




The Vital
Thread
of Tom
Sugrue

By Nathaniel Popkin



In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* and now *Sweet Land of Liberty*, Penn historian Thomas Sugrue has shattered the conventional narrative about the struggle for Civil Rights in this country. The new book was published on the same day a black man was elected president; still, says Sugrue, “We’ve got a lot of overcoming to do.”

The sky on this mid-January day is opaque, the color of gauze, and large snowflakes are falling. From time to time, a wind slashes, but for two hours of walking, Tom Sugrue, the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Professor of History and Sociology, and I have ignored it.

We had met at a buzzing Mount Airy café, InFusion, whose back room was given over to young parents and small children. Sugrue, who lives nearby in a grand, wood-paneled house with a thick garden, is 46. He has a round, boyish face, a small mouth, and dimples. His hair is white and eyebrows black, an owlish composition. Two months earlier, his highly anticipated and narrative-altering new book—*Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*—had been published by Random House to immediate acclaim.

The book was named a finalist for the 2008 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in History (to be announced after the *Gazette* went to press). Writer and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates Jr., who directs Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research, called it "revelatory, daring, and ambitious." Penn colleague Steven Hahn, the Ray F. and Jeanette P. Nichols Professor of History, whose *A Nation Under Our Feet*, on Southern Civil Rights, won the Pulitzer Prize, said it's "one of the most important works on modern American history to appear in recent memory." Not surprisingly for such groundbreaking work, *Sweet Land of Liberty* has also been met with uncertainty. Historian David L. Chappell wrote in *Newsday*:

Sugrue's lavish attention to extreme rhetoricians only occasionally distorts his story. More often, it spices it up—and his notes will lead skeptical readers to a more balanced view...The book covers more fresh ground than any history of race has in many years. Despite its occasional cheerleading tone, it opens up a lot of complexities and hard questions.

Because the book is so thoroughly researched—it occupied Sugrue and some of his graduate students for a decade—most often these questions don't relate to content, but rather to issues of emphasis and impact. Which political movements deserve the most careful attention? Whose voices, yet unheard, require emphasis?

My walk with Sugrue had begun at the top of the Mount Airy shopping district on Germantown Avenue. Extending some 12 miles from the Delaware River through the heart of North Philadelphia at Broad and Erie, to Nicetown, Germantown, Mount Airy, and then Chestnut Hill at Philadelphia's northwest border (and beyond, into Montgomery County), Germantown Avenue is one of the longest and oldest urban streets in the nation, Lenape trail cum German Quaker trade route to the mother city.

"When I walk around I see the taken-for-granted," Sugrue explains. "I don't see the street just as buildings and people

but the embodiment of political and economic forces. But I also have different ways of encountering space. When I get to the Northeast [the once homogenous part of Philadelphia largely developed in the 1950s and '60s], I marvel at heterogeneity: the old Jewish delis, the Brazilian places on Castor Avenue, the Vietnamese cafes. It's a relatively banal urban landscape. It's ugly. But the diversity makes it interesting."

Sugrue has honed his observational skill in part by spending days with the photographer Camilo Vergara, whose best known work on Detroit, Harlem, and Camden, New Jersey documents the continuous transformation of the urban street. In the 1990s, Vergara was the first to call Detroit a living American ruins. "With Tom, you can see how he's physically moved by the city," says Vergara. "Maybe I'm the same way. It's almost like a piece of music is being played for him."

Jerold Kayden, co-chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Harvard University School of Design, where Sugrue was visiting professor last fall, says the enthusiasm is intrinsic to his work. "He has an infectious love of cities, an excitement that can't be manufactured, that animates the best scholarship. You can read it in his teaching, scholarship, and lectures."

Now, as we descend into the oldest part of Germantown, the winter day has turned colder still. The diffuse light has sharpened. Sugrue suggests we take a moment's refuge at the Friends Free Library, a vaulted space that serves the students and staff of the Germantown Friends School. As a quasi-public library, it's also open to the community.

