

**Escaping the Split-level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in
Recent American Fiction**

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ABSTRACT

My PhD engages with a number of recent works of fiction in order to understand how American literature has commented on the emergence of a postsuburban environment – that is to say a cosmopolitan landscape in which the previous city/suburb binary is no longer evident. Whilst the term 'postsuburban' is resistant to easy categorisation, I use it as a mode of enquiry both to reassess what fiction has to tell literary criticism about the foundational concept of suburbia, as well as to assess contemporary writing free from the assumptions of an inherited suburban imaginary. It is my thesis that these postsuburban environments are seen by the writers who set their fictions there as places that are far more than white middle-class dystopias, and that it is a fallacy to attribute to them, as certain literary critics do, the negative cultural clichés associated with postwar suburban fictions.

After offering revisionist readings of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), I consider Richard Ford's trilogy *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006) as a representation of a classic postwar suburb that has been overtaken by development and sprawl. I focus next on T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), and Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996), which both suggest the postsuburban landscape as a place of cross-cultural exchange and re-invention. An analysis of Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) follows and proposes that the physical postsuburban spaces of innovation that exist in Silicon Valley, the novel's setting, are paralleled by

the changing virtual spaces of the Internet. Lastly, I explore *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) by Dinaw Mengestu, and Richard Price's *Lush Life* (2008), two novels that deal with one of the corollaries of the breakdown of the city/suburb binary and the emergence of a postsuburban environment: inner-city gentrification.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	45
“Heroically reconnecting to respectable civilian life”: Postwar Adjustment and the Suburbs in <i>The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit</i> and <i>Revolutionary Road</i>	
CHAPTER 2	76
“A more interesting surgery on the suburbs”: Richard Ford's Paean to the New Jersey Periphery	
CHAPTER 3	127
Into the Postsuburban Third Space: The Immigrant Experience in T. C. Boyle's <i>The Tortilla Curtain</i> and Junot Díaz's <i>Drown</i>	
CHAPTER 4	190
“A kingdom of a thousand princes but no kings”: The Postsuburban Network in Douglas Coupland's <i>Microserfs</i>	
CHAPTER 5	237
Is the City Becoming Suburban? Exploring Gentrification in <i>Lush Life</i> and <i>The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears</i>	
CONCLUSION	273
BIBLIOGRAPHY	284

INTRODUCTION

From Suburbia to Postsuburbia

Suburbs of one form or another have been a feature of the American landscape since the revolutionary era. At the end of the eighteenth century the suburb as a residential site, or a place of business, could be found near Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. However, it was from around 1815 that, attendant on technological innovation, the pace of growth in fringe urban areas began to outstrip that of the core, and suburbanisation became associated with a commuting lifestyle. In the case of New York City the development of ferries, buses, and steam trains led to the emergence of suburban communities in Brooklyn, up Broadway north of Greenwich Village, and in Harlem. The development of the streetcar, from horse-drawn to electrified, led to a democratisation in suburban living as sections of society other than the wealthy became able to afford to live outside of the central city. At the end of the nineteenth century, when the U.S. Census Bureau declared the frontier closed and America emerged as the world's leading industrialised nation, the association between suburban life and the middle-class imagination began to take hold as people sought to establish the single family home as a private bastion against mass society and technology, although, ironically, the suburbs

experienced a further boom in the 1920s due to the widespread availability of the automobile. By 1959, 9 million of the booming American population lived in suburbs newly-created on the back of favourable mortgage deals and tax-breaks.¹

However, at the end of the 1980s, and during the 1990s, geographers and urbanists began to note the ways in which the suburban landscape was undergoing dramatic change. To these observers it seemed that the classic postwar suburb which was comprised of tract housing organised in gridded subdivisions, and which maintained a dependency on the central city, had been transformed into, or superseded by, a polycentric, economically, culturally and politically self-sufficient metropolitan form. For Edward W. Soja this new configuration was nothing less than “the city turned inside out.”²

In the fields in which these writers were working, the idiom used to describe the landscapes beyond the city core changed with the topography, and a host of neologisms began to circulate. As far back as 1987, Robert Fishman was referring to the emergence of an environment “with principles ... directly opposed to the true suburb ... [which] was always functionally dependent on the urban core.” Fishman called these new peripheral phenomena “technoburbs” because of the fact that they featured a great number of science parks and much hi-tech industry, and

¹ For a more complete discussion of suburbanization in America, see Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also, John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) for an analysis of postwar suburbia's origins in the frontier spirit that animated the settling of the borderlands between the urban and the rural landscapes in the nineteenth century.

² Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 250.

were linked by arterial freeway networks. By the early 1990s, Fishman began referring to this new metropolitan form as a “postsuburban environment.”³

This is a term that is explicitly explored in the edited collection *Postsuburban California* (1995). The contributors to this volume all work on the basis that the postsuburban periphery is empirically measurable due to its spatial formation, its cosmopolitanism, and its relationship with “information capitalism” and consumerism. In this way, it marks a discrete break from the previous suburban form which, for these authors, in contrast, was economically and culturally less vital. The editors of the collection also take trouble to distinguish their model from that which Joel Garreau proposes in his 1991 work, *Edge City* and which views the transformation of the periphery as nothing less than the constitution of new “edge” cities beyond the limits of old ones, often incorporating previously suburban areas in the process. For Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, Garreau's paradigm ignores the “fundamentally decentered or multicentered nature of these emerging regions.”⁴ A host of additional terms have also been used to describe the changed metropolitan

³ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 183-4, and, “Urbanity and Suburbanity: Rethinking the 'Burbs,” *American Quarterly* 46 (1994): 36. In this article Fishman also points out that the establishment of a postsuburban landscape has a corollary in the emergence of a “posturban” environment due to the changed relationship between the periphery and the urban core. This is a point that I explore further in Chapter Five in which I analyse fictions that represent the process of gentrification.

⁴ Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, “Beyond the Edge: the Dynamism of Postsuburban Regions,” in, Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), ix, xiv; Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

landscape (“exurbs,” “edgeless cities,” “boomburbs,” “midopolis”).⁵ Moreover, new ways of conceptualising former suburban environments have emerged synchronously to the advent of a terminology dedicated to the periphery. Now it is common to read about “mature suburbs” and “inner-ring suburbs,”⁶ terms that similarly reflect the diversification of metropolitan form and the dissolution of the binary categorisation of suburb and city.

More recently, the publication of works such as Mark Clapson's *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (2003), and Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short, and Thomas J Vicino's *Cities and Suburbs: New Metropolitan Realities in the US* (2010) testify to the fact that social scientists are still considering the relationship between this particular spatial change and social, cultural, political, and economic factors.⁷ For the purposes of this thesis, my adoption of the term postsuburban is intended to acknowledge the fact that American fiction writers are tackling the same questions as some of the geographers and urban theorists mentioned above. The novels and short stories that I analyse in chapters two to five were all written and published at the same

⁵ William R. Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2007), 111, for a summary of the origins of the term “exurb”; Robert E. Lang, *Edgeless Cities: Exploring the Elusive Metropolis* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003); Robert E. Lang and Jennifer B. Lefurgy, *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2007); Joel Klotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random House, 2001 [2000]).

⁶ See Mike Davis, “Obama at Manassas,” in *New Left Review* 56 (2009): 5-40. In Chapter Three I consider some of Junot Díaz's short stories as narratives that explore the socio-spatial fabric of such older suburban areas.

⁷ Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short, and Thomas J Vicino, *Cities and Suburbs: New Metropolitan Realities in the US* (London: Routledge, 2010).

time as this move to understand America's newest landscape was being established. As such, I am interested in the ways in which the “post” prefix indicates, not only the material fact of the eclipse of the postwar suburb, but also the imaginative acts undertaken by the authors considered here in seeking to represent the postsuburban in terms that move beyond the rhetoric associated with previous suburban fictions.

As well as aiming to establish, therefore, a new frame of reference for literary criticism that engages with cityscapes in fiction, I also intend to show, through an examination in Chapter One of two novels that may be taken as representative of the postwar suburb, that the orthodoxy surrounding such fictions can be queried; as such, I make a case for a “postsuburban” reading practice that allows for a revisionist perspective on fictions whose images have become fixed in the literary-critical mind.

This overdetermined cultural conception of the suburbs has led some literary critics to apprehend a suburban imaginary that persists in upholding the notion that the suburban environment is either utopian or dystopian. Such a critical approach invariably reinscribes suburbia as an almost exclusively white middle-class experience. The work of historians such as Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue demonstrates how this standard narrative of suburbia has tended to emphasise its class and race homogeneity with the result that its more complicated demographic reality has been overlooked. Consequently, whilst revisionist histories of suburban expansion in America are “Mindful of the diversity of

metropolitan America in terms of race, class, culture and politics,”⁸ contemporary literary criticism is less responsive to reassessment. Introducing his book *SuburbiaNation* (2004), Robert Beuka avers that “the suburban milieu ... has for at least the past half century represented both the promise and the failure of mainstream, middle-class American culture,” explaining that “the vexed cultural perception of the suburbs remains tied to visions of suburbia in post-World War II America” when America's middle class expanded significantly.⁹ In conclusion, Beuka states that his argument is an attempt to show that “this consistent focus on suburbia as an American dystopia is more than coincidence and instead reflects [Americans'] ... uneasy relationship to an environment heavily invested with, even defined by, middle-class America's cultural aspirations and anxieties.”¹⁰ Similarly, Catherine Jurca's thesis in *White Diaspora* (2001) assumes the undifferentiated nature of suburbia as a white middle-class refuge that has left its residents disaffected. A significant part of *White Diaspora* examines suburban literature from the first half of the twentieth century in order to shed light on postwar suburban fiction. Throughout this longer history of suburban fiction, Jurca sees writers proposing an environment that alienates the affluent, its chief occupiers.

⁸ Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, “Introduction: The New Suburban History,” in, Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10. See also, Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) and Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). Both of these works show how twentieth-century suburban development in California followed particular and local patterns and emphasise the fact that it is inaccurate to assume the white middle-class nature of suburbia.

⁹ Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 16, 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

With such a heritage established, Jurca opines that contemporary novelists who set their narratives in the suburbs are simply “heirs rather than inaugurators of a tradition.”¹¹

Whilst Jurca is struck by “the relative modesty of formal shifts in [recent] literary treatments of the suburb and the conspicuous continuities of thematic preoccupation and representational strategy,”¹² I propose, in contrast, that a considerable number of recent fictions not only recognise the changed socio-spatial nature of suburbia, but also represent it in innovative ways that deliberately disrupt (or expose as clichéd) familiar fictional tropes such as the dysfunctional middle-aged, middle-class white male, or the mundane and debilitating nature of domestic space. Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Gloria Naylor, who do imagine suburbia from the perspective of a particular ethnicity but who nonetheless recycle and transpose onto their alternative narratives these inherited discourses, are not examined in what follows.¹³ As Mary Pattillo-McCoy points out in *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (1999), thinking about suburbia in stereotypically negative white middle-class terms has the effect of making problems specific to minority experience appear indivisible from those of the majority culture when, of course, they remain particular and unique.¹⁴ Instead, this thesis considers

¹¹ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008) and Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* (London: Methuen, 1985). Lahiri's short stories and Naylor's novel both question the extent to which ethnic identity is sacrificed in the pursuit of material success in affluent suburbia.

¹⁴ Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1-3.

fictions that represent ethnic suburban experiences as having the potential to challenge and re-make stereotypical understandings, and in the process resist the absorption of minority lifeways into those of the majority.

The fictions under consideration in this thesis all recognise a taxonomy of postsuburban micro-geographies in that they take as their settings the exurbs, edge cities and mature suburbs of the metropolitan sprawl of California and the eastern seaboard. In choosing fictions that explore the nature of postsuburbia in these particular areas I do not wish to deny the emergence of postsuburban forms elsewhere in America. Works by authors such as Frederick Barthelme and Tom Wolfe represent the changing nature of metropolitan space in the New South, for example.¹⁵ However, on a purely circumstantial level, it must be noted that, historically, cities such as New York and Los Angeles, by virtue of their sheer size, became the urban centres with the largest suburban areas in their orbit, and that, consequently, it is in these regions that postsuburban development has been most marked. More importantly, though, my chosen fictions speak to a new kind of American regionalism, one which Paul Giles sees as being “predicated less on the distinct properties immanent within any given place than on the cartographies relating 'here' and 'there' to all-encompassing global networks.”¹⁶

And yet, in the sense that postsuburban landscapes are indicative of global late capitalist culture in the contradictions inherent in their form –

¹⁵ Frederick Barthelme, *The Brothers* (New York: Viking, 1993), and *Elroy Nights* (Cambridge: Counterpoint, 2003); Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

¹⁶ Paul Giles, “Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53 (2007): 341.

decentred, fragmented, but linked by transnational capital and information flows – taken together, the fictions that are the subject of this thesis seek to explore how human identity and selfhood is nonetheless able fully to be expressed in the context of such a commercially, technologically, and culturally flattened milieu. In this sense, then, such fictions may uncouple meaning from a particular territory and begin to excavate the individual and collective role people have in the production of postsuburban space. This may make the fact that these narratives are set in the particular locales of the western and eastern seabords something of a red herring. In terms of its impact on people's lifeways, I will argue that there is no quality that is uniquely ascribable to the different iterations of the postsuburban landscape in America, and that meaning for the characters who live there is generated by their own interactions with their environment.

As such, my position echoes Neil Campbell's in its recognition of a “regionalist sensibility [that] is as much concerned with negotiations amid complex spaces as it is with any absolute point of coherence within a national narrative framework or grid.”¹⁷ Commenting on the production of such lived structures of feeling in a globalised world that pits the local against the transnational, Arjun Appadurai writes that “it is the

¹⁷ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 43. For more on critical regionalism as a discourse that aims to question the interactions between the local and the global, and the way in which the two are mutually connected see also: Neil Campbell, *The Cultures of the New American West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Soja, *Postmetropolis*; Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in, H. Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture* (London; Pluto Press, 1983), 16-30.; Sharon Monteith and Suzanne W. Jones, eds., *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

imagination that will have to carry us beyond.”¹⁸ I want to apply this notion not only to the characters in the narratives I explore, but also to the authors themselves. As Sara Blair points out, fictive texts can be replete with “tricks of resistance to the imperatives of the temporal and the ... 'strange effects' of space,”¹⁹ both at the level of what the narrative represents, and on the level of authorial intention.

Suburbia: The Critical Consensus

How, then, did this prevailing view that postwar suburbia was a place of no alternatives become established amongst many cultural commentators? It was the rapidity and extent of the postwar suburbanisation of the United States, in which efforts, facilitated by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944) – commonly known as the G.I. Bill– and the continuing work of the Federal Housing Association (established in 1934), were made to house sixteen million returning soldiers and sailors, that lead to the publication of a series of sociological studies of this new phase in suburban development. I will review some of these assessments so that their impact on the broader cultural conception of the postwar suburb can be better understood.

The first publication to emerge that explicitly attacked the suburbs was John Keats' vitriolic *The Crack in the Picture Window*, published in 1957. Merging the techniques of fiction and sociology by following an

¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, quoted in, Sara Blair, “Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary,” in, *American Literary History* 10 (1998), 556.

¹⁹ Blair, *ibid.*

invented family (the less than subtly-named, the Drones) and their fortunes in a Levittown-like development in order to extrapolate a damning indictment of all postwar suburban expansion, Keats' work is notable for such hyperbolic statements as this warning to his original readers: "even while you read this, whole square miles of identical boxes are spreading like gangrene ... everywhere."²⁰

In equally hysterical tones, the husband-and-wife team of Richard E. Gordon and Katherine K. Gordon (assisted by Max Gunther) attempts to bring its background in psychiatry to bear on the suburban question. In their 1960 work, *The Split-Level Trap*, the authors identify Bergen County, New Jersey, as the typical postwar suburb and promise, somewhat paradoxically, both "creative interpretations" and "scientific conclusions" regarding "suburban mental problems."²¹ Promising to provide "statistical evidence" for a nationwide suburban malaise through the documented stresses of Bergen County's "disturbed modern community," the Gordons' approach is to "find out whether life in modern suburban America is truly more stressful than the small-town life of the nation fifty or a hundred years ago."²² Such a frame of reference immediately establishes the postwar suburb as a homogeneous white middle-class environment as the authors seek to measure its appeal against the nostalgically-invoked and pre-lapsarian control sample of nineteenth-century Main Street. Such as it

²⁰ John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), xi. Accessed online, 06/10/2009 at: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=9481665>.

²¹ See "Publisher's Note", in, Richard E. Gordon, Katherine E. Gordon and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1960), 7.

²² Ibid., 30, 33. It would seem that the Gordons coined the phrase, "Disturbia" (33), a synonym for suburbia that still has some currency in contemporary culture, as evidenced by the 2007 film, directed by D. J. Caruso, which takes it as its title.

is, the Gordons' hypothesis seems to be that a dangerous acquisitiveness has seen postwar suburbanites amass gross amounts of wealth that have, in turn, led to a bewildering array of psycho-social ailments, citing the sight of “young husbands ... suddenly start[ing] to vomit blood” and a “middle-aged woman ... empt[ying] the pills into her hand ... [before going] back to her bed and [lying] down to die.”²³ Such sensationalist language clearly prefigures the development of a suburban gothic as a sub-genre in popular culture.²⁴ The various themes and images associated with a suburban gothic – loss of autonomy, the invasion of privacy, the steady erosion of the material comforts of consumer affluence – are all acknowledged and satirised by the writers I analyse in this thesis. In this sense, Beuka's and Jurca's identification of continuities between the cultural perception of contemporary suburbia and the suburban imaginary of post-World War Two America, with recent fiction writers being “heirs rather than inaugurators” of a tradition, is an accurate one. One of the aims of this thesis, however, is to clarify the ends to which these tropes are put. Whether it is someone coming to terms with the insurgent wild dog population in the canyons of suburban Los Angeles, or someone adjusting to life in a dilapidated mature suburb, what unites all the postsuburban narratives under examination here is the fact that they represent a spatiality that is open and unrestricted and which therefore is subject to change which cannot always be controlled.

Another work of note to deride the suburban environment was

²³ Ibid., 28, 19.

²⁴ For more on the development of suburban gothic see, Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Lewis Mumford's far more rigorous but nonetheless lofty dismissal in his National Book Award-winning, *The City in History* (1961). For Mumford, the postwar suburbanisation of the United States was a shocking betrayal of a previously more refined (and by implication, elitist) suburban way of life. Bemoaning the democratisation of the suburb through legislation such as the G.I. Bill, Mumford writes that, "As soon as the suburban pattern became universal, the virtues it at first boasted [in the nineteenth century] began to disappear," with the "ultimate effect" of the suburban boom being ... "a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible."²⁵ In Mumford's estimation, nothing better sums up the disenfranchisement of the entrepreneurial upper middle classes from their semi-rural suburban retreats than the proliferation of feckless "families in space" to be found in "mass suburbia," families dedicated to nothing more than "relaxation and play."²⁶

In a similar fashion to Mumford, David Riesman is another commentator to note the problem of the suburbs as one of a "massification of men," seeing the widespread democratisation of suburban homeownership as a process leading to a "constriction of alternatives."²⁷ In his essay, "The Suburban Dislocation" (1957), Riesman offers a brief analysis of Sloan Wilson's novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955),

²⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), 491, 486-7.

²⁶ Ibid., 505, 495.

²⁷ Riesman, "The Suburban Dislocation," in, Riesman, *Abundance for What?*, 227, 251. Riesman's and Mumford's reservations were part of a broader concern amongst intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s that mass society was stripping American life of political passion and any semblance of radical ideology. Key works in this movement include Dwight MacDonald's collection of essays *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), and Irving Howe's essay "This Age of Conformity," *Partisan Review* 20 (1954): 7-33.

in which he strives to position Wilson's work as a dramatic treatment of the continued choice between suburb and city, suggesting that its central protagonist, Tom Rath, chooses “suburban cosiness” over the “exciting ... opportunity” of the city.²⁸

In this sense, Riesman's views prefigure Mumford's in the way they strive to maintain the distinction between the city and the suburb that allowed for the establishment of the suburbs' previously exceptional character. Accordingly, Riesman comments on the loss of the potentially “various selves” of the population to the “like-mindedness” of the mass suburban environment of postwar America. And yet, for Riesman, any societal problems fostered by the suburban environment seem to be far removed from the debilitating afflictions identified in *The Split-Level Trap*, or indeed the complacencies that Mumford sees as being endemic. Riesman's conflicted assessment of the impact of suburban life on the American people is perhaps best summed up in his conclusion that “many people have achieved, in the suburbs, a face-to-face community and a domesticity which gave meaning to life even while, in some degree, oppressing them.”²⁹ This position, perhaps more generous than Mumford's, takes into account what Riesman refers to as “national orbits” – the historical context of the cold war and the booming economy – and their effect on the way that the suburbs are perceived. Early in “The Suburban Dislocation”, Riesman acknowledges too the propensity of white middle-class intellectuals to transpose onto suburban life their

²⁸ Ibid., 237.

²⁹ David Riesman, “Flight and Search in the New Suburbs” (1959), in, Riesman, *Abundance for What?*, 267.

“contemporary fears for the loss of liberty and individuality,”³⁰ bringing a degree of self-reflexivity to his position that Mumford's writings on postwar suburbia lack.³¹

Whilst William H. Whyte's, *The Organization Man* (1956) has been labelled the “single most influential attack on the American suburb,”³² I want to suggest that Whyte's analysis, like Riesman's, offers a more equivocal take on postwar suburban expansion. The thesis of Whyte's influential work holds that the postwar suburbs are no more than an analogue for the environment of “the organization,” a metonym Whyte uses to represent the number of burgeoning corporations employing a bureaucratic workforce of clerks and managers. For Whyte, “the great package suburbs ... reflect the values of the organization man” and they represent the end-point of a journey towards respectability and prominence, with a great many people becoming middle class in the suburb, even if they did not enter as such.³³ Whilst, certainly, Whyte wrestles with the desirability of this relationship between corporate and home life, he nonetheless sees in the suburbs a definite “dynamism.”³⁴ Such a perspective contrasts markedly with the formulations of critics such

³⁰ Riesman, “The Suburban Dislocation,” in, Riesman, *Abundance for What?*, 227.

