new that it dreamed only of what the embryo knows” (p. 7).

Given the age of these places, it is no surprise that Coupland's young adults are at home with the iconic structures of the

last half-century. They live among suburban apartment courts, convenience stores, and eight-screen theaters. Tyler and Anna-Louise in *Shampoo Planet* attend Lancaster Community College, which is “composed of brutal 1970s cement cubes and looks like dead air conditioners linked together by the little mesh catwalks of a hamster’s fun run” (p. 30). Six microserfs share a Redmond, Washington, split-level built in cedar-sided and moss-inviting Northwest style. They work in Microsoft’s version of the generic office park, distinguishable from others by the most subtle details: Nintendo-ites work in “two-story industrial-plex buildings sheathed with Death Star-black windows,” while Microsoft workers write code inside “sea foam-green glass” (*Microserfs*, p. 14). The corporate campuses of Palo Alto are futuretowns:

Futuretowns are located on the outskirts of the city you live in, just far enough away to be out of reach of angry, torch-carrying mobs that might roam in from the downtown core. You’re not supposed to notice futuretowns—they’re technically invisible: low flat buildings that look like they’ve just popped out of the laser printer; . . . small back-lit Plexiglass totems out front quietly brandishing the strangely anti-language names of the company housed inside: Cray. Hoechst. Diw. Unilever. Rand Pfizer. Sandoz. Ciba-Geigy. NEC. . . . Futuretowns are like their own country superimposed onto other countries. (*Shampoo Planet*, p. 218)

As befits novels whose characters have grown up in the 1960s and 1970s, Lego toys provide Coupland a versatile metaphor for transitory environments and “anonymous landscapes.”²¹ The tidy mowed lawns at Microsoft are “green Lego pads,” and the microserfs group house is just like the houses that Daniel Underwood built out of Legos as a kid. Later in that book, another character responds to the Northridge earthquake of 1994 by constructing a Lego freeway interchange to smash and rebuild. Meanwhile Daniel’s father, cast off by IBM, has filled an entire room with a Lego city that seems to Daniel more real than the actual Palo Alto, even though it has taken weeks rather than decades to erect. If Redmond has Lego houses and Palo Alto is a Lego pad, Vancouver is like an entire Lego city that film crews can morph into “any North American city or green space with little effort and even less expense” (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 88).²² And

21. Tate, *Douglas Coupland*, 110.

22. *Girlfriend in a Coma* was written in the 1990s when Vancouver was indeed taking off as center for television and cinema production.

Oop!, the software program/game that Daniel and co-workers develop during the Silicon Valley sojourn is a virtual Lego system.

Lego cities may be easy to smash, but interspersed with Coupland's suburban landscapes are actual *modern* ruins, further evidence of temporal shallowness. On the outskirts of Palm Springs sits West Palm Springs Village, "a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s" (*Generation X*, pp. 14–15). Lancaster has a failing shopping mall with half its stores plywooded or burned out, and even booming Palo Alto has an empty corporate research campus, unused after only two decades—"a 1970s utopian, *Andromeda Strainishly* empty tech complex" (*Microserfs*, p. 211). In the background loom the ruins of atomic weaponry. A jar of Trinitite from the New Mexico test site makes an appearance in *Generation X*, and the vast atomic energy complex of Lancaster/Richland, being decommissioned and decontaminated in the 1990s, is one of the great ruins of the twentieth century.

Coupland's western suburbia thus echoes the early United States, when the country was growing and changing so rapidly that a building could experience the entire cycle of construction and abandonment in a decade or two. As Nick Yablon has explored in a fascinating book, such "untimely ruins" lacked the cultural resonance of deeply historical Europe.²³ Their peculiarity was a source of frustration for Nathaniel Hawthorne, but a source of celebration for Goethe in a sort of transatlantic signal crossing.²⁴ Most early Americans were on Goethe's side, with absent or untimely ruins taken as signs of vitality and opportunity. Coupland splits the difference, emphasizing the temporal shallowness of western suburbs but seeing that shallowness as fodder for art.

With the past figuring largely as untimely ruins, Coupland's suburbias are places outside of history, thin on the ground as physical places and only thinly represented in the fourth dimension.

23. Nick Yablon. *Untimely Ruins: An Archeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819–1919* (Chicago, 2009).

24. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe noted the opportunity when he wrote: "America, you have it better than our old continent," being untroubled by Europe's useless memories and conflicts. It was not that better results were guaranteed, but there seemed fewer impediments to political progress. Goethe wrote *Den Vereinigten Staaten* in 1827 and published it in *Musen-Almanach* issued by Amadeus Wendt in 1831.

Lancaster has a “brief past” and a common “willful amnesia that propels the rest of the town’s citizens into the sparkling and thrilling future” (*Shampoo Planet*, pp. 10–11). At the Ridgecrest Mall, “people are interested only in staying as modern as possible, continually forgetting the past while envisioning a shinier more fabulous future” (*Shampoo Planet*, p. 141). Palm Springs is a town where one character comes “to erase all traces of history from my past” (*Generation X*, p. 36). In *Microserfs*, the most sympathetic character, Karla, comments that “we live in an era of no historical precedents—this is to say, history is no longer useful as a tool in helping us understand current change” (p. 99). In *Shampoo Planet*, the very idea of history becomes absurd, reduced to Richard’s satirical proposal to turn garbage dumps into theme parks (pp. 199–201).

In response to these observations, several critics interpret Coupland by invoking Francis Fukuyama’s argument that the collapse of communism and the triumph of capitalism has meant the “end of history,” at least as understood in Hegelian terms as the contest among competing political ideologies and, possibly, the descent into the shallow consumerism of an eternal present moment.²⁵ Coupland clearly takes on shallow consumerism as an intellectual challenge (what is the consciousness of consumerism?) but also tries to imagine avenues of escape and transcendence. In *Generation X*, he offers simple physical relocation to start over as petty capitalists in Mexico. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, he explores the possibility of a modern-day atonement.

The apocalyptic break in *Girlfriend in a Coma* takes the absence of history to a logical extreme. Two-thirds of the way through the novel, a satirical comedy of manners morphs into magical realism. Society collapses when people all over the world fall asleep to be killed by their crashing cars, pulled off the beach by the rising tide, or simply never to awaken. The process takes days, not minutes, traced through chapters titled “The Past Is a Bad Idea,” “2000 Is Silly,” and “Progress Is Over.” Only seven high school friends, now in their thirties, remain awake to watch the modern ruin from the North Vancouver hills: “The city lies before them, a glinting damaged sheet of pewter, with fires burning like acetylene pearls” (p. 205). Karen,

25. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3–18; G. P. Lansbury, “Generation X and the End of History,” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 58 (Spring 1996), 229–240; Katerberg, *Future West*; McGill, “The Sublime Simulacrum.”

the girlfriend who fell into a seventeen-year coma because she could not bear her visions of apocalypse, has awakened as a witness. “The world’s over now,” she says, as her mind’s eye sees the last person close her eyes and sleep. “Our time begins” (p. 208).

These remnant crew members of spaceship earth find themselves “at the end of the world and the end of time” (p. 266). What they do with “their time” is not, initially, very edifying. They have booze to drink, marshmallows to toast, videos to watch, prescription medications to try before they go bad, and the Park Royal mall to plunder. In the first year as survivors, they parody suburban affluence. “They have money fights, lobbying and tossing Krugerrands, rubies and thousand-dollar bills at each other; at times they make paper airplanes from prints by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and shoot them into the fireplace” (pp. 211–212). It takes prodding from a ghostly Jared, a high school classmate who died from a football injury before the book starts and who returns as a blend of chorus and mentor for his surviving classmates, to get them thinking about next steps for the world for which they are now responsible.²⁶

Douglas Coupland may propel suburban Vancouver completely out of history, but Richard Ford constructs central New Jersey firmly on its past.²⁷ Haddam and its environs are steeped in history. As a real estate agent in the second and third books, Frank has a keen eye for property development and community change. Ford periodically slows the action to reflect on Haddam’s history since its founding in 1795 or describe the multiple layers of suburbia, as with the village of Penns Neck, now “become just one more aging bedroom community for other larger, newer bedroom communities” (*Independence Day*, p. 59). The landscape is a mosaic of development from different decades and for different ethnic groups; there is an old black district and new enclaves of Russians, Ethiopians, and Koreans. Social classes divide among a horsey district, older leafy streets, a new “wealth belt” for Philadelphia and New York commuters, starter

26. There could be long debates whether *Girlfriend in a Coma* is science fiction, magical realism, or some other genre, and whether Jared’s ghost actually is supposed to manifest outside the heads of the survivors.