Here, the Avenue reverberates with voices of urban invention and urban struggle. The very first American anti-slavery protest took place just three blocks down, at Manheim Street, in 1688. In a campaign swing through Philadelphia in October 2008, then presidential candidate Barack Obama delivered a particularly resonant paean to black America three blocks up, in Vernon Park. The Yellow Fever escape house of the nation's first president is a block away. Across the street: the birthplace of *Little Women* author Louisa Mae Alcott, now

the Cunningham Piano factory, the last of its kind in Philadelphia. "You know they still employ a blind piano tuner. He has really acute hearing," says Sugrue as we pass through the library's gate.

"My kids might be a little surprised to see me here," he continues without pause, or reticence (he enthusiastically asks a librarian if any lower-school students are there). As we warm our feet, Sugrue receives an email on his BlackBerry from a reader, a former journalist who had witnessed and reported on an event described in *Sweet Land of Liberty*. He wants to comment on Sugrue's account and share his own observations. He's found a willing audience. "Tom's work is as granular as the sources allow," notes Robert Self, an associate professor of history at Brown University and author of *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. But while a great many historians are careful archival researchers, "not many are producing synthesis," says Michael Katz, the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History. Sugrue, "a terrific synthesizer," does both, a practice of thorough and careful engagement and integration that also noticeably reaches into, incorporates, and infects every aspect of his life.

"With someone like Tom there is the totality of the person," explains social entrepreneur Greg Goldman, CEO of Wireless Philadelphia, the heavily promoted municipal broadband project that at present—under Goldman's direction—is primarily concerned with bridging the digital divide. "All the aspects of his life experiences—family life, friendship, scholarship, community engagement—are fundamentally integrated," Goldman tells me when we meet in his Center City office. Goldman and Sugrue are close friends and neighbors; their kids have grown up together. "I don't know him as an academic. But he doesn't have a narrow mode of operating. Really, it's his broad engagement in the urban environment. That's the thread that connects."

The spool is what Sugrue calls a "typical 1920s/'40s northwest Detroit neighborhood," where he grew up on an elm-lined street called Asbury Park, with small houses on one-eighth acre

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lots, an easy walk to St. Mary of Redford Catholic Church and school, shops, and a movie theater. His father helped to bring the first African-American family into the parish. Then, in 1973, when Sugrue was 10, amid a vast white exodus from Detroit, his parents decided to leave the city, moving the family to suburban Farmington. The two events together are the kind of thing a sensitive child absorbs, and indeed, the experience fundamentally informs his two major works, the 1998 Bancroft Prize-winning *Origins of the Urban Crisis* and *Sweet Land of Liberty*. From *Origins*:

Between 1943 and 1965, Detroit whites founded at least 192 neighborhood organizations throughout the city, variously called “civic associations,” “protective associations,” “improvement associations,” and “homeowners’ associations.” Few scholars have fully appreciated the enormous contribution of this kind of grassroots organization to the racial and political climate of twentieth-century American cities. Their titles revealed their place in the ideology of white Detroiters. As civic associations, they saw their purpose as upholding the values of self-government and participatory democracy. They offered members a unified voice in city politics. As protective associations, they fiercely guarded the investments their members had made in their homes. They also paternalistically defended neighborhood, home, family, women, and children against the forces of social disorder that they saw arrayed against them in the city.

Sugrue’s analysis of that dynamic, according to Bill McGraw, a long time *Detroit Free Press* reporter and the co-editor of the popular *Detroit Almanac*, has produced groundbreaking history. “I was pretty familiar with a lot of the books and other writing about Detroit, and what has happened to it since World War II. So when I read Tom’s book in 1996 I was really blown away by a number of aspects, among them his tracing of the urban cri-

sis back to the 1950s; his vivid documentation of how white residents had ‘defended’ their neighborhoods by fighting, literally, black families when they moved in; his explanation of how Detroit’s economic crisis also began in the years after World War II, and, of course, his telling the story of how African Americans got the short end of the stick. That part of the story is certainly understood in general terms by most Americans, but Tom’s research of how it played out specifically in Detroit was eye-opening and amazing.”

At the heart of that research is what Harvard’s Kayden calls a “voracious appetite for knowledge.”