³¹ Writing in 1980 on Mumford's *The City in History*, over twenty years since the publication of his own thoughts on postwar suburban expansion, Riesman develops his opinions further by saying that “the move to the suburb ... has for many families brought greater freedom of choice, more opportunity for friendship and community activity, greater space and amenity, closer family ties.” He points out that he shares Mumford's “despair” about the general decline in the quality of life in suburban America, but acknowledges that conditions there are, for the average American, far better than were to be found in the city previously. See, David Riesman, “Some Observations on Lewis Mumford's 'The City in History',” in, *Salmagundi*, 49 (1980), 84-85.

³² Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 2.

³³ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [1956]), 267, 299.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 279, 283-4.

as Keats and the Gordons in resisting the temptation to attribute to the suburban environment deadening and oppressive qualities. Indeed, Whyte explicitly states that “the suburbanites themselves provide evidence that their values are a great deal more than a function of the physical environment.”³⁵ In her work on privacy in Cold War America, Deborah Nelson links Whyte's perspective on corporatised suburbia with the feminist perspective of Betty Friedan whose *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) condemned suburban dwellings as being particularly harmful to the construction of healthy female identities. For Nelson, the lack of privacy afforded suburban residents through the very architecture of their homes – the picture windows, the open driveways and lawns – that Whyte saw as indicative of the corporation's reach into the domestic sphere also resulted in women having to conform to a standardised model of behaviour: the “feminine mystique.”³⁶

A second wave of sociological studies looked to provide an unequivocal counterpoint to the hostile critiques aimed at the suburbs in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although the work of David Riesman and William H. Whyte should not simply be categorised as anti-suburban in the way of Keats, the Gordons, and Mumford, this later body of work on suburban lifeways shakes off any ambivalence Riesman and Whyte share to proclaim suburbia a misunderstood terrain that is, in actuality, remarkable for its heterogeneity and diversity.

³⁵ Ibid., 393.

³⁶ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 87. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997 [1963]).

Writing in 1963, the same year as Friedan, William M. Dobriner calls for the notion of a particular and uniform suburban “ecology” – by which he means the supposed standardised spatiality of the subdivision – to be rejected as a critical paradigm. In Dobriner's view, most criticism of the suburbs proceeds from this erroneous standpoint, with the “classic portrait of the suburbs as significantly 'homogenized' areas ... grossly oversimplif[ying] the character of the suburbs ... obscur[ing] the vital and *significant differences between them*.”³⁷ Dobriner attempts to co-opt Whyte's work to his revisionist project stating that, although *The Organization Man* “did much to establish the psychological and literary matrix [of suburban studies] ... the currently active savants ... have ranged unbridled far beyond the relatively controlled and legitimate perspective of his pioneering work.”³⁸ Dobriner's point of departure from Whyte lies in positing the idea that, rather than there being a single suburban form, there are, in fact, many, with the key to understanding suburbia to be found “in the age and type of suburb and the social characteristics of the population.”³⁹ One of the types of suburban environment that Dobriner identifies in *Class in Suburbia* is what he calls the “reluctant suburb.” This characterisation is useful in allowing us to see postwar suburban expansion as more than just a series of uniform developments as it accounts for the suburbanisation of already established small towns that have been dragged in to a city's orbit or engulfed entirely by its sprawl.

³⁷ William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 8, 12.

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

Dobriner explains: “The differences between a suburb created out of the cornfields by a big business builder using modern technology and the ‘reluctant suburb,’ shaped by the forces of urban assault, are legion.” Dobriner’s book features a case-study of one such “reluctant suburb” in which he draws on a range of data to paint a picture of “Old Harbor,” an anonym for a town somewhere on the Atlantic coast of New England.⁴⁰ It is with Dobriner’s work that a sense of suburbia as something other than a universally white middle-class landscape first emerges. In suggesting that suburban environments are many and varied, this view proposes, as a consequence, that the people living there are themselves far from the easily categorisable mass that earlier critics assumed.

These sociological observations are complemented by the later theoretical work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. In the preface to the third edition of his *La Production de L'Espace*, (*The Production of Space*) published in 1986, Henri Lefebvre outlines the conception of space against which he is opposed. For Lefebvre, this is a space theorised as “an empty zone, a container indifferent to its content, but defined by certain unexpressed criteria: absolute, optico-geometrical, Euclidean-Cartesian-Newtonian.”⁴¹ Contrary to this idea of space as an empty container, Lefebvre’s Marxist-Humanist formulation emphasises in materialist terms the way in which space is constituted by a socially productive process with individual and collective agency reasserted. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s work on mass culture in which the German philosopher

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre, “Preface to the New Edition: The Production of Space,” in, Stuart Elden et al., *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 206.

suggests that people achieve individuation through the process of habituation to mass cultural forms, John Archer asserts that “what the suburban landscape provides Americans is what the landscape of any culture provides its people, a *datum* of opportunity: a set of given conditions and customs that are well recognized and observed ... a knowable terrain in which needs and desires can be addressed in practicable fashion.”⁴² If Lefebvre's work offers a spatial equivalent to Benjamin's ideas about consumption, I want to extend Archer's idea by suffusing my fictional analyses with Lefebvrian notions of the way in which a landscape's inhabitants generate their own geographies and understand their environments in their own terms.⁴³

By adopting Lefebvre's thought as my critical base, I demonstrate how contemporary fictions draw more on the sort of view of suburbia Dobriner's advances than on the negative sociological studies of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Another more nuanced perspective on suburban life is Herbert J. Gans' important study, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1967). A product of two years of research during which period Gans lived in the eponymous suburb as a “participant-observer,”⁴⁴ *The Levittowners*, like Dobriner's work,

⁴² John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream Home, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 337. Archer refers to Benjamin's famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”; see, Hannah Arendt, ed., trans., Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973 [1969]).

⁴³ Michel de Certeau is another European intellectual who has conceived of space in these Marxist-Humanist terms. As Jim Collins suggests, de Certeau's notion of people having local “ways of operating” is very much to do with how a place's inhabitants “make the landscape into their life-scapes.” See Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 39.

⁴⁴ Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [1967]), xviii.

firmly advances the notion that there is no such thing as a “typical suburb” and that the term “suburbia may simply be a substitute phrase for low-density settlement.”⁴⁵ For Gans, the flight to the suburbs for a diverse cross-section of Americans was a *symptom* of underlying societal issues to do with poverty, and racial and class segregation, rather than a *cause* of invidious divisions. The study notes that most incomers to Levittown were motivated by a desire for a little more space and affordable housing and that, given people were moving to the suburb in families of varying sizes, as opposed to being members of a larger ethnic group leaving the city *en masse*, very often a degree of homogeneity was welcomed by the new suburbanites as evidence that they had found a community into which they could easily assimilate.⁴⁶

As a result of first-hand observations, Gans is dismissive of what he sees as the self-absorption of the critics of postwar suburbia and the “ethnocentrism” of their extrapolations. Whilst he agrees that “many of the *phenomena* identified by the critics occur in Levittown,” Gans categorically states that “their alleged *consequences* do not follow.” For Gans, the fact that the majority of the critics are middle class – with the majority of their criticisms aimed at middle-class suburban lifestyles that do not and cannot stand for a representative national suburban scene – goes a long way to explaining the unfortunate persistence of the suburban

Levittown, New Jersey was the third postwar suburban development to be completed by the construction company Levitt and Sons, Inc., after Levittown, Long Island, New York, and Levittown, Pennsylvania. Building began in 1955 on a site previously known as Willingboro Township and was completed in 1958. Gans and his wife were among the first twenty-five families who moved in.

⁴⁵ Ibid., vi.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32-37, 166, 154. Interestingly, Gans points out that no more than five to ten per cent of the new Levittowners could be considered upper middle class.

myth. He writes: “The upper middle class is ... more competitive and more status-conscious than the other classes. Popular writers studying upper middle-class suburbs have observed this competition and some have mistakenly ascribed it to suburbia.”⁴⁷

Indeed, Gans notes that criticising the new postwar suburb for being a place that actively engenders both a dangerous conformity and an alarming competitiveness is contradictory, but that lumping the two together has become a convenient mode of attack for nay-sayers. Conversely, Gans advances the thesis that the residents of Levittown construct their own suburban experiences. In terms that are similar to those Lefebvre employs in his writings about the production of space, Gans analyses the subdivision, and the sub-blocks that comprise it, as “unique [in scope] for each individual,” with what happens in Levittown being “almost always a reflection of the people who live in it.”⁴⁸

Working with a conception of space as continually evolving and contested allows for readings of both suburban and postsuburban fictions that run counter to a critique informed by fixed or universalised understandings of these symbolic landscapes. Lefebvre's work provides a language of “spatial differentiation”⁴⁹ which, in turn, permits an appreciation of the ways in which, in Edward W. Soja's formulation, “the encompassing and encaging spatializations of social life that have been associated with the historical development of capitalism”⁵⁰ can be

⁴⁷ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 174, 281, 411.

⁴⁹ Neil Smith, “Homeless/Global: Scaling Places,” in, Bird et al., 99.

⁵⁰ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 24.

challenged. In my view literary criticism's engagement with suburban fiction has been limited by a neglect of the ways in which the variegated spatialities of society have been textually represented. Too often, the work of literary critics has been compromised by an unquestioning invocation of the sort of metaphorisation of suburban space to which Soja alludes above. Whilst in Chapter One my readings of *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* seek to recover these texts from a critical consensus that sees them as an indictment of the period of mass suburban expansion in the aftermath of World War Two, the rest of my thesis aims to interrogate the legacy of such static and essentialist notions of suburban fiction by refusing to conflate the perceived ills of the postwar suburban environment with those often ascribed to postmodern landscapes. My examinations of recent American fiction reject the fatalism implicit in the assumption that the supposedly inhibiting nature of the suburbs has simply been subsumed into a late-capitalist, postmodern void. Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* and Richard Ford's 'Frank Bascombe' trilogy, in particular, do not present the postsuburban environment in the same pejorative terms as do, for example, Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* (2005), in which the contemporary metropolis is shown to be a psychosocial illusion rife with threats from within and without. Nor do they share the perspective of Stephen Amidon's *Human Capital* (2004), which portrays suburbia as a habitus in which people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.⁵¹ Commentaries such as

⁵¹ Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (New York: Knopf, 2005). Stephen Amidon, *Human Capital* (New York: Viking, 2004).

James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993), Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990), which introduces the idea of a "paranoid spatiality" to a contemplation of Los Angeles, and Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1988), which offers a semiotician's portentous view of contemporary American landscapes as empty spectacle, have all contributed to this school of thought in American culture more broadly. Similarly, in his book *Globalization and Culture*, John Tomlinson argues that the postmodern landscape is "a place that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity." But, as Doreen Massey argues, when approaching this topic, there needs to be a more considered engagement in order that such questions as "*which* condition of postmodernity" and "*whose* condition of postmodernity" can be asked. By drawing on this idea of a differentiated, localised postmodernity embedded in individual experience, and on Lefebvrian notions of the way in which space is produced, I will show that, contrary to the pessimistic vision that literary critics such as Jurca invoke, the fictions of postsuburbia do not represent an environment that is necessarily restrictive. Instead narratives such as *The Tortilla Curtain* and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* represent ordinary people as having real agency despite, and because of, the particularities of postmodern landscapes.⁵²

Bennet M. Berger also addresses the anatomy of the myth of

⁵² See: Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993); Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); Baudrillard, trans. Chris Turner, *America* (London: Verso, 1988); John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 9; and, Doreen Massey, "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner, eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 62.

suburbia in a 1972 article simply titled, “The Myth of Suburbia.” Expanding on Dobriner's earlier rejection of a uniform suburban ecology, Berger further nuances the revisionist approach to the suburban debate by proposing that scholars recognise the difference between 'the suburbs' as a collection of differing spatial matrices and 'suburbia' as a loaded cultural formulation.⁵³ With this point established, Berger is concerned to contextualise the debate about suburban life by emphasising that there is nothing specifically suburban about “conformity, status anxiety, and the rest” and that “suburbia may be nothing but a scapegoat” for larger problems inherent in a national culture predicated on certain economic and political ideologies.⁵⁴

Despite the work of figures such as Dobriner, Gans, and Berger, two of the most recent studies of suburban fiction still draw disproportionately on the negative image of suburbia established by negative postwar sociological studies. In focusing on Catherine Jurca's *White Diaspora* and Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation*, I want to point, through my own analysis of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, to ways in which we may be able to re-think the critical reception of suburban fiction of the 1950s and 1960s. More centrally to my overall thesis, such an intervention will also serve as an important prelude to my readings of postsuburban fiction. Whilst the postsuburban ecology reveals the diversification of spatial forms, with the

⁵³ Bennett M. Berger, “The Myth of Suburbia,” in, Charles M. Haar, ed., *The End of Innocence: a Suburban Reader* (Glenview, IL : Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972), 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42.

fictions set in postsuburban locations responding to these changing environments through a range of representational strategies, it seems that the critical lens through which they are appreciated is still in need of recalibration. As Berger writes: “Too many responsible intellectuals, while uncritically accepting the *myth* of suburbia, are nevertheless extremely critical of what they 'see' in it.”⁵⁵

Beuka's *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004) argues that representations of suburbia serve as a mirror to the dominant culture of the white middle classes, offering up “symbolic manifestations”⁵⁶ of an environment that this stratum of American society loves to hate. Beuka relates the impact of sociological studies on attitudes towards suburban life and in his consideration of suburban fiction concludes that a majority of novels are simply “Confirming the worst fears of the postwar social critics” showing the suburbs as “fostering [a] homogeneity of experience.”⁵⁷ Beuka concludes fallaciously that sociologists' investigations unanimously interpreted the suburbs as “either utopian models of community or dystopian landscapes of dispiriting homogeneity.”⁵⁸ By contrast, I have argued that the various critiques of these commentators are a little more complicated than such a simplistic summary allows. Ironically, given his acknowledgement of the long and influential afterlife of the various attacks on the suburbs, Beuka not only

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

subscribes to reductive visions of suburbia, but also perpetuates them in the analyses of film and fiction he undertakes in *SuburbiaNation*. Setting out the relevance of such early considerations of the postwar suburbs to his own work, Beuka writes that

it would seem almost as if the suburb – a preplanned, homogeneous, transparently symbolic place – was from the outset overdetermined with cultural meaning, a landscape so indelibly etched with the markers of white, middle-class, family-centred American life as to make serious reconsideration – either fictional or critical – seem superfluous at best, if not downright repugnant.⁵⁹

Beuka's study is notable for its recognition of the fact that the suburban landscape has been radically altered in recent times. And yet there is little in *SuburbiaNation* that attempts to re-formulate the critical idiom of suburban fictions in the light of this acknowledgement. Instead, Beuka writes, almost forlornly, that, "Although suburbia itself has continued to evolve, its image in cultural forms has remained relatively static."⁶⁰

Catherine Jurca's earlier 2001 analysis, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* exhibits a similar

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12. Beuka's reliance on this "overdetermined" paradigm is a consequence of a larger failure on the part of its proponents properly to historicise their arguments. Beuka cites the architectural critic Clifford Clark who notes that the development of the postwar suburbs was part of a "larger perfectionist impulse that swept through postwar society ... [T]he postwar housing boom was part of a one-dimensional frame of mind that stressed the possibility of creating the perfect society" (Beuka, 5). This seems to me to raise issues that actually undermine Beuka's suggestion that suburban fictions in film and literature have become so standardised as to be useful only in as much as they confirm white middle-class America's conception of itself. Firstly, if the postwar boom in suburban development was simply an expression of a larger national drive towards perfectibility then assigning to suburbia particular, intrinsic qualities by which its population was, without exception, moulded into a new manner of man, is actually to miss the bigger picture. Secondly, if, by citing Clark here, Beuka intends to point to the importance of broader cultural currents in any assessment of suburban fictions then it stands to reason that any attempt to assess contemporary depictions of the suburban environment will need to take into account contemporary contexts which are radically different to those of the 1950s and 1960s.

⁶⁰ Ibid. This is a frustration that a reviewer of *SuburbiaNation*, Michael Brooks, picks up on too when he asks, "Levittown doesn't look like Levittown anymore. Shouldn't representations of the suburb show more variation?." Michael Brooks, "Review of Beuka, Robert, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*," H-Urban, H-Net Reviews, June 2005. Accessed online: (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10612>).

indebtedness to the sociological critique of postwar suburbia. Her stated intention is to unpack the “tendency” in literary treatments of the suburb to portray the privileges of being white and middle class as having “more to do with subjugation” than “social dominance.”⁶¹

There are two problems with Jurca's approach: firstly, it assumes, without question, the validity and influence of the sociological critique of the suburbs by yoking the intentions of fictional chroniclers of suburban lifeways to this sociological critique. In stating that, for example, “Twentieth-century novelists who have written about the suburb present their work as a critique of its culture,”⁶² Jurca avoids confronting the reality that some don't; in fact, as I hope to show in the next chapter, the work of two novelists whom Jurca labels as uncomplicated critics of suburbia, Richard Yates and Sloan Wilson, provides ample evidence to dispute such a claim. Secondly, Jurca suggests that fictional treatments of the suburbs do not only borrow a thematic stance from the sociological critiques, but even copy certain formal and rhetorical elements, too. She claims that the “preponderance of popular novels that borrow from and mimic sociology suggests the power of the assumption that the postwar suburb was producing a new kind of America.”⁶³ This leads Jurca to some rather reductive analyses of postwar fictions, as detailed examination of *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* will uncover. Assuming the findings of critics of suburbia to be

⁶¹ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 4.

⁶² Ibid., 6.

⁶³ Ibid., 136. In actual fact, the borrowing was being done by the sociologists: John Keats', *The Crack in the Picture Window* is often referred to as being novelistic and *The Split-Level Trap* contains passages of prose are redolent of sensationalist fiction.

inviolable leads Jurca to posit that a white middle-class “rhetorics of victimisation”⁶⁴ runs throughout postwar suburban fiction. The identification of this trend depends entirely on defining the suburb as an alienating environment of dispossession and although Jurca professes to examine the creation of the suburbs as a fictional world through “various discourses,”⁶⁵ *White Diaspora* proves reliant on an *a priori* adoption of the discourse of crushing homogeneity, to the exclusion of more variegated insights that critics of suburbia, notably Dobriner, Gans, and Berger, posed in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Beuka, Jurca identifies a continuation in contemporary fiction of the idea of suburbia as a standardised, overwhelmingly white middle-class environment, and decides that this in turn results in suburban imaginaries according to which fiction writers continue to present their characters as dispossessed and victimised.

Referring to what she terms the “unprecedented homogeneity associated with paths of suburbanization since World War II,” and despite the emergence of what she describes as a modern-day suburban landscape of “fluid contours” and “complex spatial and social geographies,” indeed a “polymorphous suburb,” Jurca argues that it is “hard to imagine that these new enclaves won't eventually yield a further literature of suburban victimization, in which characters mourn the spiritual hollowness of their lives.”⁶⁶ *White Diaspora's* epilogue, tellingly-titled, “Same as It Ever Was (More or Less),” asserts that recent fictional chroniclers of suburban experience are engaged in a long-standing process by which fiction has

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 13, 171.

resisted the suburb and attempted to estrange its readers from this particular landscape. By contrast, I want to suggest that a significant number of authors have published novels and stories that engage with the realities of contemporary suburbia, and that, in the process, their works strive to free readers from what is, in fact, a culturally-mediated and clichéd *myth* of the American suburb. In her review of Jurca's book, Susan Edmunds queries the "validity and merit" of *White Diaspora's* reliance on "white [middle-class] suburbanites' self-reported experience of isolation, anxiety and despair," suggesting that feelings of self-loathing and dispossession designated as an effect of the suburb's unique spatial configuration may, in fact, be more reasonably explained as "historically potent manifestations of real social crisis."⁶⁷ More than this, these "self-reported experiences" obscure the broader perspectives of what Kruse and Sugrue term "pink-and blue-collar suburbanites whose working-class world of modest houses, apartments, and trailer parks was central to suburbia."⁶⁸

It is one of the central tenets of this dissertation, therefore, that contemporary literary critiques, notably *White Diaspora* and *SuburbiaNation*, mistakenly attach too much importance to the myth of suburbia as a bland, oppressive, and overwhelmingly white middle-class environment. It is not hard to map Beuka's and Jurca's theses onto hostile sociological critiques like those of Keats and the Gordons. Beuka writes of the suburb as an "instantly identifiable, uniform" space that takes as its

⁶⁷ Susan Edmunds, "Accelerated Immobilities: American Suburbia and the Classless Middle Class," in, *American Literary History*, 15 (2003), 415-416.

⁶⁸ Kruse and Sugrue, *The New Suburban History*, 4.

basis the “new suburbia”⁶⁹ of the postwar development, despite sociological work, such as Dobriner’s, suggesting that making the tract suburb the basis of such generalizations is a “fundamental error.”⁷⁰ The proposition of anti-suburban critics that the spatiality of the suburb was in itself somehow inhibitive is freely adopted by Beuka and Jurca: the former brings to his analysis of suburban fiction and film an acceptance of the notion that “the uniformity of the suburban landscape [leads] to a variety of detrimental effects on residents,”⁷¹ whilst the latter writes of “an ongoing strain of the American novel [that] has insisted ... that the suburb and suburban house cheat characters.”⁷² Gans’ insistence that “a single suburban way of life has never existed, except as a stereotype”⁷³ is a warning that goes unheeded by either Beuka or Jurca where the stereotype is used to trump competing discourses about suburban fictions that might historicise rather than mythologise such texts.

As Andrew Hoberek points out in his study of American fiction and white-collar work, *The Twilight of the Middle Class*, postwar social criticism is remarkable for the way in which it not only disregards those not of middle-class background, but also misrepresents the mainstream of society and “universalized concerns about the bureaucratization of bourgeois individualism.” Such has been the influence of this critique, that he believes some literary critics’ readings of suburban fiction are similarly “disingenuous” in perpetuating a view of middle-class experience that is

⁶⁹ Beuka, 2, 6.

⁷⁰ Dobriner, 26.

⁷¹ Beuka, 66.

⁷² Jurca, 5.