27. Kathy Knapp offers interesting readings in “Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel,” *American Literary History*, 23 (2011), 500–528. I disagree, however, with her assertion that “society” has ceased to exist in Bascombe’s world (p. 507), given that Frank is constantly navigating among professional, social, and business associates.

condos for singles, starter ranches for young families, and retirement complexes. Taken as a whole, this complex environment of temporally and spatially layered communities is a microcosm of America; as Frank observes: “An American would be crazy to reject such a place, since it is the most diverting and readable of landscapes, and the language is always American” (*The Sportswriter*, p. 52). Historians should be reminded of the incisive book *A Consumer’s Republic*, in which Paramus, New Jersey native Lizabeth Cohen uses the postwar experience of her home state to explicate changes in American society and politics.²⁸

As both a real estate salesman and a converted Jerseyite, Frank Bascombe consciously *learns* the history of his home territory and recounts it for the reader as he mentally comments on the roadside landscapes that fill the stories of comings and goings. Harry Angstrom grows up with local history as a constant context for his life, and he moves among the aspirations of multiple generations embodied in commercial and residential landscapes. We watch through his eyes as Brewer’s economy declines and then revives with white-collar jobs that spill over from Philadelphia in *Rabbit at Rest*. We see new subdivisions appear and older subdivisions lose their cachet. We see the same restaurant through a new incarnation every decade, from Johnny Frye’s Chophouse to Café Barcelona to the Crepe House and then Salad Binge.

Brewer is a metropolitan region where the landscape shows the results of a century-long process of industrial obsolescence—in contrast to the failed real estate speculations that create instant ruins in Coupland’s world. The sidewalk cracks and heaves in front on Harry’s childhood home because trees have grown alongside multiple generations of residents. The abandoned factory that Harry often passes has stood empty for longer than he can remember. Even the “new” suburban house that he acquires at the end of *Rabbit Is Rich* is old, with the landscaping choices of previous residents gone to seed in the natural processes of maturity and decay.

Harry’s life is itself a transect through both the space and the history of metropolitan Brewer. Updike traces neighborhood change through Harry’s own life history and uses neighborhoods to exemplify that history. Readers are never in doubt about how the

28. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003).

different sections of Brewer and its environs fit together in both physical and social space. By moving Rabbit from one suburban neighborhood to another, Updike lets his very life trace transects—from pre-World War II Mt. Judge to postwar Penn Villas, from down-market apartments to upscale Penn Park, whose mock Tudor houses are home to “the most successful dentists . . . the pushiest insurance salesmen, the slickest ophthalmologists” (*Rabbit Redux*, p. 12). For Rabbit himself: “Brewer, too, that torpid hive, speaks to him of himself, of his past grown awesomely deep, so that things he remembers personally, V-E day or the Sunday Truman declared war on North Korea, are history now” (*Rabbit at Rest*, p. 183).

For both Harry and Frank—and for Tony—the weight of external history is bound up with the weight of family. Popular culture commonly identifies suburbs as the proper setting for families and cities for singles, from *Leave It To Beaver* to *Home Improvement* on one side of the balance, and from *Mary Tyler Moore* to *Frasier* to *How I Met Your Mother* on the other. *The Sopranos* continues this tradition, for Tony Soprano is a family man by multiple definitions. He is embedded in the family crime business. He is also embroiled in the classic “suburban” story of raising a family with tensions among son, daughter, wife, and ferocious mother.

Like Tony Soprano, Harry Angstrom and Frank Bascombe are unable to escape their families. They feel the weight of history not only in their communities but in their personal lives, for each is haunted by the early death of a child—Harry a daughter by accident as an infant, Frank a son from Reye’s syndrome at age nine. Each has an alienated son with whom he tries but fails to connect. Harry and his wife Janice have alternating sexual affairs but keep returning to each other. Frank oscillates in the orbit of former and present wives and girlfriends. Family means a set of responsibilities that he may or may not fulfill, although his sense of “family” obligation is strong enough for him to take excursions with the crotchety father of a former girlfriend, a man who is as exasperating as any real in-law. For Harry, family is a web of burdens that he cannot escape: “The dead, Jesus. They were multiplying, and they look up begging you to join them, . . . Pop, Mom, old man Springer, Jill, the baby called Becky for her little time. . . . The obituary page every day shows another stalk of a harvest endlessly rich, the faces of old teachers, customers, local celebrities like himself flashing for a moment and then going down” (*Rabbit Is Rich*, pp. 9–10).