Sugrue, he tells me, “is one of the most un-siloed historians, wonderfully broad and inclusive.” This means he’s adept at illuminating political movements with vital strands of social and cultural history, and vice versa, a skill that was attractive to Michael Katz and Nichols Professor of American History Bruce Kuklick C’63 G’65 Gr’68, who led the committee that hired him. “Michael would have hired a social historian. I wanted him to be a true political historian,” admits Kuklick. “We were both wrong.”

Kuklick and Katz were eager to find an energetic addition to the history faculty, someone to effectively teach large classes in a department with a huge enrollment. Kuklick says Sugrue did so immediately by taking over Michael Zuckerman’s iconic class on the 1960s. But perhaps his greatest impact has been in recruiting and working with graduate students. Katz says of all Penn history faculty, Sugrue, who is the department’s graduate director, attracts the most applicants. What’s more, “the graduate students revere him.”

Karen Tani is a student in the joint JD/History PhD program Sugrue helped design. “He has had a huge influence on my work, mainly in terms of topic selection,” she tells me. “Tom ‘thinks big’—he’s not afraid to go after big ideas and complicated questions. The project I’m now working on is ambitious—maybe too ambitious—but I’m excited about it.

When I go to work, I don’t feel like I’m digging through dusty archives (even though that is what I’m doing); I feel like I’m on the trail of a big idea.”

Another graduate student, Clem Harris, is a current member of New York Governor David Patterson’s staff and a former New York state trooper. Harris says that in his work on race and politics in late 20th-century Philadelphia, Sugrue “has pushed me to think more critically about the role of electoral politics, to look beneath the veneer” of racial identity, corruption, and machine control. The effect, he says, is profound. “You start to recognize it’s not solely a machine.”

Tani says Sugrue is “the best person I know for a brainstorming session. He loves to talk about ideas, he has a great memory, and he’s very creative, which means that you can go into his office feeling despondent about your work—totally muddled and lost—and leave with a list of books to read, three or four great research topics, and renewed sense of purpose.”

But in 1991, the year Sugrue was brought to Penn (after receiving his PhD from Harvard he did a post-graduate stint at the Brookings Institute), neither Katz nor Kuklick would have imagined the extent of his involvement in Philadelphia. “Philadelphia worked for me right from the start,” Sugrue explains, adding that as a “wannabe architect” he was moved by the vital remains of the 19th and 20th-century city, its walkability, and its large, residential-commercial downtown. Beginning in 2001, Sugrue spent seven years as vice-chair of the Historical Commission, serving as senior historian and often presiding over monthly hearings (the chair, lawyer Michael Sklaroff L’67, was repeatedly forced to recuse himself because of conflicts of interest). In the summer of 2006, as Sugrue neared the end of the research that would form *Sweet Land of Liberty*, a 1950s Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood called Greenbelt Knoll was brought before the commission for historic designation.

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For Sugrue, it was a not-so-unusual confluence of scholarship and community involvement. Fellow commissioner Harris Steinberg C’78 GAR’82, director of the School of Design’s civic planning agency Penn Praxis, says, “Here was Philadelphia, architecture (it’s believed that Louis Kahn Ar’24 Hon’71 designed some of the development’s houses), the story of breaking down racial barriers, and his own ongoing scholarship. All this came together for him.”

Greenbelt Knoll was one of a series of purposely integrated suburban-style housing developments built by Philadelphian Morris Milgram, who was in the vanguard of open housing advocates in the 1950s and ’60s. According to Sugrue in *Sweet Land of Liberty*, “open housing activists came to view the creation of stable, racially integrated communities as the key to breaking down the psychological barriers of race.”