⁷³ Gans, xiii.

solely concerned with the “problems of prosperity.”⁷⁴ By following this critical paradigm, Beuka and Jurca not only obscure some of the subtleties of suburban fictions written in the 1950s and 1960s, but also negate the impact of contemporary fictions set in the suburbs that, both formally and thematically, track notable changes in suburban experiences over the last twenty years.

In filtering their appreciation of suburban fictions through an anti-suburban critique, Jurca's and Beuka's analyses miss the ways in which literature can extend the observational and empirical records of sociology by responding more sensitively to aspects of social change. As Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood have pointed out, “Literature, because it delineates man's anxieties, hopes, and aspirations, is perhaps one of the most effective sociological barometers of the human response to social forces.”⁷⁵ To read suburban fictions as confirming a certain sort of sociological - and broader cultural - perspective on suburbia (and, one might say, not a particularly complex one), is to deny the ways in which fiction can offer a variety of perspectives on socio-cultural phenomena. Dobriner writes that it is the job of the sociologist to generalise, but responsibly⁷⁶; it seems to me that it is the job of the literary critic, in turn, to augment sociological insight by subjecting fiction to analysis that questions and extends sociological conclusions, rather than merely

⁷⁴ Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-4. As well as commenting on *White Diaspora*, Hoberek also indicts Barbara Ehrenreich and Jackson Lears as being guilty of this tendency.

⁷⁵ Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood, *The Sociology of Literature* (London: Paladin, 1972), 17.

⁷⁶ Dobriner, 48.

corroborating them.

Like Hoberek, John Archer notes in *Architecture and Suburbia* (2005) that “to literary critics and sociologists ... suburban homogeneity appear[s] to demonstrate a connection between the built environment and how the identities of those who live ... there ... [are] shaped,” and that this connection “while largely fallacious, has remained remarkably potent in the evaluation of suburbia up to the present day” with standardised housing producing a conformist populace.⁷⁷ Instead, he argues, suburbia has become the site in which Americans consciously acknowledge and negotiate the inescapable presence of advanced capitalism's promotion of commodity accumulation and the ideological imperatives of the nation that see fulfilment as linked to private pursuits. In this analysis, suburbanites actively fashion their material circumstances “as instruments for dealing with complex ideological, social and economic possibilities,” and Archer insists that recognising this is “crucial to developing a less facile ... approach to suburbia.”⁷⁸

More recently, literary critics have begun to produce work that supports Archer's assertion. In exploring Anne Sexton's poetry Jo Gill makes the case that Sexton “actively, persistently, and consciously ... evoked the suburbs as the site of her poetry, as the source of her poetic voice, and as a badge of difference with which to counter dominant metropolitan and masculine literary models.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Martin Dines'

⁷⁷ Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*, 311.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 350.

⁷⁹ Jo Gill, “Anne Sexton's Poetics of the Suburbs,” in, Mark Jackson, ed., *Health and the Modern Home* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 65.

Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture (2010) sets out to contest the orthodox view of the suburbs as a heteronormative habitat, pointing out that mass suburbanization in America has actually “helped to foster a visible and discrete gay identity.” Analysing Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964), Dines sees gay central protagonist George Falconer as someone who is encouraged to conceptualize both his self and his life through his difference to the perceived uniformity of suburban culture.⁸⁰ Similarly, Kathy Knapp argues that twenty-first-century fiction by writers including Richard Ford, Tom Perrotta, and Chang-rae Lee has represented the suburban landscape as a spatiality that reflects changes in American society, politics, and culture following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In constructing what she calls a “Suburban Real,” Knapp proposes that novels such as the *The Lay of the Land* (2006), *Little Children* (2004), and *Aloft* (2004) offer readers “new and flexible ways to imagine belonging and identity in a catastrophic age.”⁸¹

Knapp is correct to identify a change in the way that suburbia is depicted in the fiction of the recent years, but representations of the suburbs that engage with reality rather than see suburbia as an inherited cultural shorthand have been in evidence for longer than Knapp suggests. Imputing this shift solely to the events of 9/11 overlooks patterns that I analyse in the main body of this dissertation. My first chapter advances

⁸⁰ Martin Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture: Homecoming Queens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 5.

⁸¹ Kathy Knapp, “Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 American Novel,” in *American Literary History*, 23 (2011), 516, 520.

new readings of *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in order to problematise assumptions about postwar suburban fiction. What I then hope to show over the rest of the project is that the evolving suburban landscape has received a good deal of scrutiny from writers since the mid-1980s onwards. My readings consider fictionalised postsuburban landscapes as, to borrow Archer's phrase, a "base-plane of understood circumstances" in which there is opportunity "to engage, in various possible ways, in processes of social formation, individuation and self-realization."⁸² It is my contention that these narratives are either misinterpreted because the postsuburban imaginary they script is not readily compatible with reductive suburban critiques, or they are not considered as having anything to say about this particular expression of socio-spatial change, either because they treat the white middle class in new ways, or, indeed, because they represent different demographics entirely, just as they examine spatial sites other than the suburban subdivision.

Postsuburban Spatialities

In what remains of this introduction I want further to outline the theoretical foundations of my project in terms of its engagement with questions of space. Whilst it is primarily concerned with literature and literary criticism, this thesis makes considerable use of critical cultural geography to substantiate the argument it seeks to make about the

⁸² Archer, 351.

discourses of suburban fiction.

Lefebvre's great insight was to transform Marx's original notion of the dialectic by reasserting the importance of geography. Where Marx's critique of the capitalist political economy privileges history as the site of contest, Lefebvre positions the opposition as that between the abstract spaces of capitalism's economic and political systems and what he calls the "lived space" of everyday life. But more than this, what Lefebvre's theory emphasises is just how problematic it is to assume the very notion of abstract space in the first place. The key principle in Lefebvre's work on space is that it does not simply exist in itself, waiting to be discovered and peopled; rather it is actively produced and reproduced through the actions of a society in a temporal process – in the case of the fictions I read, the postwar society of the 1950s, and recent American society of the 1990s and 2000s. Such a consideration of space becomes useful to the present work by pointing towards other ways of thinking about suburban and postsuburban space; ways of thinking that do not only reiterate discourses of alienation and isolation in the face of what is seen as capitalism's homogenising spatial matrix. Pondering Lefebvre's thoughts on the idea of space as a product of social processes, Andy Merrifield suggests that Lefebvre gives space "a pulse," and that thinking of space in this way means it is no longer "a passive surface, a *tabula rasa*." Instead, Lefebvre is useful for literary critics because he "demystif[ies] capitalist social space by tracing out its inner dynamics" in order to redescribe it "not as a dead,

inert thing or object, but as organic and fluid and alive.”⁸³ Moreover, the act of writing fiction is part of this process of space production. For Lefebvre, “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” through a reconfiguration of the images and symbols associated with a society or culture, or the “dominated space”. It is, in part, through this reconfiguration that the social production of space comes about, and, in Lefebvre's view, imaginative reconstruction is a key component of the expression of space as “directly lived”.⁸⁴

Consequently, my primary focus on fictional representations of the postsuburban environment proceeds from a recognition that literature is not a mimetic form wherein reality is 'reflected'. Rather, my thesis is animated by a keen sense that the writers of postsuburban fiction have not been afforded the recognition they deserve, especially when their fictions do more than just map out this new landscape's contours. As Iain Chambers has observed, maps serve to give their users “an outline, a shape, some sort of location”; what they fail to provide is any measure of “the contexts, cultures, histories, languages, experiences, desires and hopes” that pervade a particular topography.⁸⁵ The novels and short stories that this project considers have not been chosen merely as examples of the most faithful, or the most figuratively insightful,

⁸³ Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 105, 107; Andy Merrifield, “Henri Lefebvre: A Socialist in Space,” in, Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 171.

⁸⁴ Henri Lefebvre, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]), 39, 27, and passim. For a further discussion of how the essentially temporal art of fiction-writing can establish a “spatial secondary illusion,” see Joseph A. Kestner, *The Spatiality of the Novel* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).

⁸⁵ Iain Chambers, “Cities Without Maps,” in, Bird et al., *Mapping the Futures*, 188.

descriptions of a postsuburban reality that recent American literature can offer. Rather, refuting a reductive distinction between ideas of space and place, and instead referring to particular 'spatialities' as the network of social interactions peculiar to any given space or place at any particular time,⁸⁶ I argue that the fictions under consideration convey certain ideas about postsuburban spatialities through the spatial praxis of their narratives. By doing this I want to avoid falling into the trap of venerating place as a defensive, nostalgic, or romantic demarcation, an essentially conservative critical position that easily gives way to the sort of abstractions my thesis seeks to particularise. Thus, place is not a bulwark against space but an integral part of the process by which space is produced; as Doreen Massey contends, place is not “an inward-looking enclosure ... [but a] subset of the interactions which constitute a space, a local interaction within a wider whole.”⁸⁷ My analyses show how fiction reveals the ways in which postsuburban spatialities are socially produced and in their contested, fluid nature are usefully resistant to cartographical categorisation and totalising oversights. By uniting space and place, one is able better to consider the ways in which fiction suggests identity formation as being “always changing and multiply located,” rather than

⁸⁶ I acknowledge that, as this process is constant, and as these relations are never static, it is impossible to expect fictional representations to offer a definitive account; rather I suggest that novels and short stories can textualise the evolutionary processes of socio-spatial change. Rob Shields defines the related term 'spatialisation' as “not just an achieved order in the built environment, or an ideology, but also an order that is itself always undergoing change from within through the actions and innovations of social agents.” Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1999), 155. By this token, when I refer to socio-spatial change, I mean the dialectical process at the heart of Lefebvre's theory of production.

⁸⁷ Doreen Massey, quoted in, Nicole Schröder, *Spaces and Places in Motion: Spatial Concepts in Contemporary American Literature* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006), 46.

“homogeneous and stable.”⁸⁸

Importantly, what Lefebvre's theory provides the literary critic is a means of reading fictional representations of space that does not overlook the unity of space and time. In the preface to the third edition of *The Production of Space*, written, in part to address some of the confusion arising in the minds of readers of the previous editions, Lefebvre observes that, “Ten or fifteen years ago, when this book was written, conceptions of space were muddled,” to stress that the social production of space is processual, and, therefore, temporal. He maintains that

the effort to escape confusion by no longer considering (social) space and (social) time as facts of 'nature', modified to some degree, nor as simple facts of 'culture' – but as *products* ... brought about a change in the use and meaning of that word. The production of space (and time) did not see them as some kind of 'object' or 'thing', created by hand or machine, but as the principal ... effects of the action of societies.⁸⁹

This strain of Lefebvre's thought on space is confirmed by a statement he made during the course of a debate with other French intellectuals in 1967, before publishing *The Production of Space*, in which he declared that, “Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world, spaces are the realisations, inscriptions in the simultaneity of the external world of a series of times.”⁹⁰ For the work of the literary critic, then, uncovering the multitude of socially produced spaces that are represented in fiction is also

⁸⁸ Schröder, 36.

⁸⁹ Lefebvre, “Preface to the New Edition,” in, Elden et al., 206, 207. In *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*, published in 1973, one year before *The Production of Space* first appeared, Lefebvre describes his new dialectic as “no longer attached to temporality” (see, Henri Lefebvre, trans. Frank Bryant, *The Survival of Capitalism* [London: Allison & Busby, 1976], 17). However, this should not be seen as Lefebvre repudiating the importance of time to his theory of how space is produced; rather, this is his way of distinguishing his model of dialectical materialism from Marx's by changing the focus from the historical inevitability of the proletariat's victory over the bourgeoisie to a recognition of the need for creative, pragmatic resistance emerging from the spaces of everyday life.

⁹⁰ Lefebvre, quoted in Shields, 156.

a process of delineating the way in which these spaces might be transformed over the narrative's unfolding. As a result, it becomes increasingly hard to justify readings of suburban and postsuburban fiction that propose an unproblematic dystopian vision. In their introductory remarks to the collection *American Literary Geographies*, Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu refer to a long tradition in the historiography of American literature of critics using geography “as an interpretive grid.”⁹¹ In this introduction I have argued that, in its application of certain sociological studies of the suburbs to fictions that explore such landscapes, some critical work on suburban fiction may become gridlocked by interpreting suburbia in a conventional way. This study attempts to move analysis of suburban and postsuburban fiction on and this task of reassessing fictional representations of space is steadily being taken up by other contemporary critics. For example, in her 2006 monograph, *Spaces and Places in Motion: Spatial Concepts in Contemporary American Literature* Nicole Schröder posits that American writing is now showing “space as processual, contested and contestable” and that “this spatial conception is used to question static and essentialist notions of identity, to re-negotiate ideas of origin and home.”⁹²

As a means of asserting an alternate perspective on suburbia's image in postwar fiction, in Chapter One I explore how Sloan Wilson and Richard Yates represent the suburban landscape in *The Man in the The*

⁹¹ Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, “Introduction”, in, Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, eds., *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 12.

⁹² Schröder, 13. Schröder focuses her study on the work of Toni Morrison, Michelle Cliff, Garrett Hongo, and Joy Harjo in order to show how “they put forth a view of space which does not allow for a fixed and definite mapping of the world” (2-3).

Man in the Gray Flannel Suit and *Revolutionary Road*, suggesting that both narratives are far less hostile to the suburbs than is commonly thought, and that a more open reading of both texts is dependent on a consideration of the ways in which the central male figures, Tom Rath and Frank Wheeler, conceive of suburbia as a means of readjusting to society following service in World War II. I also argue that, for different reasons, the central female characters, Betsy Rath and April Wheeler, are not victims of an oppressive suburban spatiality that forces them to conform to the prescribed sort of femininity that Friedan theorised. In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Betsy is integral in persuading Tom that suburbia represents a place of opportunity away from the pervasive influence of the corporation he works for. Additionally, I propose Wilson's novel as a text that depicts a differentiated suburban landscape through the use as its primary setting of the sort of "reluctant suburb" that Dobriner identifies. In *Revolutionary Road*, April's eventual suicide is less a result of an inability to perceive an existence beyond suburbia, and more about an inability to act upon her ambitions. For Yates, the middle-class self-indulgence of the Wheelers that he makes the target of his scorn is not a product of an encaging spatiality but rather a culturally ingrained habit of mind.

Having established the possibility of thinking about postwar suburbia anew, in the following chapters my analyses reveal the ways in which an emergent postsuburban landscape is represented in fiction, and in the process makes a clear break from any inherited tradition of suburban cultural critique. I begin by examining Richard Ford's 'Frank

Bascombe' novels in Chapter Two and argue that they portray Frank, a white middle-class man, contrary to stereotype: he comes to understand that his suburban existence as an independent person of some means is bound up closely with the fortunes of others. I propose that all three works, *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), suggest the importance of language and imagination to Frank's perception of the novels' New Jersey setting.

In Chapter Three I draw on theoretical work concerned with hybridity to posit postsuburbia as a site of cosmopolitan possibility. I consider T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) and Junot Díaz's short story collection *Drown* (1996) for the ways in which they represent the postsuburban micro-geographies of the exurb and the ageing inner-ring suburb. I suggest that both texts' focus on ethnicity and class offers a pointed corrective to suburban discourses that privilege the white middle classes; moreover, they offer a perspective on postsuburban immigrant experience that other works with ethnic minority American characters do not. Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*, for example, uses its Italian-American central protagonist's passion for flying to metaphorise how suburban assimilation has rendered him remote and dispassionate.⁹³ Contrastingly, in this chapter I show how *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown* represent postsuburban spatialities as having the potential to facilitate the formation of positive hybrid identities.

In Chapter Four it is my argument that Douglas Coupland's novel *Microserfs* (1995) deconstructs such pre-existing binaries as city/suburb

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Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

and home/work, and that the new phase of the postindustrial capitalist production of space of the mid-1990s, the establishment of web-based technologies, is directly influenced by the social relations enacted by the characters. The chapter demonstrates how the novel – almost as a repudiation of the slacker values of the characters in his earlier work, *Generation X*⁹⁴ – dramatises the maturation of the lead characters through the creation of a communal and mutually beneficial Internet start-up, and thereby allows for a revised conception of both the social hierarchies traditionally associated with capitalism, and the centrality of the idea of the frontier to conceptions of suburbia.

Chapter Five explores literary representations of gentrification as part of my larger inquiry into the ways in which recent American fiction engages with postsuburban space. Whilst my reading of *The Tortilla Curtain* will show how Boyle scripts an alternative exurban imaginary that recognizes the need for a vernacular landscape, critics of inner-city gentrification see the process as nothing less than the obliteration of a vernacular, heterogeneous mix of spatialities that is historically characteristic of the city.⁹⁵ My readings of Price's and Mengestu's novels in this chapter will explore the ways that these fictions suggest a different view. Urban theorists have explicitly linked the decline of the postwar suburbs with both the rise of a variety of new peripheral metropolitan forms *and* the gentrification of the inner city, leading to a

⁹⁴ Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1992 [1991])

⁹⁵ See, for example, Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

reassertion of the urban centre's hold over the white middle-class imagination. This chapter argues, however, that fiction writers are presenting gentrification as a more complex phenomenon, and not just another manifestation of white middle-class avarice and delusion. In *The New Urban Frontier*, Neil Smith takes Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) to task as a fiction that approbates the white middle-class view of the urban environment as a place in which this demographic is “unreasonably victimized.”⁹⁶ Richard Price's *Lush Life*, I argue, offers a new vision of recent gentrification in the sense that it does not portray the white middle class as unreasonably victimised, even if one subscribes to the idea that Wolfe's novel does ultimately re-inscribe such notions. Interestingly, Price has written of his admiration for Richard Yates who briefly taught him during the mid-seventies as part of a writing programme at Columbia University. Could it be that Price shares with Yates an understanding of the way in which white middle-class aspiration can be an imprisoning and undermining vision?⁹⁷ Whilst neither Richard Price's *Lush Life* (2008) nor Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) deny the very real material hardships indigenous inner-city communities face as their neighbourhoods have gentrified, both novels complicate the picture of what constitutes a 'typical' gentrifier and the extent to which gentrification can be conceptualised as a deterministic, monologic process.

⁹⁶ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), 213.

⁹⁷ See, Richard Price, “Introduction,” in, Richard Yates, *Everyman's Library Collected Edition of Richard Yates', Revolutionary Road, The Easter Parade, and Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (New York: Random House, 2009), ix-xiii.

The spatial turn in the humanities, and developments in critical cultural geography have opened up new avenues of exploration for scholars. As Sara Blair summarises, this field of investigation “constitutes a powerful expressive form, giving voice to the effects of dislocation, disembodiment, and localization that constitute contemporary social orders.”⁹⁸ It is these overlooked narratives that I want to foreground. As Blair points out, this form of cultural geography “provides powerful new models and vocabularies for revisiting certain definitive (and apparently intractable) problems in American literary studies.”⁹⁹ Blair's article calls for a critical literary geography that builds on New Americanist attacks on certain American cultural myths. She advocates an engagement with texts that articulate conditions of “diaspora and cultural diffusion, of borderlands and exurbia ... of experience on the local scale.”¹⁰⁰ I aim to use this critical lens to complicate existing, and to my mind problematic conceptions of suburban fiction, as well as to recognise the ways in which recent writing has represented the emergence of the postsuburban landscape.

In the chapters that follow, the analyses of my chosen fictions reveal the ways in which suburban and postsuburban landscapes are negotiated by the everyday practice of the characters featured, and that the narrative structure of these fictions is indicative and constitutive of this effort. In this sense, my analyses can be aligned with Lefebvre's belief that everyday life becomes the “inevitable starting point for the realization of the

⁹⁸ Blair, “Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary,” 545.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 549.

possible.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Henri Lefebvre, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 35.

CHAPTER 1

“Heroically reconnecting to respectable civilian life”: Postwar Adjustment and the Suburbs in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road*

As a prelude to the analyses that follow in chapters two to five, in this chapter I want to reassess Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961). They are both set in the New York suburbs of the 1950s and are two of the novels conscripted by Beuka and Jurca as evidence of how contemporary fiction writers are still reworking the themes and conventions of their forebears. My readings explore the extent to which they may also be helpful to question some normative assumptions about suburban fiction.

Revolutionary Road and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* can fairly be considered together.¹ Indeed, Morris Dickstein, writing on the development of American fiction in the postwar years, points out that, in many ways, with *Revolutionary Road*, Yates “rewrites Sloan Wilson's novel as a tragedy.”² Such an observation immediately raises the issue of

¹ The biographies of Yates and Wilson share some important features: both saw action in the Second World War, the former as a soldier in Europe, the latter as a Coast Guard; both held down various teaching and copywriting jobs in an effort to prioritise their fiction-writing. See Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (London: Methuen, 2004), and Nona Balakian, “Talk with Mr. Wilson,” *New York Times*, 7 August, 1955, BR17.

² Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American*

why these are so often cited as anti-suburban works. Certainly, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* share certain elements of plot: both feature a male protagonist working for a large corporation having returned from service in the armed forces; both men commute to their jobs in New York City from the Connecticut surrounds; both men have young families and attractive wives. They are set within two years of each other: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in 1953, *Revolutionary Road* in 1955. Dickstein's implication is that Wilson's work is actually a far sunnier fiction than Yates'. But if *Revolutionary Road* can be made to substantiate claims for American literature's disillusionment with the suburbs, how can its apparently polar opposite be similarly conscripted? In order to recover these two novels from classification as works which depict postwar suburbia as ahistorical, static and pernicious, this chapter will address the specificities of both the suburban spatialities they portray and the socio-historical contexts that they represent, a move that assumes that these foci are mutually reinforcing.

By offering revisionist readings I hope to lessen the extent to which a critical orthodoxy regarding the appreciation of suburban fiction remains unchallenged, and to construct an analytical method which will allow postsuburban fictions to be considered outside of this prevailing paradigm. I want to suggest that any appreciation of both these novels can be enhanced by uncovering the socio-spatial experiences of their characters

Fiction, 1945-1970 (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136. Interestingly, the publishers Atlantic-Little, Brown rejected a 134 page draft manuscript of the first section of *Revolutionary Road* as "one of the many imitators of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*" (see Bailey, 178).

and recognising the importance of historical context and the action of time in the processual production of space. This critical lens offers an alternative approach to that which reads *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* inductively to position them as fictions that indict suburbia as a restrictive and deadening environment.