Coupland—no surprise—inverts the expectations about suburbs and families. His stories bring together unrelated young adults in suburban landscapes where they work, hang out, take road trips, hook up, unhook, back each other up, get on each other's nerves, and occasionally break away. The groups in *Generation X* and *Microserfs* are random, the one assembled by casual acquaintance, the other thrown together by a corporate human resources department. The loose gang who hang out together in *Shampoo Planet* have community college in common but few real shared interests. The crew in *Girlfriend in a Coma* share the most as a high school clique from the same neighborhood who scatter to the winds in their twenties but come home to North Vancouver in their thirties. It is as if the cast of the mega-hit television series *Friends* were teleported from Manhattan to suburbia and turned dark, edgy, uncertain, and far too self-aware in the process.

These young western suburbanites have families as thin as their surroundings. Parents are ineffectual or left behind. The computer coders in *Microserfs* have long since rejected or ignored their parents, with the exception of Daniel, whose mom ends up as a den mother and dad as a mascot (after being laid off by IBM) when the group of Microsoft employees quit to try their own start-up in Silicon Valley. Back in the Northwest, in the midst of an offhand conversation at a Lancaster diner, Tyler realizes that “not one of my friends at the table has a biological father present and stable in our lives” (*Shampoo Planet*, p. 38). His own family includes a biological father who is terminal hippie, a flaky mother, an ex-stepfather who is one step above a real estate scammer, and bankrupt grandparents with an Amway-like scheme to get rich again. It may seem a stretch across very different sensibilities, but Tyler and friends inhabit a social world not all that different from that of the film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Elliott and his siblings live in a new suburban house literally on the edge of development (the shooting location was Tujunga). Their father is absent and their mother well-meaning but clueless. Kids know how to navigate their environment in the final chase scene, but adults do not. It is a suburban world, in short, where neither generations or history count for much.

Scattered, centered, thin, thick

It's time to pause from literary studies to kick back, slit open the cellophane around our complete DVD set for *The Sopranos*, and

click the bookmark that takes us to *Rockford* episodes on Hulu.com. As we sit through some marathon viewing, we realize that each show had a rhetorical structure on which scriptwriters could hang their variations—a structure that reinforced its implied understanding of suburbia.²⁹

The typical episode is off and running when Jim Rockford gets a call from a stranger or a plea to help a friend of a friend who finds herself in trouble. There are a few two-part shows, but every case and most episodes are distinct and self-contained. The investigation takes Jim to nondescript Los Angeles locations—motels, suburban commercial strips, gas stations, apartments, parking lots, restaurants. The scenes are connected by cars, stoplight conversations, and car chases, but only Jim Rockford behind the wheel knows how one setting connects to the others. Los Angeles is like the opening credits—a montage of distinct scenes with an occasional street sign to mark Ventura or Bel Air.³⁰

Tony Soprano, in contrast, typically navigates two “family” stories in the course of his hour. There are problems in his nuclear family—wife Carmela is restless, daughter Meadow is alienated, son AJ is a screw-up. If that’s not enough stress, there’s a problem with the extended crime family of blood relations and in-laws. The tension in both is the succession of generations as Tony displaces his uncle (who early on puts an unsuccessful hit on him), tries to groom his own lieutenants, and wonders whether his son will ever have what it takes. Like all stories of generations, the roots of the storylines are deep and their development sequential. The action is claustrophobic—the interiors of apartments, the back room at the club, dark streets, and nighttime meetings—all in the same heavily layered corner of New Jersey. These contrast starkly with *Rockford’s*

29. Summaries of Rockford episodes can be found at www.tv.com/shows/the-rockford-files/episodes and Sopranos summaries at www.hbo.com/the-sopranos/episodes. Both accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

30. Jim Rockford’s Los Angeles is like that described by novelist Alison Lurie: “She gestured at Mar Vista laid out below the freeway: a random grid of service stations, two-story apartment buildings, drive-ins, palms, and factories; and block after block of stucco cottages.” Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City* (New York, 1965), 25. It also reflects Rayner Banham’s depiction of Southern California as a mixture of Surfurbia, Autopia, and the Plains of Id (his term for the vast stretches of valley neighborhoods) in Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York, 1971). Banham’s sympathetic portrait emphasizes freedom of movement within a multicentered metropolis.

blue California skies and occasional investigations and chases that open into bright desert hinterlands.