Soon after being hired by Penn, Sugrue moved to Mount Airy, one of the first urban places to resist white flight and rapid social dissolution by embracing open housing and intentional integration. In 1953, with African Americans from North Philadelphia moving up the “Gold Coast” to upper-middle class neighborhoods like Mount Airy, three religious organizations—one Jewish, two Christian—formed a covenant, an embrace of racial integration. The covenant, one of the first of its kind in the country, fomented a new kind of local activism. Residents fought “block-busting” real-estate agents, made straw purchases for black families, lobbied large employers to hire African Americans, and spent time in neighborhood schools helping newly integrated students and teachers adapt. In 1959, community activists formed a civic organization, West

Mount Airy Neighbors. The goal wasn’t to defend territory, but to open it, in a way that achieved social stability. By the early 1990s, with about half its residents black and half white, Mount Airy was one of the most thoroughly integrated places in the nation. West Mount Airy Neighbors, however, had lost its efficacy.

Enter Sugrue, who took over the organization’s presidency in 1996. “When Tom became president was the beginning of the organization’s spirit of renewal,” says West Mount Airy Neighbors executive director Laura Siena, who for five years until 2003 was chair of the Fund for Open Society, the organization started by Morris Milgram. “Anything I’ve done in four years is part of Tom’s legacy,” she says. Much of that legacy followed his own study of the social history of the grassroots. He wanted the organization, so seated in progressive ideas and urbanity, to reengage with the wider political process. That meant shaking off the parochial interests of an increasingly affluent constituency and reaching out across Germantown Avenue—to join forces with East Mount Airy Neighbors, a more traditionally African-American and working-class group, to solve broader, more intrinsic problems. The initiative met with opposition.

“One of the main issues we struggle with,” Sugrue explains, “is that often our vision is really small. We can’t solve the problems of the city by gussying up storefronts. I love and am a member of the grassroots, but ultimately they have the will but not the capacity. One take-away from [*Sweet Land of Liberty*] is that far-reaching gains in Civil Rights require people to organize locally but form a broader coalition, providing a longer reach. But we tend to think real small.”

On the other hand, he says, “It’s the small things that matter” to people in city neighborhoods. He means that a meaningful understanding can only come from close observation. “One of the most interesting features of the urban landscape is going to places in the day and night. I don’t play golf or tennis, but I do go out and explore, ride the buses and subways. So, for example, at night the street changes. In some places it becomes marked. Women, especially, feel trapped. They’re made to feel they can’t go out.”

We’re walking near the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham avenues, the bustling, cacophonous, commercial heart of Germantown. Men, in groups of five and six, gather on street corners. Some make deals, some leer, and some shuffle and laugh. Here are church towers and high rises, Dunkin’ Donuts and Villa Sneakers, Divine Toddler Town and Risque Video, the Foxy Diva and Empire Books (“We Ship to Prisons,” it says in the window), Dollar Crazy and Dahlak, the Germantown branch of the well-loved Baltimore Avenue Ethiopian restaurant. There are vestigial murals and vestry robes, the Lions of Judah and Mr. Hook (“We Fry Fresh Fish”).

Sugrue mentions he needs a new winter hat, but the mission is soon forgotten. “Tom has a kind of childlike ability to look up and around him to see details, immense riches,” says Siena. Foxy Diva’s traditional storefront displays black iconography, memory, exhortation, and hope. Here are reprints of slave auction announcements, the faces of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. Here are large, framed prints of the First Family, and a poster of Barack Obama. In large letters, it says, *Destiny*.

“In some ways, my single intellectual trait is insatiable curiosity,” Sugrue tells

me. "I find the city endlessly fascinating. There's always something to see with new eyes." It's no passive joy. Sugrue's willingness to look harder has thoroughly altered the narrative of cities in the 20th century. Says the *Free Press's* McGraw, "Tom's analysis eviscerated the accepted wisdom for years in Detroit that its downfall really dated from the 1967 riot and especially from the reign of Coleman Young, Detroit's first African-American mayor, who held office from 1974 to 1993. Young was very controversial, especially among whites, but he had become a scapegoat for much of what's wrong about Detroit. Tom effectively demolished that school of thought."

Likewise, *Sweet Land of Liberty* pushes the narrative of modern Civil Rights—which now typically begins in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*—back in time to the "Great Migration" of the 1920s and up, across the Mason-Dixon line, and into the small towns and big cities of the North. In the book's introduction, Sugrue argues,

The exclusion of the North—or its selective inclusion as a foil to the southern freedom struggle—comes at a cost. It ignores the long and intense history of racial violence and conflict in northern towns and cities. Though the differences between North and South were real, our emphasis on southern exceptionalism has led historians, journalists, and political commentators to overlook the commonalities across regions. The long and well-publicized history of racial atrocities in the South gave northerners a badge of honor, a sense that they were not part of America's troubled racial history.