Discussing *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Jurca proposes that the novel reveals how “every white-collar [suburban] worker was reinvented as the factory slave of the fifties,” whilst in Beuka's estimation Wilson's tale “portray[s] advancement in the ... suburban [world] as [an] alienating experience.”³ Both of these summations are redolent of the sort of dismissive statements that proliferate in Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Indeed, Beuka acknowledges that Keats' work offers a “hyperbolic, even frenzied attack on suburban sensibilities,” yet he employs the same critical stance in seeing both *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* as “continu[ing] the dissection of postwar suburbia.”⁴ Jurca's opinion of Yates' novel is that it confirms the suburb as “a living space that is in constant danger of contaminating you.”⁵ As outlined in the introduction, Jurca's work is dependent on the assumption of an inhibiting suburban spatiality in order for her thesis – that a majority of suburban fictions portray the suburb as a place of white middle-class spiritual disenfranchisement – to have traction. It is this starting point that means Jurca has to work hard to read

³ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 138; Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 68.

⁴ Beuka, 68.

⁵ Jurca, 148.

Wilson's novel as a narrative of the Rath family's assertion of "cultural superiority to the suburb" through their eventual repudiation of it.⁶ I suggest that such a conclusion is unnecessarily tortuous given that, in the first place, the novel hardly portrays the suburb in a negative light and that, in the end, the Rathes are quite content to embrace a suburban existence. Likewise, I want to argue that *Revolutionary Road* is a novel that represents the emergence of the postwar suburb as one facet of an intense period of socio-cultural change and that its alleged restrictions are largely generated in the minds of the two central characters, husband and wife, Frank and April Wheeler.

In outlining the methodological differences between the writing of sociological reports and fictional narratives, Elizabeth Long has argued that "Individuals and their lives are in the foreground of most novels," whilst sociologists tend to "look for the regularities within and across lives." One consequence of the sociological perspective is that the individual risks being construed "as the passive object of broader social forces, thus a one-dimensional reflection or a cipher in what social thinkers have defined as the main drift on the institutional level."⁷ In my readings of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* I want to advance the possibility of disassociating suburban fiction from the totalising diagnoses of sociological study, and suggest that, in fact, the novelists offer counter-narratives that complicate and nuance the necessary breadth of such opinions. The anti-suburban

⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁷ Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 10, 12.

school of thought positions the new postwar suburb as an environment of amnesia, developing William H. Whyte's notion that the "organization people" that resided there were the "elders of ... [a] new suburbia ... free of the pressures of older traditions."⁸ However, a central theme in both novels is the operation of the past in the present, with *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s eponymous hero, Tom Rath, in particular, struggling to come to terms with his family background as it impacts on his ability to live in a postwar period of rapid and significant social change. In Yates' work, the Wheelers strive, and fail, to live up to an idealised vision of themselves formulated when they first meet under very different circumstances before the war, and it is this disconnect that drives *Revolutionary Road*'s narrative.⁹

Richard Yates' biographer, Blake Bailey, suggests that, in writing *Revolutionary Road*, Yates was keenly influenced by a sort of "Flaubertian determinism" whereby readers are fully aware of his characters' fated declines but read on nonetheless in order to establish just how they will cope with the woeful hand that's been dealt them. In this way "The suburbs ... are not, then, a mass of malign external forces that combine to thwart the [characters'] dreams; rather the characters – in all their weakness and preposterous self-deceit – are themselves definitive figures of that culture."¹⁰ I hope to show that both fictions are works that, rather

⁸ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [1956]), 267.

⁹ In his *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [1967]), Herbert J. Gans, writing of conditions in the late 1950s, states that "Social change in America has been so rapid that the ideas and experiences of the elderly are often anachronistic" (169).

¹⁰ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 176, 232. Flaubert was one of Yates' favourite

than ascribing their characters' travails to a clichéd vision of the suburbs, interrogate the cultural conception of this particular environment by stressing the necessity of individuals taking responsibility for their lives and forging singular experiences – an evolutionary process by which suburban spatialities subject to human agency may be transformed. The context that becomes crucial to an understanding of both novels is not the suburban one but the larger, epochal background of postwar adjustment. The narrative in each is focalised primarily through the man of the family. Tom and Frank struggle to reintegrate themselves into peacetime life following spells in Europe with the U.S. Army. For both men, the various unexpected and guilty thrills of wartime – combined with the knowledge that the lives they return to in postwar America are supposedly balm for the mental and physical wounds sustained in combat – mean that any anxieties they feel cannot simply be explained away by a supposedly deadening suburban existence. If, as Jonathan Franzen has asserted, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is a novel that interrogates the ways in which Tom's "life of breadwinning and suburban domesticity [feels] so radically disconnected from his life as a paratrooper in the Second World War,"¹¹ then Yates' novel fits the same bill. Where I would depart from Franzen is in the importance of the suburban setting to this sense of disconnect: in an anti-suburban critique, the home becomes a metonym for suburbia, as if the only experience of the domestic sphere in 1950s America was that which involved ranch-style subdivisions and nuclear

novelists, *Madame Bovary* one of his favourite novels..

¹¹ Jonathan Franzen, "Introduction" (2002), in, Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1955]), n. pag.

families gathered around the television set.

One assumption that seems to underpin the position that suburban fictions reveal a familiar crucible of discontent is that the suburban environment should offer a utopian experience. This mode of thought can be traced back to Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*, in which, he decried the passing of the “freedoms and delights” of the pre-war suburb as a semi-rural retreat that housed a “favored minority.”¹² The foundational promise of this suburban idyll lies in the spatial separation of the sphere of work and/or the city from the sphere of the home and this distinction is held to be the ultimate aspiration: that suburban living in the 1950s offered a shot at both a well-ordered domestic life on the fringes of the countryside and (for the man) a rewarding job in the heart of the city. It is this unique selling point that also informs the work of those literary critics who read suburban fiction as most concerned with the tarnished dreams of the white middle classes.¹³ The virtues of this urban/suburban socio-spatial configuration go unquestioned in such critiques: the benefits of living at a remove from the corporation/city interface are taken at face value and the work of the critic lies instead in pinpointing why the fictions' various characters have failed to make suburbia an edifying experience, or more often, have been failed by a suburbia that remains only partially-realised.

¹² Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego, New York City, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), 505-506.

¹³ Mumford himself saw an increasing commitment on the part of suburbanites to “relaxation and play as ends in themselves” (495) as proof positive that the environment had rendered suburban residents hopelessly yet cheerfully indolent. But neither Wilson's nor Yates' novels offer any suggestion that the Rathes' or the Wheelers' problems are the result of a self-satisfied devotion to leisure. Quite the opposite.

In this seeming consensus, *The Man in the The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is often proposed as a novel that confirms the ways in which home life became corporatised in the 1950s.¹⁴ Yet to point out that the spatial distinction between the suburb and the city does not lead to the easy compartmentalisation of work and home and, in fact, does the exact opposite in blurring the boundaries between these two experiences, seems to me a rather banal observation, especially when the novel is considered more closely.¹⁵ By the narrative's conclusion, Tom has taken a job at a newly-developed outpost of his corporation in his hometown of South Bay with a promise to his wife of “plenty of time to ourselves” and “No more working every week end,” and as the various other dilemmas in his life are resolved (a little too neatly), Tom pointedly remarks that he's become “almost an optimist.”¹⁶

Yates' novel shares with Wilson's a distinct socio-spatial terrain: the suburb/city binary is established in order to emphasise just how tenuous a practical separation of the home and work spheres is in this configuration.

¹⁴ See Beuka, 67-68.

¹⁵ In his book, *The Fifties*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), David Halberstam considers Tom, and his wife Betsy, to be semi-destitute figures, “always in debt” and living in a house that “seemed to be disintegrating beneath them” (521). According to Halberstam, “For the Raths the house had come to symbolize all their frustrations and tensions”; in the form of a crack in the wall, it bears the physical scars of their arguments over the amount of money Tom's job at a charitable foundation in the city brings in. The unacknowledged irony in Halberstam's commentary is that the Raths' status as Connecticut suburbanites spatially removed from the city actually renders them economically and spiritually more completely dependent on New York: the very fact that Tom's labour involves a three-hour commute (with all the logistical pressures that entails) brings the importance of his job into greater prominence, especially when the work he does seems barely sufficient to cover the costs of his family's suburban existence. Yet, Halberstam's assessment of the novel is that its main theme is “the struggle of young Americans against the pressures of conformity ... in suburban life” (522).

¹⁶ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1955]), 254, 273. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text. The novel will be referred to as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* from this point on.

The Knox Building in downtown Manhattan where Frank Wheeler works is an imposing building “that mean[s] business,” an edifice that apparently works like a Siren call on Frank, its irresistible pull meaning that “riding to work ... he [feels] middle-aged.”¹⁷ In contrast, the omniscient narrative voice reveals that when Frank and April were previously living in Greenwich Village, just a few blocks from Knox, the “Knox Building could have been a thousand miles away” (77) for all that Frank would care upon returning to their apartment. Ironically, although Frank now lives miles away in western Connecticut, the Knox Building has more of a hold on him than it ever did when he lived in New York.

The breakdown of the suburb/city binary is a recurring conceit in the postsuburban fictions I examine, and will be considered more closely in the chapter on Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995), but it is already in evidence in these early works. Insisting that the affective power of a suburban fiction derives from the supposed tragedy of its characters' inability to countenance a life spatially removed from the city but that remains influenced by the urban, is to ignore aspects of the fictional text in favour of re-stating a time-honoured sociological lament.

Another key similarity between the novels that I want to foreground is their nuanced depiction of the suburban setting. One reviewer of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* writes that the story of Tom and Betsy Rath is the story of their “becoming part of the ... new suburban world,”¹⁸ whilst

¹⁷ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Methuen, 2001 [1961]), 69, 68. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸ Halberstam, 524.

Jurca's analysis of *Revolutionary Road* rests on her identification of Frank and April Wheeler as a “suburban couple,” just “people who happen to live in a suburb.”¹⁹ But such an undifferentiated reference to the suburban environment neglects the fact that these two novels actually reveal two very distinct *types* of suburban environment, neither of which conforms to the subdivision/tract-house model so deplored by some sociologists but accepted as the synecdoche for suburbia by most literary critics ever since the 1950s. The “suburban world” Jurca here refers to is the sociologically-constructed one of “whole square miles of identical boxes,”²⁰ but this is not the environment in which either the Rathes or the Wheelers actually reside.

What is often overlooked in discussions of the suburban locale in *Revolutionary Road* is the important point that Frank and April don't actually live on the Revolutionary Hill Estates where the “friendly picture windows” (26) and “cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue” (65) denote the presence of a new development. Instead, the Wheelers live at the bottom of the hill, down the titular Revolutionary Road, in a place that, in the words of Mrs. Givings, “has absolutely no connection with [the Estates],” being a lone, “sweet little house” built “right after the war ... before all the really awful building began” (29).

In this way, Yates removes the Wheelers from the already stereotypical suburban setting. The fact of their distance from the suburban development they choose to despise does not allow them any comfort, however, and the tragedy that engulfs Frank and April comes

¹⁹ Jurca, 148.

²⁰ John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), xi. Accessed online, 06/10/2009 at: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=9481665>.

about because of their fixation with a myth of suburbia, not the reality. Indeed, in some respects, *Revolutionary Road* showcases the diversity that sociologists such as William M. Dobriner, Herbert J. Gans and Bennett M. Berger (contrary to Keats, Mumford and the Gordons) insisted was in evidence in the suburbs:²¹ there are the various architectural styles of the estates and the houses on Revolutionary Road, and there are a range of inhabitants in the area. Whilst, certainly, they are all white, the novel's characters range in age from thirty-something young couples such as the Wheelers to the retired Mr. Givings. Estate residents Shep and Milly Campbell also represent the presence of a working-class element in the area: Shep is employed in a hydraulic machinery plant and Milly, before becoming a mother and housewife, is a secretary.²²

Similarly, what *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* tells us is that, initially, Tom and Betsy live in a small house on Greentree Avenue in the colonial town of Westport. Wilson strongly suggests that the house is old and crumbling, part of a social fabric that is slowly becoming anachronistic. Tom and Betsy bought the house in 1946 (there is no mention of it being bought new) and the narrative tells of the passing “on that street” of “the custom of asking people in for dinner” (3, 108). This, in itself, would seem enough to dispute Catherine Jurca's claim that the

²¹ William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963); Gans, *The Levittowners*; and, Bennett M. Berger, “The Myth of Suburbia,” in, Charles M. Haar, ed., *The End of Innocence: a Suburban Reader* (Glenview, IL and London: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972).

²² In his study, *The Levittowners*, Gans disputes the whole notion of the suburb as a means of understanding postwar America and instead insists that it is more helpful to consider suburbanites as the holders of “new technical and service jobs that are transforming ... [the] economy” and that these people are “principally working class and lower middle class” (Gans, xix).

Raths “detest their development house that looks just like all the others.”²³ *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* also portrays Westport as an established town rather than a suburb: it is only a suburb in the sense that it shares with the postwar housing developments – the so-called “identical boxes” – the same topographical relationship to the city, in this case, New York.

To essentialise Westport as a place of stereotypical subdivisions is to miss the point. The town of South Bay, where the Raths end up, is certainly dotted with development housing, but it too is a community of longer-standing than a Levittown-like settlement created from nothing. In the sense that they are suburbs, Westport and South Bay would seem to fit Dobriner's definition of “the reluctant suburb”: an already-established town that is dragged into the orbit of a large city nearby.²⁴ Such a recognition raises the question of whether the literary critic needs to acknowledge that there are other means of approaching suburban fictions that do not foreground the ways in which suburban space is symbolically constructed but instead recognise the variety of material environments. Certainly, this is true of postsuburban fictions, but, at this juncture, the extent to which *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* represent a number of different iterations, mental and physical, of the postwar suburban environment is noteworthy.

²³ Jurca, 5.
²⁴ Dobriner, 19.

At the outset of *Revolutionary Road*, Frank muses that although “Economic circumstances might force you to live in [the suburbs] ... the important thing was to keep from being contaminated” (20). A significant number of the Wheelers' conversations in the novel are centred on reassuring each other that they are not part of a suburban crowd composed of, in Frank's terms, “idiots” (60). This sense of superiority on Frank's part is in no small measure due his experiences as a soldier in World War Two. Frank recalls at one point that it was whilst “going up to the line for the first time” that he “felt this terrific sense of life” (130). One after-effect of Frank's wartime service and the satisfaction that it brings is his belief that his subsequent life is somehow destined to unfold on a more rarefied plane of experience, a belief which helps to explain the derision Frank directs towards a suburban existence. In a discussion with his wife, Frank is told by April that maybe their contempt for the suburban way of life as they see it actually implicates them in the same shallowness they abhor. She says to Frank, “remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay? ... We *are* the people you're talking about! ... How did we ever get *into* this strange little dream world?” (110-11). Later, when hatching plans to leave life in suburban Connecticut behind and start again in Paris, Frank likens their American existence to being “encased in some kind of Cellophane” (129); if only they could break out and head to Europe, Frank remarks, it would be akin to the heightened state of reality he experienced in the war.

For Catherine Jurca, the Wheelers' distaste for their environment and their neighbours renders them quintessential suburbanites. Jurca

writes that, “*Revolutionary Road* brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the ant suburbite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else's putative conformity.”²⁵ Yet this critique reinscribes the notion of Frank and April as hapless victims of the suburban landscape – even as they try to distance themselves from it by means of various rhetorical performances, they are drawn deeper into the trap. Similarly, for Robert Beuka, the suburbs represented in *Revolutionary Road* are an environment where, upon moving from the city, “figurative” death awaits Frank and April, the “urban-sophisticate protagonists,” as a precursor to April's literal death.²⁶ And yet, Yates never conceived of his novel as an exposé of the suburban environment. In an interview granted in 1972, Yates explained that “The book was widely read as an anti-suburban novel, and that disappointed me. The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their delusion, their problem, not mine.”²⁷ This suggests that Yates had no sympathy with readings of his novel that blame the suburbs for the failings of suburbanites. Furthermore, he damns April and Frank for their own obsession with trying to avoid the effects of a supposed suburban conformity.

At the end of the narrative, after visiting family friends Milly and Shep Campbell to tell them of April's death, Frank runs home, down the hill from the Estates back to the Wheeler house on Revolutionary Road. In

²⁵ Jurca, 148.

²⁶ Beuka, 69.

²⁷ Richard Yates, quoted in, DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark, “Interview with Richard Yates,” in, *Ploughshares: The Literary Journal at Emerson College*, Winter 1972. Accessed online, 10/06/09: (<http://www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=128>)

“desperate grief,” Frank “veer[s]” across backyards, “plunge[s]” through woods and “scrabbl[es]” through a ravine in order to get home to allow his mind to “indulge in ... [the] cruel delusion” (323) that April might still be alive and awaiting him, “curled up on the sofa with a magazine” (323). In this scene, Yates reveals Frank to be in possession of the very sort of free-spirited impulses that might have seen the family's proposed trip to Europe come to fruition. He crashes through the “toyland of white and pastel houses” that make up the suburban development of the Estates without a care for the residents watching television in the “dozing rooms” around him (323).²⁸ Yates then redoubles this image of Frank as a character tragically at odds with himself by stating that when Frank sees his “darkened,” uninhabited house hove into view, he “really” (324) sees it, a qualification pregnant with meaning in the sense that he is not only hit with absolute confirmation that April is gone, but that only now does he understand what the two of them had, but could not appreciate. As he sifts through the remnants of April's botched abortion, hearing her gentle directives in his head as he goes about cleaning-up, Frank's voice mingles with the authorial voice in the question, “How could she be dead when the house was alive with the sound of her and the sense of her?” (324). It is a technique Yates uses to indict Frank for not having seen the possibility of a

²⁸ This scene has definite similarities to the central conceit of John Cheever's short story, “The Swimmer” first published in the collection *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* in 1964, three years after *Revolutionary Road*. Whilst Yates' work shows Frank, a narcissistic figure lacking in self-awareness, careering through a suburban environment from which he feels estranged, Cheever's narrative features Neddy Merrill, a narcissistic figure lacking in self-awareness, who tries to swim home from a cocktail party via the various private and public swimming pools that populate his suburban community. Both Frank and Neddy arrive back at their homes to find them deserted, their families absent. See, John Cheever, *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1990), 776-788.

contented existence on Revolutionary Road when April was alive.

This tragic sense that Frank only appreciates his home-life when forced to stand back from it is prefigured by an earlier passage in the novel. Whilst constructing a new path to his front door, Frank pauses to assess his progress: “At least, squatting to rest on the wooded slope, he could look down and see his house the way a house ought to look on a fine spring day, safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man's love, a man's wife and children” (45). As in the narrative's climax, it is only through a literal separation from his domestic arrangements that Frank is released from the ideological hostility he feels towards the suburban environment, and thus the animosity he normally feels towards the home he has made with April.

Morris Dickstein regards *Revolutionary Road* as, “a road novel in reverse, with the hero [Frank] secretly unwilling to go anywhere.”²⁹ I would extend this assessment by suggesting that Yates' real accomplishment in rendering Frank so helpless a character is by virtue of such moments as the two analysed above. Certainly, due to the prospect of promotion at work, Frank retreats from his initial desire to accompany April to Paris – and in this sense, Dickstein's conclusion is irrefutable. But more than this, Yates constructs Frank as a character who *is* possessed of the socio-spatial imagination and agency necessary to find fulfillment in the suburbs, so that staying put in Connecticut becomes in itself both a rewarding journey and a satisfying destination. The problem for Frank is that he fails to recognise that he does not need to dream of Paris or an

²⁹ Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple*, 137.

increased salary as a solution to his dissatisfaction. Yates suggests that it is from the limits of his plot or the boundaries of Revolutionary Road that Frank can gain an objective perspective on his life. Ultimately, then, the Wheelers' sad disintegration as a family derives, not from the fact that they fail to satiate their romantic whims, but from their inability to identify what Blake Bailey summarises as the “discrepancy between romantic and elusively 'authentic' selves.”³⁰

April and Frank are not the only characters who represent the futility of a hyper-sensitive aspect on suburban life: John Givings, the mentally disturbed son of Mrs. Givings, the Wheelers' realtor, in many respects fuses the most sentimental aspects of both April's and Frank's thought. Through a series of visits whilst on day-release from his psychiatric institution, John finds common ground with the Wheelers in a mutual distaste for what he terms the “hopeless emptiness” of suburban life (287). The Wheelers recognise something of themselves in John when April remarks to Frank that, “He certainly did seem to approve of us” and that, “He's the first person who's really seemed to know what we're talking about” (192).

Yet, John is aghast when the Wheelers decide to remain on Revolutionary Road following the discovery that April is pregnant and the bitter accusations of cowardice and complacency that he levels at Frank and April trigger the latter's descent towards suicide. Dickstein argues

³⁰ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 230. In making this point, Bailey points out the rich suggestiveness of the novel's French title, *La Fenêtre Panoramique* (*The Picture Window*), in that it encapsulates the way that the Wheelers fail properly to perceive what is around them, just as they also struggle to map an external reality onto their interior lives.

that “[John] Givings' role as madman and truth-teller is so audacious that it ought to shatter the economy of the novel.”³¹ That it doesn't is, in my view, due to Yates scripting him as a distortion of April's and Frank's own characters, compromised as they are by their adherence to anti-suburban ideology. Whilst, at the novel's end April is dead and Frank is broken, someone who, in Shep Campbell's view, “You couldn't picture ... really laughing, or really crying, or really sweating or eating or getting drunk or getting excited” (330), John is back confined to the ward of his hospital, no longer allowed out into the community. The novel's anti-suburban “truth-tellers” all fall victim, not to the suburban environment they so despise, but to their inability to tell truth to themselves.

The ultimate subversion of these three characters' deprecatory interpretations of the socio-spatial conditions of the Estates, and wider Revolutionary Road environment, allows Yates to dot his narrative with ironic intimations of disaster. Just prior to John's final visit, Yates focalises the narrative through Frank whose opinion of his home-life is, again, mediated by being temporarily removed from it. He is on his way back from the train station when he once more observes the socially-produced reality of his house and surrounds:

The house looked very neat and white as it emerged through the green and yellow leaves; it wasn't such a bad house after all. It looked ... like a place where people lived – a place where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes to near-tragic disorder, as well as to ludicrous minor interludes (274).