These very different images of East Coast and West Coast suburbs, whether in popular television or literary fiction, resonate deeply in American culture. Take archetypal Los Angeles movies as an example. Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is a set of separate stories linked by the Venn-diagram overlap of a few characters but each with a distinct plot. The locations are Los Angeles fragments. There is a bit of Pasadena, some Hawthorne, a visit to West Hollywood, a stop in Canoga Park. The metropolitan background is like the *Rockford* metroscape drawn ninety-eight degrees darker. Another example is the *katabasis* of Michael Douglas in *Falling Down* (1993). His march to the sea at Venice Pier presumably traces an identifiable route through Los Angeles, but the screenplay offers a series of confrontations in visually unconnected locations.

Contrast these with Barry Levinson's Baltimore in *Diner* (1982), *Tin Men* (1987), and *Avalon* (1990). This is a richly imagined metropolis in which city and suburbs connect. The aluminum siding salesman in *Tin Men* schmooze and swap leads in the city, but they flim-flam their customers in working-class suburban neighborhoods. *Avalon* follows three generations of a Jewish family from an older ethnic neighborhood to new suburban homes after World War II. A political take on the same theme of generational change and immigrant incorporation is Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*, a 1956 novel and 1958 movie in which a traditional politico from the heart of Irish Boston runs for reelection as mayor, only to fall to a younger politician with all the postwar suburban accoutrements.

The point of additional examples is not to prove that eastern and western suburbia *are* different but that Americans think they are. Indeed, the popular imagery is often wrong. American metropolitan areas are rapidly converging on many dimensions, such as increasing ethnic variety in suburban Massachusetts, Georgia, Illinois, and California. When sociologists actually study California suburbanites, they find not the isolated, anomic individuals that Joan Didion depicts in *Play It As It Lays* (1970) but normal folks with as many social connections as everyone else.³¹ Levittown and Lakewood are sister suburbs under the same sun (although they

31. Claude Fischer, *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (Chicago, 1982).

may be obscured by more clouds on one coast and more smog on the other).

When there are real differences, moreover, they often run contrary to the popular imagination. Western and southwestern cities are more compact than eastern cities, for one example. In 2000, the U.S. Census found forty-nine metropolitan areas with one million people or more. Ten of the twelve most densely populated lay in the West, not the East—Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Phoenix, Sacramento, Seattle, Portland, San Antonio, and Salt Lake City. They don't look like highrise Manhattan, but their growth has been compact and contiguous. The capitals of sprawl are places like Atlanta, Charlotte, and metro-Jersey, not Los Angeles or Seattle.³² Despite complaints by New Yorkers who find western cities unfamiliar, they are also eminently legible, oriented into corridors by mountains and waterfronts and often visible at a glance from encompassing hills.³³

Pesky facts, however, miss the fun of working with popular culture and literary texts. Far more people enjoy television shows and read novels than labor over census data and federal research reports. When those shows and novels are well crafted and compelling, they serve to fix and reinforce a body of public knowledge, giving form and authority to our everyday impressions. Having perhaps grown up, like this author, with *77 Sunset Strip* (1958–1964), viewers of *The Rockford Files* already knew that Los Angeles was about streets and fast cars. *The Sopranos* drew on what viewers thought they knew about North Jersey and reimagined that understanding in convincing fashion. Richard Ford utilized his own experience to describe a suburbanized state that seems right on target—at least to this occasional visitor. Coupland's acerbic depiction of the future-towns in their shiny form (Bellevue, Palo Alto) and less shiny versions (Palm Springs, Richland) offers readers a shorthand vocabulary for understanding their surroundings.

32. Between 1982 and 1997, Phoenix converted sixteen acres of land from rural to urban uses for every hundred new residents, Los Angeles converted fifteen acres, and Salt Lake City converted nine acres. In contrast, Nashville converted forty-two acres, and Charlotte converted forty-nine acres.

33. Carl Abbott, "Southwestern Cityscapes: Approaches to an American Urban Environment," in Robert Fairbanks and Kathleen Underwood, eds., *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America* (College Station, Tex., 1990), 59–86.

As much as anything, this excursion beyond the “city limits” of social science and into the exurbs on the edge of historical scholarship confirms one important point about the American and Canadian imagination. Whether we are in Virginia Beach or Vancouver, Ottawa or Oakland, we *think* that the western states and provinces are different from the East, and we are ready to believe that this distinction has persisted over generations of development. The doings of Jim Rockford and Tony Soprano may look like riffs on current events, but they also reflect the power of imagination over history.