Sugrue goes on to trace the path of people, organizations, and events, alliances and political pressure, geography and perception across 70 years of boycotts, deals, double-talk, idealism, riot, disillusionment, policy, and politics—from boards of education to the calculations of Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. The story moves across the vast north, at times to California, and often stopping in small towns and suburbs, where Jim Crow-like conditions

endured in meager black schools. All along, he is careful to account for the evolution, interpretation, and deployment of ideas across the world and the American political spectrum, a complex feedback loop of opinion, analysis, events, hope and reaction, fear and assertion. With terrifically still and restrained prose, he makes the dynamic tumbling forward apparent and alive.

From the chapter "Long Hot Summers":

Acts of resistance and rebellion usually have unintended consequences. Black revolutionaries hoped that they would destabilize the political system; black rioters hoped to stick it to "the Man," whether brutal police officers or white shopkeepers. The fear of rioting led white elected officials, from the Johnson administration on down to local mayors, to fashion policies to try to buy off black discontent, what sardonic observers called "riot insurance." But riots also fueled urgent demands for law and order and enhanced police power ... The Kerner Commission warned of the "indiscriminate use of force against wholly innocent elements of the Negro community" during the riots. The vast majority of riot-related deaths came at the hands of law-enforcement officials.

Sweet Land of Liberty was published on November 4, 2008, a day marked in places like Germantown by a kind of surreal stepping forward, one voter at a time, and a night—from Chicago and out across the North and South—steeped in tears of melancholic joy and magical disbelief. It was a colossal moment in Civil Rights, surely, a time to stare back, long and derisively, and to gaze forward with still more hope and terrible uncertainty. There are some who call it the start of a different, much less racially polarized America. But Sugrue can't see it that way. "The conventional wisdom says, 'This is proof positive we have overcome.' I think it's a wrong interpretation. Well, you only need to go 10 blocks from Barack Obama's house on the South Side [of Chicago] to see that racial history is not over in the U.S. We've got a lot of overcoming to do."

As the day grows colder, Sugrue and I descend farther down Germantown Avenue.

We pass the home of 19th-century novelist Owen Wister and a tiny park named for the early portraitist Gilbert Stuart. There are vintage 1940s storefront signs and there's the crumbling mill of the Samson Pattern Company. One store advertises imported Muslim oils. Another sells Islamic books. Men—every one of them African-American—wear beards and calf-length robes. Women have covered themselves in black headscarves and long dresses. A block later, we come to Freedom Square; here, in 1688, Daniel Pastorius and other German Quakers, who had sought in William Penn's colony religious freedom, declared their opposition to slavery. In 1992, hoping to catalyze economic development, the Germantown Housing Development Corporation turned the corner into a strip mall called Freedom Square. Today, it feels lifeless and dangerous. As we walk through the large parking lot, Sugrue observes, "Even the beer distributor is closed. The screen is down on the windows. This is sad."

When I return, alone, a few weeks later, this lower section of Germantown Avenue is being reconstructed. A new street bed will be laid, new trolley tracks, curbs, and cobblestones. Construction workers, union employees of a local contractor, swarm the street. Not one, of perhaps two dozen in all, is African-American. It is a bewildering scene, tension palpable. But Sugrue is my steady, and relentless, companion here.

From *Origins*:

Ten years after the onset of the national civil rights movement, and eight years after Michigan passed a statewide Fair Employment Practices act, blacks remained effectively shut out of well-paying, skilled, and unionized jobs in the construction trades.

That was 1963, Detroit. This is Philadelphia, 2009. "You can't help but feel the force of segregation, notice it at every level," observes Sugrue. "At least let's be honest about it."

Nathaniel Popkin C'91 GCP'95 is a 2009 PA Council on the Arts Fellow.