Unlike Sloan Wilson with Tom and Betsy Rath, Yates shows no affection for Frank and April and his narrative technique makes it quite

³¹ Dickstein, 138.

clear that he is criticizing them for criticizing the suburban environment as the root of all their problems. Yates uses central protagonists, April and Frank, to underscore the wrongheadedness and futility of invoking the symbolic lore of the suburbs to explain away universal human failings that are themselves exacerbated by wider socio-historical contexts. This is evidenced by a particular facet of his novelistic technique whereby Yates privileges access to Frank's thoughts in one moment, and pronounces judgement on his actions in the next. This mixing of free indirect style and the pointed use of a more conventional third-person perspective means that Yates can both direct the reader into a stark proximity with the characters *and* a more considered position removed from them.

In an interview, Yates emphatically rejects the notion that Frank and April actually are “at war” (97) with their suburban environment, stating that the problems were theirs and theirs alone.³² Yates' suburban imaginary is not a spatiality of restriction and repression; rather it is one that could be transformed should Frank and April so wish it. It is their failure to find the will to make the space their own that Yates represents as the ultimate hubris. This is poignantly confirmed following April's suicide when the narrator allows that “The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy” and this may be read as a way of saying that the “invincibly cheerful” (323) houses of the Estates have not been constructed to oppress their residents.

Instead, Yates suggests that the real tragedy lies in the deep

³² Yates, quoted in, Henry and Clark, “Interview with Richard Yates,” in, *Ploughshares*, Winter 1972. Accessed online, 10/06/09: (<http://www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=128>)

personal insecurity April feels that causes her to end her life and gives the last word to Mrs. Givings, the realtor who sells the Wheelers their house. She says: “the Wheelers ... they always were a bit – a bit whimsical ... A bit neurotic” (336). Ultimately, Frank and April are undone by their inability to create a suburban spatiality in which they can find contentment. In the novel's early descriptions of the Wheeler home, Yates does hint that Frank and April are establishing a measure of agency as producers of space when he relates that “one corner of the [living] room showed signs of pleasant human congress” (31). Yet Frank and April's relentless cynicism regarding their environment continually prevents them from exploiting it for their own happiness, and the potential to remake the rest of their home in a similar way is never fulfilled.³³

Their reluctance to embrace postwar Connecticut life leads the Wheelers to consider moving to Europe in order to be reminded of happier times: for Frank, his spell as a serviceman; for April, her bohemian life with Frank prior to the war when they lived in Greenwich Village. Observing one evening his wife detailing to the Campbells their plans for escape, Frank thinks that “Anyone could picture her conquering Europe” (127); the rhetorical question that Yates leaves dangling is, of course, why can't the two of them conquer suburbia? The answer is that in their hostility to an environment they see as predetermined, Frank and April abnegate any facility for reshaping their suburban world; *Revolutionary Road* thus presents suburbia not as the cause of Frank and April's

³³ Just as their plan to go to Europe never comes to fruition. Blake Bailey notes that Yates considered that “the main theme of the book was abortion in various forms” and that the story itself evolves around “April's literal, climactic act.” See Bailey, 177.

problems but as a symptom of a way of thinking that considers it a betrayal of the desires of the generation that saw America through the war. Catherine Jurca refers to the Wheelers as “Sanctimonious Suburbanites,”³⁴ in the sense that their sanctimony makes them ever more suburban; surely it is enough just to say that they are sanctimonious and leave the suburbs out of it?

The front cover of the 2005 Penguin edition of Sloan Wilson's novel shows Gregory Peck as Tom Rath in the 1956 film version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Fig. 1). What is striking about the image is the way in which it encapsulates a great deal of the thematic content of the novel. What at first seems to be a literal, even simplistic rendering of the eponymous hero, becomes, on closer inspection, a useful way in to Wilson's work.

³⁴ Jurca, 133.



(Fig. 1, Front cover, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 2005)

The front cover presents Tom in an upright pose that is militaristic in bearing, although he is, clearly, dressed in the uniform of the corporate office.³⁵ It is thus suggestive of his past as a paratrooper and indicative of his present as a white-collar worker, and marks Tom out as both dutiful and submissive in that he appears to be awaiting further instructions from some sort of authority.

The congruity of Tom's life as a corporate worker and his past as a serviceman is made explicit in the novel. Throughout the narrative's second half, Tom not only wrestles with the knowledge that he has other men's blood on his hands, but also that, in postwar Europe, living

³⁵ The front cover of the novel's first edition in hardback, dating back to 1955, shows Tom in a similar pose but he is only illustrated in outline. In so far as any great import can be attached to this, I would resist any inclination to see such a cover as symbolic of Tom as an anonymous suburban drone and propose instead that it reveals him to be a man who, when we meet him, is very much unfulfilled and uncertain of his destiny.

conditions and general levels of affluence remain well short of those in America, a fact made important to Tom because he fathered a child with an Italian woman whilst fighting in the war. Tom is reminded by Caesar Gardella, an old army colleague, and a relative of Maria, Tom's wartime lover, that, "Things are so much easier ... here [in America] than they are [in Europe]" (142). Moreover, early in the narrative when readying himself for an important interview at the United Broadcasting Company (UBC), Tom's thought processes fuse the persona of the boss of the firm with that of a fellow trooper preparing for a parachute drop (36); later, Tom recalls that being stationed in Rome during the war had "been almost like a suburban community, with the men all working for the same big corporation" (82).

Wilson consistently equates the office spaces of UBC with the spaces of combat experienced by Tom in the Second World War, writing of a particularly distracted day at work during which Tom "got up and started pacing up and down his office, feeling much as he had during the war when he heard of another jump coming up" (138). This sense of the corporation's office as a liminal zone akin to the downtime between combat operations is accentuated further when Wilson metaphorically compares Tom's office in the Rockefeller building to dangling from a parachute: "It was queer to be suspended motionless so far above the city. It was almost as though his parachute had got stuck in mid-air, halfway between the plane and the ground" (183).³⁶ I want to nuance this image

³⁶ Wilson's focalisation of the narrative through Tom's perspective is telling here. The use of the third person can't disguise the empathy with which Wilson draws Tom's

further to suggest that Wilson synthesises the office and combat spaces in order to make the reader aware that, in both, the individual is required to defer to an often absented authority. By the novel's conclusion, in complete contrast, what Tom's new life in South Bay (another colonial town not far from Westport where the Raths reside when the novel opens) offers is the prospect of a simple nine-to-five job at the new UBC office close to his home, and a burgeoning property development business with his wife as his associate. He is his own boss by this point, and it is only at this point, Wilson suggests, that Tom has in any way resolved the tension he feels at the intertwining of these two psycho-spatial strands to his life.

The type of suburban environment in which Tom and Betsy reside is both produced by, and productive of, their entrepreneurial efforts. Reviewing Wilson's novel at the time of publication, John McNulty of *The New York Times* opined that *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s theme is that “the dangers and worriments of New York-Connecticut life can perhaps be more difficult to overcome than the more dramatic perils of wartime combat.”³⁷ This overlooks the possibility of such “worriments” having their root in “the perils of wartime combat,” or indeed any other of Tom's formative experiences, by normalising them as an indelible aspect of postwar suburban existence. Another 1955 reviewer suggests a completely different route by which *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* could have

emotional responses to his situation. Given the author's obvious affinity with his hero, and remembering that Wilson regarded his novel as “largely autobiographical.” See, Sloan Wilson, “Afterword” (1983), in, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, (London: Penguin, 2005 [1955]), n. pag. the case for Tom being viewed as a simple victim of a corporate/suburban dislocation becomes even harder to make, regardless of Tom's given circumstances at this point in the narrative.

³⁷ John McNulty, “Tom Rath, Commuter,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1955, BR18.

passed into popular consciousness when she writes, “its tag title has already become a synonym for a post-war phenomenon: the former G.I. *heroically* reconnecting to respectable civilian life.”³⁸

That this alternative reading of Wilson's novel never gained much traction in popular (or scholarly) circles is further testament to the predominance of the anti-suburban critique. In a 1983 afterword to *The Man in the The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Wilson confides – in similar fashion to Yates – that, “To my surprise, my novel ... was taken by some serious thinkers as a protest against conformity and the rigors of suburban life.” Instead, he considers it to be about “the problems which ... [his] generation faced when ... [it] came home from World War II,” and views Tom Rath's main concern as a feeling the world was “driving him to become a workaholic.”³⁹

At the outset of the narrative, Wilson makes it plain that Tom's self-confidence is fragile: he seems permanently “confused” (55) and “worried” (60). In a key passage, Wilson's narrative voice relays that “There were really four completely unrelated worlds in which Tom lived” (22): the “best-not-remembered” world in which he'd been a paratrooper; the “ghost-ridden world” of his Rath forebears; the “matter-of-fact” corporate world; and the only world “worth a damn,” that of his home life with Betsy and the children (22). As Graham Thompson argues, Tom initially tries to

³⁸ Balakian, “Talk with Mr. Wilson,” BR17.

³⁹ Wilson, “Afterword,” n. pag. Jurca writes that, “The preponderance of popular novels that borrow from and mimic sociology suggests the power of the assumption that the postwar suburb was producing a new kind of American and that novelists felt themselves to be actively participating in its construction and elaboration” (Jurca, p. 136). With regard to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, it seems to me that the plausibility of this assumption can be called into question given that Wilson's novel pre-dates the majority of the sociological works Jurca alludes to.

keep separate the spaces his life traverses, before he realises “How interconnected everything is!” (240)⁴⁰ and achieves a synthesis of these different personal landscapes by confessing his wartime experiences to his wife, rejecting a high-powered promotion at UBC, and progressing the sale of land left him by his grandmother. Where *Revolutionary Road* rejects the idea that spaces act on people independently of their own agency, what Wilson's novel also offers, then, is a pointed rejection of the idea that any single spatiality can be considered in isolation as a determinant of identity. In the build-up to Tom and Betsy's move to Tom's old family home, bequeathed to him by his grandmother, it is clear that Tom struggles to come to terms with the backstory to his life that his Rath ancestors have provided. In this way, the novel is the story, not only of how Tom deals with the inheritance of the house and land at South Bay, but also the inheritance of collected family memories: of his father's own wartime experiences and later suicide; and of his grandmother's financial mismanagement.

The echoes of his father's life haunt Tom's everyday concerns. When he visits the family solicitor following his grandmother's death, the appointment becomes about more than just poring over the details (or lack of them) in her will. It transpires that the solicitor, Sims, is an old friend of Tom's father and that the two were “classmates at college, and ... in France [during the First World War] together” (51). Having “never heard” (50) of Sims before, Tom is puzzled about how best to absorb this new

⁴⁰ Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 91.

information regarding a father he barely knew; indeed, it seems to Tom that all he knows of his father, Stephen, has been “piece[ed] together from trifles” (19). Upon further inspection of the will, it emerges that Tom has been left “twenty-three acres of the best land in South Bay” and Sims judges that the land “ought to be worth something”(54). In this way, the process of incorporating Rath family history into his sense of self becomes for Tom an uncertain act of inferring meaning and speculating as to intention. To return to Thompson's work on the novel: “This anxiety [of Tom's] increases as the narrative progresses and Tom's lack of self-confidence becomes evident. It seems to reach a peak not coincidentally when he and his family are in the process of moving from their ... [Westport] house into Tom's old family home [in South Bay].”⁴¹

Wilson suggests that whatever the socio-spatial annoyances of Westport as a commuter community, they are secondary to the psychological fault lines in the Rath lineage. Undoubtedly, the desire that Tom has to establish his wife and children in a home that fulfills what historian Elaine Tyler May sees as being the most important postwar societal aim, to create “a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world,”⁴² finds its greatest threat in the play of atavistic memories, and not from any disillusionment with suburban conformity. In *Homeward Bound* May contends that the domestication of American society in the 1950s was not an expression of “traditional” strains in American life that had “roots deep in the past” but was instead “the first

⁴¹ Ibid., 94.

⁴² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs.”⁴³ Following May, Thompson notes that “just as [she] questions the extent to which the white suburban family of the 1950s has its legacy in the past, so *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* suggests that Tom is actually trying not to repeat the failures of his own family.”⁴⁴

It is suburban space that finally offers Tom a resolution to this dilemma as he and Betsy settle on subdividing the land attached to his grandmother's house, because it makes financial sense, but also because doing so brings with it the possibility of a new school being built for the local children. In a climactic South Bay town meeting that precipitates the happy resolution to the narrative for husband and wife, Betsy out-argues a local opposed to their proposed development on the grounds that it will start a process that will end in “South Bay becom[ing] a slum within ten years” (246). In pointing out that “The children need a new school” and that she doesn't think that “growth will necessarily hurt the town” (246), Betsy makes a personal and public case for the suburban development as integral to a more secure home life. In this way, Tom and Betsy's suburban existence does have its legacy in the past and is a direct reaction to personal concerns rather than an expression of a more abstract “traditional” American culture. The perspective on suburban development that Wilson offers in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is that it is an expression of entrepreneurial endeavour, and that the basis of a fulfilling

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Thompson, 92.

suburban existence lies in the extent to which it is directly conceived as being built on other experiences, rather than as an escape from them. This is a vision that is hardly consistent with the paradigm of suburbia as an inhibiting space.⁴⁵

Close inspection of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, then, uncovers a fiction that is very far from just another tale of suburban angst and ennui. In a rallying call to her husband, for example, Betsy exclaims, “People rely too much on explanations these days, and not enough on courage and action” (112). Continuing her excited call to arms, Betsy implores Tom to forget the cares of his corporate job and embrace a more entrepreneurial spirit, pointing out that there is the chance to get rich through development, as well as secure the future prospects of the town: “we could make *more* than a hundred thousand!” (63). Sensing Tom’s reticence at this stage (which, regarding the novel as a whole, makes his transformation all the more pertinent to its meaning), Betsy accuses her husband of being “afraid to risk a god-damn thing!” (64). Given that Tom does eventually embrace the notion of becoming a developer alongside his wife, in effect, the novel refutes the thesis that one of the central characteristics of suburban fiction is a failed promise of affluence.⁴⁶ Instead it articulates a vision of postwar growth of the American suburbs as something that might very well be founded on acts of individual

⁴⁵ It could be said that Tom epitomises not only the model of a new entrepreneurial spirit that C. Wright Mills identifies in *White Collar*, but also an older form of “inner-directedness” that David Riesman believed was disappearing in 1950s America. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001 [1950]).

⁴⁶ See Jurca, 3-20.

enterprise. Tom inherits the land but it is only through future hard work that it will be transformed and his family rewarded.

By the novel's end, Tom will have dragged himself out of his moment of crisis. Offering a perspective on Wilson's chief protagonist that establishes him as a man of vision and drive, Elizabeth Long writes that it is "Tom's task to bring discordant parts of himself and his world, at odds through no fault of his own, into some kind of harmony."⁴⁷ It seems to me that readings of the novel that elide the importance of Tom's re-birth as a developer at the novel's end, in favour of seeing him as an emasculated suburban drone, fall into precisely the same trap that Betsy exhorts her husband to avoid.

Thus, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* dissolves the binary relationship between the suburb and the city by establishing the suburb as the site of the Raths' future economic and spiritual growth: Tom's UBC job moves him out from the central city, and they are resolved to develop the family land for the benefit of the South Bay community, as well as their own financial security. Wilson's novel is revelatory of the way in which the first phase of postwar suburbanisation is already giving way to a second, and renders redundant the continued reliance by literary critics on the notion of the suburb/city binary to establish the suburb as the analogue of the city corporation. In conclusion then, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* represents suburban space as the means to a more rewarding life for Tom and his family; it is a narrative of a "humanistic search for fulfillment" in a world where "business success has lost much of

⁴⁷ Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*, 86.

its meaning”⁴⁸ but individual enterprise promises something more affirming.

In resisting viewing *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* as thematically schematised texts that simply confirm a certain sociological strain of thought, my argument has been that both novels cast the suburbs of postwar America as more than a socio-spatial vacuum in which historical memory is lost. Drawing on Lefebvrian ideas of the social production of space, my analysis instead foregrounded the significance of postwar readjustment to the way in which Frank and Tom interact with their environments. In the next chapter, I turn to Richard Ford's trilogy of novels *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006) in order to highlight the ways in which these works complicate an inherited suburban literary tradition through a focus on their narrator and central protagonist Frank Bascombe.

⁴⁸

Ibid., 94.

CHAPTER 2

“A more interesting surgery on the suburbs”: Richard Ford's Paeon to the New Jersey Periphery

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 write a redemptive novel about the suburbs, a paean to New Jersey and its suburban life? ... not to mouth the conventional line, but instead ... as Frank does in *The Lay of the Land* ... to uncover a seam of approval, a seam of optimism, of acceptance that is, in fact, buried in us all.

- Richard Ford¹

In his introduction to the 2001 paperback edition of *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Ford notes that Richard Yates' novel presents Frank and April as characters who are “walking paths laid out by forces and authorities other than their own personal sense of right and wrong,” but posits that, whilst they may dislike the suburbs, they are “finally done in by circumstances ... [they] simply lack the moral vigor to control.” In Ford's view, *Revolutionary Road* is a fiction that requires us to consider “just how bad can it literally *be* out there in the 'burbs ... where almost nobody's character shows capacity to change, but only to suffer?”²

In this chapter I argue that in his trilogy of novels featuring Frank

¹ Richard Ford, quoted in, Phil Hogan, “To Be Frank: Interview with Richard Ford”, *The Observer*, Review, September 24, 2006, 7.

² Richard Ford, “Introduction”, in, Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Methuen, 2001 [1961]), xviii, xv, xvii, xv, xx.

Bascombe as the central protagonist, Ford presents Frank as a figure who apprehends keenly the ways in which the suburban landscape is transformed into a postsuburban one. But, more than this, he presents Frank as able to develop his outlook on his environment to the extent that, unlike the Wheelers, he regards it as a place in which comfort can be found.

Spanning a period of thirteen years from Easter 1983 to Thanksgiving 2000, Richard Ford's three Frank Bascombe novels depict the change from a suburban landscape to a postsuburban one in considerable detail. At the outset of the trilogy, in the early pages of *The Sportswriter* (1986), Frank commutes to New York City from Haddam, his New Jersey suburban small-town. Haddam is midway between New York and Philadelphia, and, as Frank allows, it is therefore "not so easy to say what ... [it's] a suburb of – commuters go both ways." The result is an "out-of-the-mainstream feeling ... as engrossed as any in New Hampshire, but retaining the best of what New Jersey offers."³

Yet, there are intimations throughout *The Sportswriter* of an emergent postsuburban matrix. Frank mentions that most people who live in Haddam "work elsewhere" – so far, so suburban – but, interestingly, he qualifies this by admitting that it is "often at one of the corporate think-tanks out in the countryside" (55), a definite invocation of the sort of spatial configuration that Robert Fishman has described as a "technoburb". The sense in which previously clearly demarcated

³ Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (Collins Harvill: London, 1996 [1986]), 54. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

boundaries between the urban and the suburban are dissolved is implied by Frank's girlfriend, Vicki, when she exclaims that "Towns aren't even towns anymore," going on to call Dallas, her hometown, "a suburb looking for a place to light" (180).

By 1988, the time of the events of *Independence Day* (1995), the changing ecology of the suburban landscape is being matched by changes in the social composition of Frank's New Jersey. Frank notes at the beginning of his narrative that the workers refitting Haddam's infrastructure are "all Cape Verdeans and ... Hondurans."⁴ This perception that the forces of globalisation and transnationalism are transforming a previously predominantly white middle-class habitat is compounded later when, as he journeys along Route 1, Frank describes "an opulent new pharmaceutical world headquarters abutting a wheat field managed by the soil research people up at Rutgers" (45). At the same time, the original iterations of postwar suburbia are fading away: further back off Route 1 lies an ailing old mall "desolated on its wide plain of parking lot, now mostly empty" (36). Frank even employs a new lexicon to impart to the reader the nature of the new landscape, talking at one point of "rain-drenched exurbia" (57). In this postsuburban spatiality the central city is a far-off, rarely contemplated presence (Frank no longer works there); when it is mentioned, it is in terms that convey a certain marginality and irrelevance, not to mention a sense that it is no longer understood: "out east Gotham shone like a temple set fire to by infidels" (110).

⁴ Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (London: Vintage, 2003 [1995]), 3. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

By the millennial year of 2000, in which the events of *The Lay of the Land* (2006) take place, the reader is confronted with “a positivist’s version of what landscape-seascape has mostly become in a multi-use society.”⁵ This is a utilitarian, polycentric and diffuse spatiality that Frank, as narrator, spends considerable time musing over. Indeed, the early pages of the novel are largely given over to Frank surveying his surroundings, searching, as Thanksgiving approaches, for what he can be thankful for in amongst “what’s new, what’s abandoned, what’s in the offing, what will never be” (24). Haddam, meanwhile, is referred to by Frank as a “township,” a term which seems indicative of the ways in which its scope and limits have shifted. Moreover, Frank assesses that because people are now “commuting *into* Haddam instead of *out to* Gotham and Philly” it has “stopped being a quiet and happy suburb, stopped being subordinate to any other place and be[come] a *place to itself*, only without having a fixed municipal substance” (89).

In this new postsuburban landscape, Frank acknowledges that “old interior suburbs [are] on their way to extinction” (341). Frank describes Sea-Clift on the Jersey Shore where he now lives in preference to Haddam as “not a true suburb” either: the “pastel split-levels on streets named Poseidon, Oceania and Pelagic” (266) seem merely to pastiche a more simple suburban age that is now past. Really, what the central New Jersey plain amounts to for Frank is a collection of “interlocking towns, townships, [and] townlettes” (289), all joined by a criss-crossing highway

⁵ Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 11. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

network and serviced by various out-of-town malls, leisure parks and high-tech industrial effusions.⁶

Read in this way, these three novels offer not only an inventory of a landscape in transition, but also present a perspective on the postsuburban that reasserts the way in which social relations are inherent in the ongoing production of space, and that this can be a transforming and ultimately life-affirming process. Several of Ford's critics have struggled to accommodate his seemingly unironic take on his narrator's New Jersey existence.⁷ But Ford has confirmed that this was precisely his intention:

There are lots of things to dislike about the suburbs, and the New Jersey suburbs in particular ... people don't dislike them. And that's the truth. The suburbs have been written about ironically so often that I thought it might be a more interesting surgery on the suburbs to talk about them in unironic terms.⁸

This chapter aims to show, then, that all three of the Bascombe novels represent a suburban and postsuburban landscape that can, and should, be taken at face value. Brian Duffy has asserted that the three novels “characterize human becoming through time”⁹ in their representation of

⁶ Robert E. Lang writes of this area that it is (in contrast to the configurations Garreau termed edge cities) “A good example of an edgeless city ... especially the area around Princeton.” For Lang, this environment is “post-polycentric” in its variety, meaning that nowhere is there the cohesion necessary for an edge city. See Robert E. Lang, *Edgeless Cities: Exploring the Elusive Metropolis* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 2.

⁷ Edward Dupuy, “The Confessions of an Ex-Suicide: Relenting and Recovering in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*,” in Huey Guagliardo, ed., *Perspectives on Richard Ford* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 71-82; Matthew Guinn, “Into the Suburbs: Richard Ford's Sportswriter Novels and the Place of Southern Fiction,” in, Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 196-207; Fred Hobson, “Post-Faulkner, Post-Southern: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*,” in, Fred Hobson, *The Silencing of Emily Mullen and Other Essays*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 165-178.

⁸ Wendell Smith, “The Life of the Writer: Lunch with Richard Ford” (1987), in, Huey Guagliardo, ed., *Conversations with Richard Ford* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 54.

⁹ Brian Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 16.

Frank's developing moral and ethical code. In what follows I want to build on this idea by pointing out the ways in which Frank “becomes” through his engagement with space, and explore how his relationships with the various New Jersey environments allow the reader to engage with the texts free from concern about their lack of irony.

In his study of contemporary American fiction, Kenneth Millard writes of Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* that it is deeply invested in “interrogating [the] American issues of social identity ... existing only in writing.”¹⁰ Whilst Millard's view of *The Sportswriter* is primarily based on the way in which it dramatises the central character Frank Bascombe's personal rejection of fiction-writing, I want to build on his idea by contending that Ford's first Bascombe novel interrogates the whole idea of the suburbs as a site of social identity formation. Ford alludes to this aim in an interview with Kay Bonetti conducted in 1986, the year of *The Sportswriter*'s publication. In an apparent criticism of those suburban fictions derived from cultural cliché, Ford states that “you can't abstract a sense of place ... a place makes itself felt entirely through particulars.”¹¹

This sense that *The Sportswriter* is an attempt to intervene creatively in the abstractions of a genre is obvious from the outset of the

¹⁰ Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction: An Introduction to American Fiction Since 1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 211.

¹¹ Richard Ford in Kay Bonetti, “An Interview with Richard Ford” (1986), Guagliardo, ed., *Conversations*, 22.

narrative when, in the second paragraph of his present tense, first-person narration, Frank confides that his family's move to Haddam, New Jersey from New York “seemed to set [them] ... up for a good life.” It is impossible to read this statement without registering the centrality of the suburban dream to American culture as it was configured when the Bascombes left New York in 1969 (the novel is set in 1983 and Frank tells us that he has lived in Haddam for fourteen years).¹² It is also impossible to miss the hint of retrospective disappointment in Frank's tone here, although he goes on to qualify this by admitting that, though he wouldn't say that the good life “has not come to pass,” nonetheless, “much has come in between” (9). Frank is prepared to admit that his preconceived ideas about the move to the suburbs may have been naïvely held: one of the events that comes “in between” is the death from Reye's Syndrome of his son, Ralph, a misfortune that precipitates Frank's divorce from his wife, referred to in the narrative as “X”.

Each year at Easter, Frank and his wife meet at Ralph's grave to commemorate their son's life, and it is at this point that the novel begins. The mode of narration allows Ford to provide access to Frank's thoughts and, during this meeting, in one of the first of many characteristic digressions, Frank recounts how “When he was fiercely sick ... [Ralph] sat up in bed in the hospital one day, in a delirium, and said, 'Marriage is a damnably serious business, particularly in Boston' – something he'd read

¹² An exact chronology is hard to determine: later on in the narrative, Frank says that he and his wife moved to Haddam in 1970 (45).

... and [which] ... took me six weeks to track ... down to Marquand” (18).¹³ By having Ralph quote from one of the key practitioners of popular suburban fiction of the 1950s, Ford suggests that Ralph's passing signals the end of Frank's belief in an image of the suburbs that is irreducibly associated with the postwar moment. As Frank states as he and X gather by Ralph's grave, they are now “a modern, divided family ... [and their] ... meeting ... is only by way of a memorial for an old life lost” (18). Frank's grief for his son is real and heartfelt, and indeed his battle with Ralph's loss is a recurrent theme in *The Sportswriter*; however, Frank is less upset about the fact that the suburban life his family had “when everything was starting has died” because, as he freely admits, “My life over these [last] twelve years has not been and isn't now a bad one at all. In most ways it's been great ” (9-10).

The state that Frank finds himself in on the cusp of the Easter weekend is one in which he is striving to cast off his tendency towards what he calls “dreaminess,” a state precipitated by Ralph's death and his divorce from X, and which has seen him, to a certain extent, sleepwalk through his life. He confesses that “Sometimes I would wake up in the morning and ... Not even know what town I was in, or how old I was, or what life it was, so dense was I in my particular dreaminess.” However, by adhering to one of the central lessons of his work as a sportswriter, Frank reports that he has “nearly put dreaminess behind [him]” (16). What sportswriting has taught Frank is that “there are no transcendent themes

¹³ In novels such as *Point of No Return* (1949) and *Sincerely Willis Wayde* (1955), J. P. Marquand popularised a satirical vision of suburban life.

in life. In all cases things are here and they're over, and that has to be enough" and that the "other view is a lie of literature" (22). Not only does this explain Frank's decision to reject his previous career as a novelist and short-story writer, it also confirms his readiness to dispense with an abstracted view of his suburban existence.

What quickly emerges at the outset of his narrative is the importance of language to Frank's capacity to engage with the world on his own terms; in stark contrast to Frank Wheeler's world-view, and with pun very much intended, Ford has Frank assert that "I have a voice that is really mine, a frank, vaguely rural voice ... a no-frills voice that hopes to uncover simple truth by a straight-on application of the facts" (17).

This is not to say that Frank is inarticulate. The very opposite is the case. All three Bascombe novels are remarkable for the way in which Frank's thoughts are represented on the page in long sentences in which the clauses stack up and the vocabulary is fulsome. Yet it is the ends to which Frank employs his voice that are important and I want to make the case in what follows that Frank's engagement with his environment is notable for the way in which his language allows him to intervene in, and recalibrate, received wisdom on the suburban landscape. Ford has spoken of his desire to foreground through Frank's idiom those qualities of language that are "not specifically communicative" but that are, instead, "expressive and sensuous".¹⁴ This is not, it seems to me, at odds with Frank's desire to "uncover simple truth" through a "no-frills voice"; as

¹⁴ Graham Thompson and Dick Ellis, "Interview with Richard Ford," *OVERhere: A European Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1996): 118.

Ford elaborates, “if you can somehow persuade yourself by the artful use of language that such and such a thing is real, that you're happy in the suburbs ... sometimes you can actually connect yourself to the bottom of experience.”¹⁵

Consequently, Ford quickly establishes Frank as an iconoclastic suburbanite. In his wry, self-aware fashion, Frank reflects on the way he is different from some of the other Haddamites he encounters, acknowledging mischievously that “It is not ... easy to have a divorced man as your neighbor,” and that “Chaos lurks in him – the viable social contract called into question” (11). Explaining his plans for Easter Sunday, Frank tells us that he is to visit the family of his girlfriend, Vicki Arcenault, “in a subdivision close to the ocean,” and that he is “scheduled to be exhibit A” (12). But Frank is shown to be a man apart in other ways than just the circumstantial. Frank's use of language allows him to derive immense satisfaction from the quotidian aspects of suburban Haddam: the “cool, aqueous suburban chlorine bouquet” reminds him of “the summer coming” and is “a token of the suburbs ... [he] love[s]” (20).

Ford continues to satirise the clichéd view of suburban social relations as he fills in some of the details of Frank's life in Haddam. Frank tells us that one of the reasons he has forsaken fictionwriting is because he felt he was “stuck in bad stereotypes” with “all ... [his] men ... too serious, too brooding and humorless”; they were “characters at loggerheads with imponderable dilemmas” (52). As Martyn Bone has pointed out, in this way Frank serves as Ford's fictional avatar: just as in writing a novel about

¹⁵ Ibid., 123.

a New Jersey resident Ford seems to be rejecting the conventional tropes of much Southern fiction, many of which are present and correct in his debut novel *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), so Frank seems to hint at a feeling of subservience to the same literary tradition.¹⁶ Indeed, in *Independence Day* Frank discovers an old copy of his book of short stories, *Blue Autumn*, the collection which, when sold to a film producer, finances the Bascombes' move to Haddam. The front cover of this edition captures precisely the mood of existential dread that Frank says he has had enough of. It shows "a sensitive-young-man" with "an uncertain half smile, standing emblematically alone in the dirt parking lot of a country gas station" (319). Such a self-conscious move also allows Ford the freedom to play with the generic conventions of suburban fiction, which in its pervasiveness and durability, body of motifs and stock characters is equally as burdensome to the writer as those of southern fiction. So, Ford has Frank recounting the dissolution of an old Haddam friendship, a hangover from the "old cocktail-dinner party days": following an evening at his friend Bert's house, during which the host got "jittery as a quail" and "ended up downing several vodkas" before "threatening to throw ... [Frank] through the wall," the two of them now see each other only infrequently "on the train to Gotham." Frank, though, is able to laugh this off for the triviality that it is in concluding his story with the pithy observation that this outcome may be the "essence of modern friendship"

¹⁶ Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 93-99. Bone also refers to Frank's previous fictional output, a novel begun in his college days entitled *Night Wing*. In Frank's words it is the story of a "bemused young southerner ... which is climaxed in a violent tryst with a Methodist minister's wife who seduces him in an abandoned slave-quarters." See also, Guinn, "Into the Suburbs," 196-200.

(50-51).

The sense that Ford is actively countering the *mise-en-scène* found in so much writing about the suburbs is confirmed later during an interior monologue in which Frank ponders the Easter Sunday dawn. Again, as with his tale of Bert's psychological implosion, Frank's language initially seems to draw on the same hysterical stock as that of the Gordons in *The Split-Level Trap*. On hearing a noise in the nearby cemetery, he remarks that "Early is the suburban hour for grieving – midway of a two mile run; a stop-off on the way to work or the 7-11. I have never seen a figure there, yet each one sounds the same, a woman almost always, crying tears of loneliness and remorse" (209-10). Ford's use of the modifying phrase "I have never seen a figure there, yet..." serves to point up Frank's scepticism about just how real the "suburban hour for grieving" actually is, and Ford encloses in parenthesis a remark of Frank's which completely undercuts the notion of a particularly suburban register of grief. Frank confides – in a sort-of aside to the reader – that, "(Actually, I once stood and listened, and after a while someone – a man – began to laugh and talk Chinese)" (210). There is no suggestion here that embittered Haddamites are slowly dying from despair-induced ulcers, and Frank continues his present meditations by laying "back on the bed and listen[ing] to the sounds of Easter – the optimist's holiday, the holiday with the suburbs in mind, the day for all those with sunny dispositions and a staunch belief in the middle view" (210).

Instead of a space that is associated with psychological and psychosomatic affliction, in *The Sportswriter* Ford scripts suburban New

Jersey as a landscape entirely without any overwhelming immanent affect. Frank extols his home state as a place where “Illusion will never be your adversary” alleging that if someone is prepared to “Stop searching” for some ideal and “Face the earth where you can” (59) then, like him, they might find themselves “not displeased by New Jersey” (58). Unlike the confounding landscapes in which John and Mary Drone lose themselves in *The Crack in the Picture Window*, or that so afflict the inhabitants of Bergen County in the Gordons' treatment of suburban New Jersey, Frank believes that Haddam and its surroundings is the most “diverting and readable of landscapes” and that an American “would be crazy to reject such a place” (58).

Settling contentedly in a place is a process Frank associates with learning and maturation, not with the enactment of purchasing power. Indeed, as I will show, across the trilogy the changing socio-spatial conditions of central New Jersey help to facilitate Frank's spiritual and emotional recuperation from the shocks of divorce and his son's death. Describing his particular place in the Haddam community, Frank explains that he is

part of the ... group who're happy to be residents year-round, and who act as if we were onto something fundamental that's not a matter of money ... but of a certain awareness: living in a place is one thing we all went to college to learn how to do properly, and now that we're adults and the time has arrived, we're holding on (55).

What Frank imparts here is the knowledge that satisfactory emplacement in an environment requires work and engagement rather than whimsy and abstraction (although this doesn't stop Frank from indulging in such thought processes). Apprehending Haddam as a “straightforward ...

plumb-literal ... simple ... [and] unambiguous” town “makes it the pleasant place that it is” (109) for Frank and means that suburban life unfolds in ways he can understand.

If we are to see Frank in Lefebvrian terms as an agent in the social production of Haddam as a suburban space, *The Sportswriter* seems to posit the pragmatic foundations of Frank's part in this process. Kevin Brooks, in a perceptive essay on the philosophical tenets of Ford's fiction, avers that, broadly, Ford's work evinces a rejection of universal rules. More specifically for Brooks, the Bascombe novels construct Frank as a figure who consciously employs the pragmatist's tactics, identified by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) as “coping” and “edification,” terms which Rorty uses, according to Brooks, “with the connotation of figuring things out or making one's way in the world”.¹⁷

This idea is given fictional expression by Ford in the opening pages of *The Sportswriter* when Frank describes how “Nowadays I'm willing to say yes to as much as I can: yes to my town, my neighborhood, my neighbor,” and to “Let things be the best they can be” (58). Such open-mindedness means that Frank inevitably exposes himself to the effects of contingency and chance and my ensuing discussion of *Independence Day* will focus more particularly on the ways in which Frank reconciles himself to this consequence of his pragmatism.

In embracing contingency and shunning the abstractions of dreaminess, Frank nonetheless enjoys what he terms the “meaningful

¹⁷ Kevin Brooks, “Life is Not a Game: Reworking the Metaphor in Richard Ford's Fiction,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42 (2009): 844-848.

mystery” (54) that Haddam and suburban New Jersey offer. Paradoxically, this is a quality that derives from Frank's literal appreciation of the everyday spaces around him. This is not, however, an untenable outlook. Martin Corner points out, in an essay on spirituality in recent American fiction, that Frank's desire for mystery is grounded in the innate *mysteriousness* of the material world and does not seek to transcend the stuff of tangible reality:

The depth, the hiddenness that overcomes literalness is for ... [Frank] not a special depth; it is the kind of depth, of resonance, that things have ... To follow him in this we must really accept that the relevant mystery might be a feature of the given world, not the disclosure of some special, distinct, marked-off reality.¹⁸

With such a philosophical outlook, Frank Bascombe becomes the polar opposite of Frank Wheeler, who, as we have seen, fails utterly to believe that the suburbs can be anything other than a token of some malign existential force.¹⁹

¹⁸ Martin Corner, “Opening the Literal: Spirituality in Updike and Ford”, in, Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman, eds., *Biblical Religion and the Novel* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 148.

¹⁹ On the Saturday of the Easter weekend Frank undertakes with Vicki a trip to Detroit, Michigan, in order that he can interview an ex-pro footballer, Herb Wallagher, now confined to a wheelchair after a ski-boat accident. Having left Vicki at their downtown hotel, Frank sets out for his meeting. His journey to Herb's takes him through the various strata of the changing suburban ecology: at first, Frank encounters “little connected burgs and townlets beyond the interior city” and “red-brick Jewish sections” before travelling along a “wide boulevard with shopping malls and thick clusters of traffic lights, the houses newer and settled in squared-off tracts” (155). To get to Herb's house Frank and his taxi driver, “a giant Negro named Lorenzo Smallwood” (155) have to continue on for a further ten minutes until they reach the “perimeter of true Detroit suburbia, the white-flight areas stretching clear to Lansing” (157). It is in this context that Mr. Smallwood, as Frank calls him, assumes the sort of symbolic significance that Bosobolo does back in Haddam: Frank is an unconventional traveller in these parts. The name of this exurb is Walled Lake and, following Frank's disastrous interview with Herb in which the erstwhile athlete breaks down in a welter of self-pity, it becomes clear that Ford freights this particular suburban space with figurative meaning. In the taxi back to Detroit, Mr. Smallwood, whom Frank describes as the best possible “confederate” (171), refers to the inhabitants of the Walled Lake area as “Sur-burban peoples” and, in a warning that comes too late for Frank, says “These people out here're crazy ... I'm tellin you. Houses full of guns, everybody mad all the time” (171). Whilst Frank is gracious enough to acknowledge that Herb's self-pity is “as justly earned as a game ball” given his reduced circumstances, he is nonetheless adamant that not “bend[ing]” (170) to such an

On Easter Sunday Frank undertakes a trip to see Vicki at her father and stepmother's home near Barnegat Pines, a development a few miles from Haddam on "a man-made peninsula" comprised of a "pleasant, meandering curbless street of new pastel split-levels with green lawns, underground utilities and attached garages" (249). It is a place of "the same sort" as Pheasant Run & Meadow a "theme-organized development" (59) where Vicki herself lives. In Frank's estimation, these homes are ideal for young and old alike offering both "an attractive retirement" and "the ideal ... for ... people just starting in the world" (59).

In their readings of *The Sportswriter* both Martyn Bone and Matthew Guinn are critical of the way in which Frank privileges this New Jersey iteration of development. Bone sees Frank unquestioningly consuming a "landscape that signifie[s] successful capitalist speculation," whilst Guinn condemns him as the "avatar of ... postmodern detachment from place."²⁰ What I want to suggest here is that Ford shows how Frank's focus on the people of these environments, and their capacity to inhabit them fully, or not, allows for a sense of place that is less encumbered by questions of the capitalist production of space and its hegemonic effect.

impulse by concluding the interview on the basis that he was not going to get any good material was the right decision to make. In this way Ford represents the extreme edge, literally and figuratively, of suburban insularity and introspection; but he also suggests, in a manner redolent of Lefebvre's idea about the production of space as a dialectical process, that it is an environment that has been compromised by its inhabitants' negative outlooks, as much as it is a space that has sullied the minds of those that live there. As Frank reflects, "A hundred years ago, this country would have been ... A perfect place for a picnic" but now it is a place of "gray crust[ed]" snow-melt, "uneasy silence[s]" and mess where people have "tossed their refuse" (161). For Frank, then, "location isn't actually everything" (223). His imperative to "face the earth where you can," however, does concede the fact that social relations and location are inextricably linked. His flight from Herb's isolated existence is a flight from a state of mind that Frank abhors, and a flight from a space which is both tainted by and reinforcing of that defensive mindset.

²⁰ Bone, 108; Guinn, 197.

Frank finds Wade Arcenault “a cheery, round-eyed ... fellow with a plainsman's square face and hearty laugh”; this is quite the opposite of what he expects, and he admits that “I had envisioned a wiry, squint-eyed little pissant – a gun store owner type, with fading flagrant tattoos of women on emaciated biceps, a man with a cruel streak for Negroes. But that is the man of bad stereotype, the kind my writing career foundered over and probably should have.” He concludes that, “The world is a more engaging and less dramatic place than writers ever give it credit for being” (267). Bone's reading of the novel conflates Frank's background as a writer who profited from the sale of his literary product (*Blue Autumn*) with an inseparable complicity in the economic production of place; for Bone, when Frank sells the option on his stories to Hollywood and moves to Haddam his “speculations in the literary market ... [become] equivalent to, exchangeable with ... [his] speculations in the property market”²¹ and it is this investment in the market that means Frank is unable to see the developments in the Haddam surrounds as anything other than a good thing.

And yet, such an insight can be qualified by the recognition that speculation, in its purest sense, is an imaginative act, an act that is bound up with language and the social. In Frank's view, the best way to ensure a sense of locatedness is through an imaginative engagement with the reality of place. As he remarks whilst sat on the Arcenaults' porch, the “snaky peninsula is the work of some enterprising developer who's carted it in with trucks and reclaimed it from a swamp. And it has not been a bad

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Bone, 102.

idea. You could just as easily be in Hyannis Port if you closed your eyes, which for a moment I do" (262). Bone's reading follows that of Edward Dupuy in its reliance on the idea of Frank "relenting" to the capitalist "world as text" landscapes around him. Dupuy argues that this allows Frank to recover from the dreaminess that has been afflicting him, whilst Bone posits that Frank is diverted from any critical engagement with such places, further prolonging his journey back to some sort of equilibrium.²² However, Frank neither relents to, nor fails to engage with, his suburban surroundings. In a postmodern landscape of multifarious architectural signifiers detached from historical context and animated by the creative/destructive energies of capital, Frank pointedly persists in making what's signified something that works for him. This particular scene, in which Frank imaginatively reconstructs Barnegat Pines as a Cape Cod seaside town, marks the beginning of a continuing effort to acknowledge the constructedness of reality and turn it to his own ends.

By the period in which the narrative of *The Lay of the Land* is set, twelve years on, Frank displays the same level of fidelity to the transformative powers of language: "If you can say it, it can happen" (161). Guinn's argument, that Frank is a figure Ford knowingly sends up by consciously implicating him in the valorisation of an inauthentic postmodern suburban landscape, is entirely dependent on viewing Ford as an ironic commentator on the suburbs. But Frank's coping strategy deploys an optimistic, relativistic rhetoric that defines the terms of his

²² Bone, 103; Dupuy, "The Confessions of an Ex-Suicide," in, Guagliardo, *Perspectives*, 72-80.

engagement with the suburban landscape in a positive light. Such a narrative move also sets Ford apart from previous suburban chroniclers such as Keats and the Gordons, and distinguishes Frank from suburban anti-heroes such as Frank Wheeler.

For Guinn, *The Sportswriter* (and *Independence Day*) are novels that revel in a sense of postregionality, showing that Ford “treats the concept of place in anti-essentialist terms, through a constant focus on mass culture that is at odds with conventional regionalism.” In such an estimation, Frank's celebration of a mystery derived from the tangible everydayness of the suburbs is no more than a celebration of place as “empty of transcendent or definitive character ... suspicious of the type of abstraction that would construe a place as vital to human character.” This seems to me precisely the effect Ford intended. While, for Guinn, such a position is a capitulation to the postmodern world that stands little comparison to the southern heritage of regionalism and agrarianism which favours “the stability of communities” and “bedrock absolutes” and not, as I argue, an effort by Ford to represent the workings of the social production of space under late capitalism.²³ The irony of Guinn's position is that, whilst he sees *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* as declensions from a more noble tradition of southern writing, his characterisation and denunciation of an ascendant postmodern culture to which Frank defers is merely reinstating the orthodoxy of an essentialist conception of place (southern regionalism) with what Terry Eagleton calls the “thoroughly orthodox heterodoxy” of an anti-essentialist conception of

²³ Guinn, 197, 199, 202, 204.

place (postmodernism).²⁴ By contrast, I suggest, *The Sportswriter* reveals Ford as an author who is not interested in championing one type of place over another, but instead represents how places are produced through social relations and the conduit of language.

We can begin to see, then, that *The Sportswriter* presents Frank as a character who acknowledges the way in which the suburbs are the product of a postmodern capitalist economy but who nonetheless is able to reconstitute them, through his own wilful thought processes, as spaces that might offer some hope. At the end of the Easter weekend his relationship with Vicki seems to be waning, and Frank contemplates what the suburbs mean to him. It is late afternoon becomes early evening, a time when “we all want to sit down in a leather chair by an open window, have a drink near someone we love or like, read the sports and possibly doze for a while.” Frank opines that, “It is for such dewy interludes that our suburbs were built” and that “entered *cautiously*, they can serve us well *no matter what our stations in life, no matter we have the aforementioned liberty or don't* ... It is a pastoral kind of longing, of course, but *we can all have it* [my emphasis]” (318). Gregory Dart has written about the way in which the “highly systematic” nature of late capitalist spaces “is always, however inadvertently, giving birth to its opposite – fantasy, reverie, daydream – as a form of resistance.”²⁵ Whilst Dart is referring to city space in this statement, his point is equally applicable to suburban space; in *The Sportswriter* Frank amply demonstrates this urge to resist through the use

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 26.

²⁵ Gregory Dart, “Daydreaming,” in, Matthew Beaumont and Gregory Dart, eds., *Restless Cities* (London: Verso, 2010), 79.

of the imagination.

This idea of Frank as a daydreamer able to resist the hegemonic domination of abstracted suburban space is not to say that the novel sees him tipping back into the detached state of dreaminess he is trying to escape. His imaginative pursuit of suburban mystery is grounded in the real. Following the suicide of Walter Luckett, Frank's friend, and fellow member of the Divorced Men's Club, Frank heads to Haddam station with a view to travelling to his magazine's office in New York. In his heightened emotional state Frank reaffirms his commitment to his home:

I will say it again, perhaps for the last time: there is mystery everywhere, even in a vulgar, urine-scented, suburban depot such as this. You have only to let yourself in for it. You can never know what's coming next. Always there is the chance it will be – miraculous to say – something you want (348).

He concludes that, “you can learn not to be cynical – if you're interested enough” (367). It is through his character Frank's intense willingness to muse on suburban spaces that Ford challenges entrenched views about this environment. Frank refuses to acquiesce to what he terms the “fragrant silly dream” of the suburbs, the sense that they are utopian spaces that offer a “Life-forever” (325). Frank understands this perception to be promulgated by the “bad stereotypes” of advertising and literature and, in the course of thinking on Walter's death, flatly dissociates himself from this imagery as an insult to the real tribulations of what Frank calls “lived life” (84), or the process of “facing the Earth where you can.” Troubled by the regret of a homosexual encounter, “lived life” proves too much for Walter, but this does not speak to a pervasive suburban sadness.

Equally, Ford uses Frank to show how theorising the suburbs as the

apogee of an enervating postmodern spatiality disregards the resourcefulness of people who make their homes there. All this being said, Ford does leave Frank with a problem at the end of *The Sportswriter*, though, that is let until *Independence Day* to solve. Frank's relationship to suburban spaces – his accent on their potentially utilitarian nature and his emphasis on their potential mutability – means that, by the time of the Easter weekend's close and with the state of his relationship with Vicki uncertain, the death of Walter on his mind, and relations with his ex-wife increasingly strained, Frank is seeking a way to disappear into the background and stabilise his own sense of himself. Now “Haddam is ... a first-class place for invisibility” (346) for Frank.

In the following section my analysis will focus on the way in which Ford has Frank learn the lesson that true independence, rather than the contrived withdrawal from society that Frank is leaning towards at *The Sportswriter's* dénouement, is achieved, paradoxically, through association with others, and that the changing suburban spaces of Haddam are integral to this reorientation.

Independence Day begins in 1988 and Ford quickly makes apparent the challenges Frank now faces in his appreciation of his New Jersey home. Frank's ability and willingness to discern beauty in the prosaic is still intact: in the first page of the novel “summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the

world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems,” despite the fact that, a block away from where Frank lives, a team of workmen is repaving, “resodding the neutral ground, setting new curbs, using our proud new tax dollars.” However, just a few lines later, Frank admits that “all is not exactly kosher here” and although he qualifies this observation by asking the rhetorical question “When is anything *exactly* kosher?” he is nonetheless discombobulated by a turn of events that has seen a work colleague murdered on the outskirts of Haddam, himself mugged one street over from his own, and an alarming fall in property prices precipitated by the stock market crash of a year before (3-4).

Ford uses Frank to create fictions that directly addresses what Joanna Price has termed the two “mythicised strands” of the ideology of suburbia, the first being the notion of “community and civitas,” the second being the creed of “independence and self-reliance.”²⁶ However, I want to use Price's observation to suggest that, in the second of his Bascombe novels, Ford's narrative reveals that these two seemingly irreconcilable ideas are, in fact, compatible.

At the point at which Frank takes up his narrative, he is keenly aware that social and economic forces are threatening to make Haddam a spatiality in which invidious difference becomes the overriding gestalt. Early in *Independence Day* we learn that Frank has left the world of sportswriting behind and transformed himself into a realtor, or real estate executive, with a local firm called Lauren-Schwindell. It is a profession

²⁶ Joanna Price, “Between Subdivisions and Shopping Malls: Signifying Everyday Life in the Contemporary American South”, in, Roger Webster, ed., *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 135.

entirely in keeping with Frank's belief, first articulated in *The Sportswriter*, that abstracted views on space and place are misguided. Describing his early morning routine involving the scrutiny of his listings sheet, Frank relates that, typically, the owner of a house will decide to sell upon realising that it was bought under a false pretence and that this "long-lost life" is something "we must all (if we care to go on living) let go of." Frank sees this as "progress of a sort" (6) and the language he uses to describe it echoes that with which his narrative began in *The Sportswriter* when he relates his sense that the conviction with which he first moved to the suburbs was no longer viable. In the second novel, Frank flatly rejects an idealised apprehension of suburban life. He explains:

The configuration of life events that led me to this profession and to this very house could, I suppose, seem unusual if your model for human continuance is some *Middletown* white paper from early in the century and geared to Indiana, or an "ideal American family life" profile as promoted by some right-wing think tank ... but that are just propaganda for a mode of life no one could live without access to the very impulse-suppressing, nostalgia-provoking drugs they don't want you to have ... But to anyone reasonable, my life will seem more or less normal under-the-microscope, full of contingencies and incongruities none of us escapes (7).

Brian Duffy posits that in the second and third parts of the Bascombe trilogy the practice of real estate functions "as a metaphor for the hazardous negotiations and choices of adult life,"²⁷ but this suggestion risks reducing Frank's relationships to the level of market transaction. Rather, Frank's new immersion in real estate is indicative of his developing outlook on life and his belief that "contingencies and incongruities" – so evident in the course of buying and selling houses – are not to be feared, but rather embraced. In interview with Kay Bonetti, Ford ponders the

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Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford*, 64.

terms of man's dialectical relationship with space: "I think that you have to be imaginative in your relationship with place. You have to be sensitive to the fact that it makes a claim on you and then try to make up what that claim is."²⁸ As I explored in my analysis of *The Sportswriter*, such imaginative acts are not comparable to a deference to abstraction. They are the means by which exigency and uncertainty are dealt with. So it is that *Independence Day* begins with Frank acknowledging a "wild world" just beyond Haddam's "perimeter." In doing so, he casts himself as different to a number of his fellow Haddamites: when he says that "I believe that they'll never get used to [it]" and that "they'll die before accommodating" themselves to it (5), the implication is that Frank feels quite differently and is very willing to countenance a changing suburban landscape. Whilst Frank recounts that Haddam is becoming, in many of its residents' defensive reactions to changing economic circumstances, a town that exhibits the behaviour of an ailing listed company (5), he himself prefers to take his chances with contingency. As he says when expanding on the functioning of market economies, "The premise is that you're presented with what you might've thought you didn't want, but what's available" with the challenge being to "start finding ways to feel good about it and yourself" (41). Later, when talking to Mr. Tanks, a truck driver Frank meets whilst on his way to pick up his son, Paul, Frank concludes that Mr. Tanks' desire to move from California to Connecticut is one that is explicable in the sense of it "having to do with the character of eventuality" and "not rust-belt economics or the downturn in per-square foot

²⁸

Bonetti, "Interview with Richard Ford," in, Guagliardo, ed., *Conversations*, 21.

residential in the Hartford-Waterbury metroplex” (204). Being a realtor allows Frank, paradoxically, to keep himself at a distance from the dictates of the economy, and he is always happy to find people like Mr. Tanks who understand, in a way some of the entrenched Haddamites do not, that there is more to a spatiality than simply its exchange value.

Some critics of the novel have taken it to be exclusively concerned with mapping the contours of this economically perilous “wild world”. For this group of readers, Ford's exploration of the theme of independence reflects a sense that American society has become one of diminished expectations with the novel's representation of the celebrations of the titular holiday revealing the ways in which 'getting on' in America at the end of the twentieth century is only possible through the pursuit of selfish gratifications.

For Nick Gillespie, *Independence Day* is a novel that advances a “funereal vision”;²⁹ for Catherine Jurca, it “pivots on the sacrifices people are willing to make to protect themselves and their property,” and the novel is read as proof of “a further literature of suburban victimisation, in which characters mourn the spiritual hollowness of their lives.”³⁰ The risk lies in misreading Frank's fealty to the epiphanies provided by the everyday and, rather than seeing such a disposition as the means by which Frank re-makes his environment, seeing him instead as a narrator who indulges in “endless naval-watching” thereby “tak[ing] suburban self-

²⁹ Nick Gillespie, “Bye-Bye American Pie,” *Reason*, December 1996. Accessed online, 27/06/10: (<http://reason.com/archives/1996/12/01/bye-bye-american-pie>).

³⁰ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 171.

consciousness and self-pity to a new level.”³¹

By contrast, my reading is predicated on a belief that the various tactics and strategies Frank employs in order to better understand his suburban environment are not symptoms of self-absorption. In *Independence Day*, his relationship with suburban space is ego-free to the extent that it enables him to come to a fresh understanding of what it means to be independent in a culture where independence is synonymous with a withdrawal from society. Indeed, the many interviews that Ford has given on the genesis of *Independence Day* reveal that his intention was to do more than make the novel a reflection of a socio-cultural moment that seemingly engenders interpersonal dysfunction and atomisation. Instead, Ford asserts, the novel is an attempt to reconsider the nature of independence in order to see if it is not only compatible with community-mindedness but integral to it. In an interview from 1996, the year following *Independence Day*'s publication, Ford confided that in writing the novel he was “interested in how and if the historical brand of independence upon which the country is founded had any peculiar relevance to how independence is achieved subjectively.” He hazards that “Human independence is not so much founded on wanting to cut yourself off ... but ... to make other hints of rapport, other kinds of relations.”³²

At the outset of *Independence Day*, in typically arch fashion, Frank takes to referring to his particular brand of pragmatism as “the Existence

³¹ Catherine Jurca, “Tales of the Suburb,” in Daniel Rubey, ed., *Redefining Suburban Studies: Searching for New Paradigms* (Hofstra: National Center for Suburban Studies, 2009), 176-177.

³² Graham Thompson and Dick Ellis, “Interview with Richard Ford,” 107.

Period.” Belief in the “general remedies of persistence, jettisoning, common sense, resilience, [and] good cheer” (390), it is a philosophy that emerges from the mindset Frank evinces in *The Sportswriter*. However, as the name suggests, the tenets of the Existence Period throw up some conceptual problems for Frank in that they require him occasionally to “ignore much of what ... [he] do[es]n't like” (10) in order to get by. It is this incipient trend towards withdrawal that Frank will row back from in the course of the novel, something that Ford subtly gestures towards through its structure.

A few pages in, and just before Frank confesses to the more problematic aspects of living the Existence Period life, he has a perfunctory telephone conversation with his girlfriend, Sally. She calls in the middle of the night when, according to Frank, “little good begins”. As Sally observes, Frank “do[es]n't seem too engaged” and he puts the phone down after just a couple of minutes of talking. Frank ignores the call as something that “seems worrisome or embroiling” (10). This seemingly trivial episode takes on significance when counterpointed with a similar one on the final page of the novel. Narrating in the present of Independence Day morning, Frank recalls how his sleep was disturbed by another phone call in the middle of the night. This time the caller does not reveal their identity and all that Frank hears is “the sound of someone going, 'Ssss, tsss. Uh-huh, uh-huh,' followed by an even deeper and less certain 'Ummm.’” In contrast to his reaction when Sally calls at the beginning of the narrative, Frank responds enthusiastically: “I'm glad you called ... Now's not a bad time at all ... Let me hear your thinking” (451). There is no intelligible

answer but Frank is convinced “someone was there I felt I knew” and despite the caller hanging up, Frank contentedly returns to the “deepest sleep imaginable” (451). In the next paragraph – the novel's final one – Frank is immersed in the Haddam Independence Day crowd; he “see[s] the sun above the street, breathe[s] the day's rich, warm smell” and his “heartbeat quickens” as he “feel[s] the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451). Ford renders this final paragraph deliberately ambiguous in that it is not clear whether Frank is narrating from the present and being swept along by Independence Day celebrations, or whether this is an anticipatory dream of the Haddam celebrations to come, a dream that has come on the back of his receipt of the enigmatic phone call. Either way, it seems Frank has arrived at a sense of independence that does not require him to withdraw from others. However one reads this, though, it is clear that Ford frames the narrative so that it ends with a deliberate echo of Frank's earlier conversation with Sally, and that the disparity between Frank's reactions is indicative of the narrative change in Frank. This requires a more generous assessment of the novel than previously advanced.

Frank conceptualises his work as a realtor in terms that flatly oppose a reading of the novel which sees him as another smug, venal suburbanite selling houses out of a sense of superiority and a desire to amass more money than is necessary to live a worthwhile life. For Frank, realty is akin to counselling. On the Friday before the Independence Day holiday weekend, Frank narrates that he has an appointment with some clients, Joe and Phyllis Markham, lower middle-class naifs who are

looking to move to the area from Vermont. Frank relates the tortured history of their house search – he has been showing them houses in the Haddam area since March – yet he does so in a sympathetic, if slightly wearied manner. Part of his service to the Markhams is to address “that feeling of not knowing” the “fears” that “come quaking and quivering into clients’ hearts” in this sort of scenario (43). Writing about *The Sportswriter*, Joanna Price posits that the novel takes Frank “on an odyssey through suburban culture, where he has a series of encounters with the ‘otherness’ which suburbia purports to exclude.”³³ This observation is equally pertinent to *Independence Day*: through his altruistic concern for the misguided Markhams, Frank actively champions the kinds of people who might otherwise find suburbia to be a space that is simply not negotiable. For similar reasons, Frank decides to become a landlord in the long-established black neighborhood of Haddam, Wallace Hill. Explaining his decision, Frank says, “I wanted the neighborhood to stay intact, with housing available and affordable for the people who lived there” (29). Being a landlord in Wallace Hill means “reinvesting” in his community, “providing affordable housing options, maintaining a neighborhood integrity ... and establishing a greater sense of connectedness” (27).

Frank sees himself, then, as not just a real estate agent, but an agent of social change: he just wants to get on with the job of “lifting sagging spirits, opening fresh, unexpected choices, and offering much-needed assistance toward life’s betterment” (47). Later on, during a phone

³³ Price, 137.

conversation with Frank, Phyllis Markham, using a malapropism that is highly suggestive of how she, at least, views his efforts, refers to Frank as a “relator” rather than a realtor (189). There is a distinctly spatial aspect to Frank's optimism. He is eager to avoid a scenario where the Markhams “dribble off elsewhere” to another agent, but the reason he gives is not solely to do with the fear of a lost sale, although that is a factor. Frank is equally keen that the Markhams avoid a situation where they just “end up buying the first shitty split-level they see” (47). Frank's hope that the Markhams open their minds to the possibilities on offer in the changing suburban spaces of the Haddam area is buttressed by a concern that they don't misapprehend what is available on the basis of an unattainable, clichéd fantasy.

Thus, as far as Frank is concerned, the Markhams are experiencing problems of perception. Whilst in Frank's mind house-buying should “easily be one of life's most hopeful optional experiences,” for Joe Markham it represents the risk of ending up “just like the other schmo” (57). Frank diagnoses in the Markhams a form of “pioneer anxiety” (58), a relationship with space that renders them unwilling to settle down for fear of “being tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture” (57). As I will show in the next section of this chapter that focuses on *The Lay of the Land*, understanding suburban space as an expression of an overweening desire to consume contains within it the seeds of its own unravelling – an inescapable sense of disappointment at expectations not met. Unlike the Markhams, Frank does not believe that space can ever be perfectly realised, or that it remains static in its aspect. He has learned

that space is produced through provisionality, through a series of “optional experiences.” For Frank, making a choice and living with it is preferable to living in fear of ever making a choice. In a statement which echoes an earlier one about learning to live in a market economy which burdens the consumer with the responsibility of making the right call, Frank counsels Joe Markham: “I don't think you're the kind of guy to fashion life by avoiding mistakes. You make choices and live with them, even if you don't feel like you've chosen a damn thing” (66).

Whilst Frank and Joe are debating the merits of Penns Neck, Ford scripts an amusing yet highly revealing episode which questions the whole notion of a stereotypical spatiality. In the course of his conversation with Joe, Frank spots “across the picture-window space” of the house across the way the confounding sight of a woman walking “totally in the buff, a big protuberant pair of white breasts leading the way, her arms out Isadora Duncan style, her good, muscular legs leaping and striding like a painting on an antique urn” (66). As pointed out in the introduction, in postwar analyses the picture window became a resonant symbol of the empty promise and stifling oppression of suburban life, functioning metonymically as a key to understanding the entirety of mass experience. But in this instance the picture window throws up for Frank “mystery and the unexpected” suggesting (with pun no doubt intended) that Penns Neck has “hidden assets” (66). Tellingly, however, Joe misses the display having grumpily and incredulously departed for the front door of his prospective new house. Although Frank is taken with this strange occurrence, and sees it as a promising sign of what Penns Neck has to offer, fundamentally his

outlook differs from the Markhams in the way that he views space as perpetually in process; as he remarks to Phyllis, “You *are* best off ... trying to bring life to a place, not just depending on the place to supply it for you” (76).

After the viewing in Penns Neck is concluded, Frank takes the Markhams back to their motel via a new development called Mallards Landing where speculative capital has been engaged in a venture designed to offer the sort of setting that in Frank's opinion looks “like a movie façade where a fictionalized American family would someday pay the fictionalized mortgage” (83). This is not a viewing as such, but what Frank terms a “negative inducement” for Joe and Phyllis, an attempt to place the house in Penns Neck into a wider context. This strategy confirms Frank as someone who can see through the “propaganda” of the suburban way of life and, as Joanna Price contends, it is “through this ... [suburban] lens ... [that] the intrinsic instability of the determination of everyday life by consumer culture is revealed.”³⁴

More than this, though, Ford continues to present Frank as a man who both understands this fallacy, and has a programme for doing something about it. Following his less than satisfactory outing with his clients, Frank concludes that “gazing at everything *else* as penetratingly as possible in the conviction that everything out there more or less stands for you,” as Joe and Phyllis have been doing on their search, is a fool's errand. Rather, Frank asserts, “with home-buying as your goal, there's no real getting around a certain self-viewing” (89); clearly, for Frank, getting your

³⁴ Price, 138.

own metaphorical house in order is paramount before one can even hope to engage with the spaces of a new residence:

the only thing that'll save them is to figure out a way to think about themselves and most everything else *differently*; formulate fresh understandings based on the faith that for new fires to kindle, old ones have to be dashed ... [in order that they can] hold forth on the subject of change and how anybody's a coward who can't do it ... a philosophy naturally honed on ... [their] own life experiences (which include divorce, inadequate parenting practices, adultery, self-importance, and *spatial dislocation* [my emphasis] (90).

The fact that Ford has Frank include “spatial dislocation” in this list of prosaic life experiences only serves to emphasise the fact that it is a problem that is remediable with the same sort of resolve and acceptance as, for example, divorce. In postsuburban New Jersey the fantasy of suburban life that the Markhams cling to is nowhere to be found (if it ever existed at all); this, as Frank pithily concludes, is “reality speaking English. To get anywhere you have to learn to speak the same language back” (90). With a more even-handed view of what the suburbs mean, and a willingness to embrace their everyday idiom, Frank believes – after his own experience – that it's possible to move from the position of “a spectral presence, like a ship cruising foggy banks,” to that of “a guy who shares a scuzzy joke with the Neapolitan produce man, who knows exactly the haircut he'll get at Barber's barbershop but goes there anyway ... [and] who's voted for more than three mayors.” All this, “by reason of Haddam's or any suburb's capacity to accommodate any but the rankest outsider (a special lenience which can make us miss even the most impersonal housing tract or condo development)” (94).

This idea that Frank sees his environment as founded on the capacity of its socio-spatial configuration to absorb change confounds, for

example, Barbara Ehrenreich's position on the novel which sees it as a narrative of Frank's failure "to focus on the humans in his life," something Ehrenreich believes is "partly because he's dazzled by the suburban detritus all around."³⁵ Yet, contrary to this view, Frank's focus on the Markhams is primarily motivated by a desire for them to resist thinking of space in abstracted terms and settle into the Haddam area as agents of the production of space.

Through Frank Ford is not concerned with reporting the ways in which space impacts upon cognition, but suggests ways in which space might be transformed through human thought and action. Recounting the events of the three years that have elapsed since the end of *The Sportswriter*, Frank tells the reader about his ex-wife's decision to remarry. Now referring to her by name, as opposed to simply X, Frank allows that Ann's commitment to her new husband, Charley O'Dell, and their subsequent move to Deep River, Connecticut, prompts him to move out of the house he shared with her and their children and where he has remained post-divorce, and into the house Ann and the children have been living in. As Frank explains:

no sooner had Ann solemnized her retreaded vows than I plunged forward with my own plans ... to purchase her house on Cleveland Street ... and to get rid of my big old soffit-sagging half-timber on Hoving Road, where I'd lived nearly every minute of my life in Haddam and where I mistakenly thought I could live forever, but which now seemed to be one more commitment holding me back.

³⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, "Realty Bites," *New Republic*, September 18 & 25, 213 (1995), 51. Ehrenreich continues that *Independence Day* is about a "post-heroic America ... [and that] Frank's less-than-heroic life is redeemed, according to the conventions of the settling genre [a lineage of narratives about WASP suburban males that she traces back through John Updike, John Cheever, and Sloan Wilson], by the splendor of his sensibility, the sheer richness of his perceptions." I would argue that, in fact, Frank offers an alternative model of small-scale heroism based on an understanding of his own limitations positioned, nonetheless, within a broader context of a belief in human agency.

Houses can have this almost authorial power over us, seeming to ruin or make perfect our lives just by persisting in one place longer than we can. (In either case it's a power worth defeating. [106])

He recognises that the anguished feelings he is experiencing at Hoving Road can be “defeated” by changing the terms of his relationship to his domestic space, in the process reflecting that a lot of the power attributed to certain spaces comes not from the spaces themselves, but from the emotions and feelings projected onto them by their occupier.

This is evidenced further when Frank summarises the experiences that have brought him to this point. On his way to visit current girlfriend Sally Caldwell for a Friday evening by the Jersey Shore, Frank's detour takes him past Pheasant Meadow where Vicki used to reside. Frank discloses that the development “seems so plainly the native architecture of lost promise and early death,” before catching himself and – signalled by Ford's use of parenthesis – qualifying his observation by saying “it's possible I'm being too harsh, since not even so long ago, I ... was a suitor to love there myself” (142). In this way Ford uses Frank's digression to stress the way in which a particular spatiality is always imbued with the resonance of social relations. Indeed, on arriving at Sally's, and whilst awaiting her return from work, Frank goes on to assert that it is “a patent lesson of the realty profession ... to cease sanctifying places – houses, beaches, hometowns ... We may feel they *ought* to, *should* confer something ... but they don't ... Place means nothing” (151-2). Later, when the events of his Independence Day weekend are behind him, Frank is surer than ever of his stance:

it's worth asking again: is there any cause to think a place – any place – within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative

essence *ever* shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?

No! Not one bit! Only other humans do that ... We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options (442).

It is advice Frank Wheeler could have done with.

Ford, then, casts Frank, as someone who negotiates space through the use of his imagination, a point I first made in connection with his outlook in *The Sportswriter*. As such, Ford establishes Charley O'Dell as the polar opposite of Frank. Charley, a country club Republican and architect, venerates space and place as being affirmative of individual success and achievement; Frank, on the other hand, disparages the O'Dell home in an exclusive part of Connecticut as a “compound” (254). Such an appropriation of space as an adjunct to a foundational worldview that prohibits mutability and change is a failure of that imagination, and results in what Frank disparagingly refers to as the “usual enclave[s] of self-contented, pseudo-reclusive richies who've erected humungous houses ... their backs resolutely turned to how the other half lives” (239). While for Charley “strict physical moorings” constitute “life and no doubt truth” (284), for Frank, such conservative worldviews are a betrayal of the capacity for toleration and adaptability: “almost everything – e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g is not really made up of “views” but words, which, should you not like them, you can change” (248). Frank actively seeks to create the spaces around him through his own engaged subjectivity. Thus, his admission that, post-divorce, he “stayed put where ... [he] more or less knew my place, Haddam, New Jersey” (242), and the double-meaning therein, points to the manner in which a habitat is constructed by a mindset, as

much as a mindset is constructed by a habitat. In Haddam, Frank knows both the geographical contours of his suburban home, and the psychological contours of his existence there.

The final pages of *Independence Day* recount Frank's experience of the preparations for the Haddam Independence Day celebrations with Ford constructing it as a means by which Frank can reflect on the previous three days' happenings.

One of the first things that Frank relays to the reader is a story in the local newspaper detailing the discovery in Haddam of a “whole human skeleton” unearthed by a worker installing a new sewer line. According to the town historian, the remains are thought to be very old and competing theories as to the skeleton's provenance have sprung up: some think the bones are that of a “female Negro servant” who disappeared a hundred years earlier when Frank's block was a dairy farm; others think that the remains are those of an Italian construction worker killed in an industrial accident in the 1920s (409). Given my contention that *Independence Day* is a novel that undermines the idea of suburbia as a static, homogeneous spatiality, it seems to me that Ford includes what Frank refers to as the “Haddam story” in order to stress the way in which Haddam acts as a palimpsest of the different historical accretions of socially produced space.

Calling by the dig site near his home, Frank characterises the work of the archaeological team as a search “for signs of history and continuance.” Yet, on inspecting the trench Frank experiences the bathetic sight of “the McPhersons' big black tom, Gordy, covering up his private business with patience” and he concludes that “Time, forward and back,

seems suddenly not of the essence on my street” (438). History and continuance, Ford seems to suggest, are merely the sum of many shifting presents, and trying to capture or imagine the essence of a space at a particular time in the past or future is an inherently impossible task. Frank “ease[s] away having found out nothing, but not at all dissatisfied” (438).

This conclusion of Frank's is further explored in the eventual fate of the Markhams in the novel's concluding section. Having failed to find a property they feel comfortable buying, Joe and Phyllis accede to Frank's suggestion that they rent one of the houses Frank owns in Haddam's black neighbourhood, Wallace Hill. Frank states, “it's ennobling to help others face their hard choices, pilot them toward a reconciliation with life (it's useful in piloting toward one's own)” (415). With the details of the move finalised, Frank observes that “in fifteen minutes the Markhams have become longtime residents” of the area as “an earnest, almost equable acceptance” descends on them. He notes that “certain fires have gone out,” with “other, smaller ones being ignited” (421-2). With a new mindset in evidence, Frank remarks that it's “encouraging to see how quickly and tidily permanence asserts its illusion and begins to confer a bounty” (421).

As Frank continues his tour around town observing the build-up to the Independence Day celebrations he notes with some sadness and alarm the gradual commercialisation of suburban Haddam, a theme to which *The Lay of the Land* returns. Lefebvre reminds us that it is inconceivable that “the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched” and, sure enough, scrutiny of the town's public space reveals the presence of a multitude of

corporate businesses, from Pet Depot to The Gap, sure signs of the pervasiveness of the market economy's power. And yet, Lefebvre also points out that space is “more than the passive locus of social relations,” and that these interconnections are forged in direct response to the permeation of space by hegemonic forces.³⁶ It is telling that despite the “actual civic razzmatazz still ... [being] a good hour off” the Frenchy's Gulf, the August Inn, the Garden State S&L are all closed or closing, and “farther on and across from Village Hall on Haddam Green there is action, with plenty of citizens already arrived in good spirits,” with a “red-and-white striped carnival marquee ... up in the open middle sward” (427). As celebrations get under way with a parachute display, Frank imagines the parachutists, because “reason would have it they're not *just* men,” as “kidney-transplant survivors, AIDS patients, unwed mothers, ex-gamblers or the children of any of these” (437). In this moment he again displays empathy with the suburban crowd he is part of but separate from.

Ford makes much of Frank's belief in having a sense of civic good and of also acting as “a bystander, a watcher, one of those whom civic substance and display are meant to serve – the public” (424). With Frank “feel[ing] the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” at the narrative's endpoint, the more solipsistic elements of the Existence Period concept have by now fallen away. As Tamas Dobozsy has written, the novel charts Frank's realisation that independence is “a readiness to recognise one's agency, as distinct from set (universal, metaphysical) laws and systems,” but that, nonetheless, his suburban existence can only be understood “in

³⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11.

terms of co-authorship” with “the text produced as one that is ever unfinished, ever in process.”³⁷ In one of the novel's most poignant final details, Frank tells of his encounter with Carter Knott, someone he considers no more than an old acquaintance from the days when he was a member of the Divorced Men's Club. Frank's conversation with Carter takes him aback, however, when he realises that Carter is “in the know” about what has been going on his life, despite the fact that they rarely see each other any more. The meeting takes place within view of Frank's old house on Hoving Road in which the Bascombes had been a family, and Frank reports that “A surprising pang circuits through me ... and I'm suddenly afraid I may yield to what I said I wouldn't yield to over a simple domicile – sadness displacement, lack of sanction.” However, Frank catches himself and avows that “by using Carter's presence ... [he] can fight it back” (445).

Independence Day's narrative functions around Frank's discovery of a new definition of independence rooted in a more civic-minded spirit; in Elinor Ann Walker's phrase, “*in dependence*, discovering something of what it means to be *independent*.”³⁸ I have tried to show that Frank's eventual balancing of this tension cannot be understood apart from his spatial sense and that, far from rendering him complicit with market forces, Frank's status as a realtor gives him an understanding of space which allows him to reject abstractions in favour of a conviction that social relations are integral to its production. Ultimately, it is lived life and

³⁷ Tamas Dobozsy, “How Not to Be a 'Dickhead': Partisan Politics in Richard Ford's *Independence Day*,” *Critical Survey* 18, no. 1 (2006): 46, 52.

³⁸ Elinor Ann Walker, *Richard Ford* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), 134.

human interaction that invests space and place with ultimate significance. In the next, and final, section of this chapter, my analysis of *The Lay of the Land* will explore the development of both the postsuburban landscape, and Frank's attitude towards it.

Twelve years after the events of *Independence Day* as the third Bascombe novel, *The Lay of the Land*, opens, Frank's circumstances are greatly changed. He is living in Sea-Clift on the Jersey Shore, and is married to Sally, although the reappearance in her life of her previously missing, declared dead, husband, Wally, sees her leave Frank to come to terms with events. Frank's children are both living away from New Jersey. Ann, meanwhile, following Charley's death, is back living in Haddam. Frank has left Lauren-Schwindell and has set up his own firm, Realty-Wise, with a Tibetan-American called Mike Mahoney. Most significantly in terms of the bearing it has on his narrative, Frank is suffering from prostate cancer and has recently undergone a course of treatment.

In *The Lay of the Land* Frank presents himself to the reader as a “citizen scientist” (22) dissecting and examining the landscape around him. With his views on the world established following the events of *Independence Day*, Frank has entered what he refers to, in familiar nomenclature, as the “Permanent Period” of his life. Despite living on the very edge of the continent, Frank sees life at Sea-Clift as being on “a steadier footing” (27), with the central imperative of the Permanent Period

that “we try to *be* what we *are* in the present” (31). In this definition The Permanent Period is “specifically commissioned to make you quit worrying about your own existence and how everything devolves on your *self* ... and get you busy doin' and bein'” (73).

This philosophy of Frank's may be read in stark contrast to what he perceives as the “malign force” of the turn-of-the century economy, a market that seems to be “in full control of every bit of real property on the seaboard ... holding property hostage and away from the very people who wanted and often badly needed it” (85). Thus, in *The Lay of the Land*, the “redemptive theme in the civic drama” of renting or acquiring a home – a theme so evident in the way Frank personally practises real estate in *Independence Day* – has been lost. This shift in the trilogy may be usefully read through Lefebvre's claim that “physical space has no 'reality' without the energy that is deployed within it,” because the “modalities of this deployment,” or the “spatial practice” of a society is derived from the mutually interdependent forces of “representations of space” (the conceptualised space of “planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers”) and “representational spaces” (the space that is “directly *lived*” by its inhabitants, the space “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate”).³⁹ The attitude that pervades socio-spatial relations in postsuburban New Jersey means that the resistance to the dominating force of the market is faltering. Instead of recognising what Frank acknowledges as the “transitory essence of everything” (207) or that “belonging and fitting in, of making a claim and settling down is at best

³⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 13, 38-9.

ephemeral” and that being ephemeral “relieves us of stodgy house-holder officialdom and renders us free to be our own most current selves” (209), Frank sees a bewildering urge in the population at large to relent to the market and to pay for a sense of permanence which the market can never truly bestow.

This is presented as one of the reasons why Frank has left Haddam for Sea-Clift: Haddam has fractured into a community controlled by special interest groups (“Boro government had turned all-female and become mean as vipers. Regulations and ordinances spewed out of the council chamber, and litigation was on everyone's lips” [89]). It has evolved into a community whose members no longer see a home as “a natural extension of what was wanted from life” (90) but an expression of the fact that “Housing is Haddam's commerce” (32). With Haddam having “entered a new, strange and discordant phase in its town annals” (84), Frank finds in Sea-Clift, by contrast, “a town with just a life, not a lifestyle” (268).

But Ford further emphasises the corrupting influence of the market's role in the production of space by inserting into Sea-Clift a couple Frank refers to as the “Toxic Feensters” (209). Newly rich following a state lottery win, the Feensters have moved down to Sea-Clift from Connecticut. However, their dedication to property as a mark of status has meant that, as far as Frank is concerned, they “got detached from their sense of useful longing” (210). Their “showy white house” is “marred by warning signs about towing and pit bulls and dangerous but fallacious riptides, their twin aqua-and-white '56 Corvettes [are] in the driveway, where they can be

admired by people” (209). When, in a finale to the novel that functions almost as a *deus ex machina*, the Feensters are shot by Russian gangsters and Frank is unwittingly caught in the crossfire, Ford strains the limits of realism to symbolically condemn the couple's implication in a way of life that privileges money over all else.

Despite his sense that postsuburban society in New Jersey is more in thrall to the market's “representations of space” than it should be, Frank nevertheless still seeks to enrich himself through pragmatic, optimistic choice. He declares that “a lot of life is just plain wrong” but that “all you can do about it ... is just start getting used to it, start selecting amazement over bewilderment” (141). Frank describes himself as a “lifelong practitioner of choices” (144) and he remains convinced that a postsuburban topography, and the “multi-use society” as he terms it, does offer scope for contentment. It is precisely this landscape that offers what Frank sees as the positivist principle that best defines American culture: the idea that one can “leave, and then ... arrive in a better state” (337). “Sometimes,” Frank proclaims, “a new vista, a new house number, a new place of employ, a new set of streets to navigate and master are all you need to [paradoxically] simplify life and take a new lease out on it.” Whilst, in the current febrile economic climate Frank acknowledges that real estate “might seem to be all about moving and picking up stakes and disruption and three-moves-equals-a-death,” he posits that it is “really about arriving and destinations, and all the prospects that await you or might await you in some place you never thought about” (336-7).

One of the concerns of Ford's novel is to unpack the theme of

development. In Frank's estimation, real estate development should be synonymous with personal development. As such, Frank is avowedly not anti-development. For example, whilst he is driving with Mike to meet a builder proposing to construct a new estate in the Haddam environs (a project about which he is highly sceptical), Frank remarks that he likes to see “the view of landscape in use” (36), just as he likes, metaphorically, to see his own existential vistas fully realised (“to seek and also to find” [13]). But what Frank most disdains is the “sprawl business” (38), which he views as the unnecessary swelling of the housing stock in the service of extending the “wealth belt” (37) that is slowly constricting the area:

It gives me the grims to think of what we humans do that no one's life depends on, and always drives me right out the door into the street with ... my head spinning. It's no different from ... [the] idea of putting up magnum-size “homes” on two-acre lots with expectations of luring hard-charging young radiologists and probate lawyers who'd really be just as happy to go on living where they live and who need six thousand square feet like they need a bone in their nose (401).

Frank offers the reader a nuanced view of commercial development which “involves not just what something *ought* to cost ... but what something *can* cost in a world still usable by human beings” (86). In other words, Frank disdains “the millennial free-enterprise canon in which the customer's a bit-part player to the larger drama of gross accumulation” (327); instead, Frank sees the prospect of “commerce with no likelihood of significant growth or sky-rocketing appreciation” as a “precious bounty” (399).

As in *Independence Day*, real estate becomes a vocation for Frank, not a profession, and one with a responsibility to “leave the client better than I found him – or her.” Indeed, Frank sees his role as having “a lay

therapist's fiduciary responsibility" and believes a "version" of the "perfect real estate experience" would be one in which "Everyone does his part, but no house changes hands" (270). In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* Terry Eagleton argues that socialism and postmodernism "Both believe in a history which would be one of plurality, free play, plasticity, open-endedness," but that socialism aims "to release the sensuous particularity of use-value from the metaphysical prison of exchange value."⁴⁰ In many respects, this is precisely the balance that Frank seeks in the postsuburban spatiality he inhabits. Reflecting further on the contractor's offer to Mike to get involved with the development of the cornfield site, Frank states baldly that flattening such places "for seven-figure mega-mansions isn't after all, really *helping* people in the way that assisting them to find a modest home they want – and that's already there – helps them" (198).

As someone suffering from cancer, Frank's brush with his own mortality only serves to make him more keen to help others, an instinct that he first really displays in *Independence Day*. The perspective that Frank brings to his self-appointed role of "citizen scientist" is indubitably influenced by "Getting out on the short end of the branch leaves," having discovered that the effect of his cancer "(little-d death, after all)" has made him "a lot more interested in other people's woes, with a view to helping with improvements" (96).

Remarkably, given both his condition and the tradition in a notable number of suburban fictions of self-absorbed middle-aged suburban men, Frank is far more concerned about the lot of others. Frank rails against

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Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 64.

what he deems a “fourth-grade perception” that sees houses ‘hailing’ people through the mechanism of a market economy, and resulting in a situation in which “we all live in houses we didn’t choose and that chose us because they were built to somebody else’s specifications” (254). Frank hopes that this imbalance can be corrected so that “humans buy houses to live in them, or so other people will” (418), a “housing concept which permits no one ever to feel he was *meant* to be here, and so [therefore] is happy to be, and happier yet to pack up and go when the spirit moves him or her” (412).

In his profession, Frank works towards a fundamental change in people’s conception of socio-spatial relations through a variety of personal interventions. He remains very idiosyncratic in these matters and tells the reader that he continues, for example, to eat at the Haddam Doctors Hospital, his “best-choice solo-luncheon venue” since moving away from town. Although he admits it’s odd to lunch in a hospital, “Form needn’t always follow function” (77) and his stop-offs always leave him with a feeling that he has “just had a human, not an institutional, experience” (78). Once again, in the final novel in the trilogy, Ford scripts Frank as an incongruous figure, a man apart from other men of his demographic. When a bomb goes off at the hospital and Frank is forced to evacuate the building, he is asked about his business there by a police officer. The answer he is tempted to give when questioned by the uncomprehending official is testament to Frank’s perception that spaces derive their meaning in the most part from the way they are socially reproduced: “I know it’s a hospital, but the cafeteria is a super place for lunch” (80).

As well as amplifying his concern for others, one of the effects of Frank's illness is to cause him to need to go to the toilet more often. Consequently, he has often had to urinate furtively behind conveniently located "7-Elevens, Wawas, Food Giants and Holiday Inn, Jrs." But, if Frank's altruism is based on his worries that "everyday life remains in thrall to abstract space" it is also possible to read these pit-stops as more than just Ford drawing comedy from Frank's circumstances. They may be understood as manifestations of small acts of resistance by Frank towards the abstracted spaces of capital, acts of resistance "purchased ... with the cringing knowledge that ... [he] could get arrested for doing it" but which, nonetheless, makes Frank feel "alive and vibrant" (186).

If *The Lay of the Land* is a novel organised around the idea of understanding what a person should be thankful for, its conclusion leaves the reader in no doubt of the importance of the production of a spatiality that is more mindful of people than the market. Recovered from his gunshot wound, and with Sally restored to him, the narrative's final scene recalls a scene from *The Sportswriter* when, returning from a trip to Detroit with Vicki, Frank spies the New Jersey turnpike from the window of the plane and remarks that he thinks "it's beautiful from up here" (183). Given his propensity back then to glory in the banal as a means of re-orienting his divorce-shocked self, it is telling that, at the end of the trilogy, as Frank lands in Rochester where his cancer clinic is located, he makes no such observation about the "meaningful mystery" of the landscape when viewed from afar. Instead what Frank records are "the bundled figures of the other humans coming into clear focus as we descend. Some are

watching, gaping up, some are waving. Some turn their backs to us. Some do not notice us as we touch the ground.” Then, with “A bump, a roar, a heavy thrust forward into life again ... we resume our human scale upon the land” (485).

At the end of a seventeen-year immersion in the changing New Jersey landscapes he has called home, nothing is more important than the understanding that the true measurement of any particular geography has to incorporate human needs, weaknesses, and desires. Frank's narrative in *The Lay of the Land* offers a bittersweet perspective: largely in agreement with business partner Mike's Buddhist-inflected wisdom that “we're all fathers of ourselves and the world's the result of our doing” (20), Frank laments the fact that much of the postsuburban environment is an empty reflection of society's acquiescence to the forces of the late capitalist economy. But he retains hope that “our doing” might yet result in a different world. Frank's tone is consistent with the voice in which he relays the lessons learned in the course of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. Despite the concerns he harbours from the vantage point of the year 2000, he is still convinced that an imaginative engagement with space can generate a spatiality that is more than a reflection of acquisitiveness. From the perspective of someone who has been close to death, he allows himself a certain measure of contentment that, through his work as a realtor, he has embraced an ethical stance that enables him to understand his surroundings on a “human scale.” As such, this chapter conceives of the trilogy in opposing terms to Kathy Knapp's view that *The Lay of the Land* is a “serious challenge” to the way in which

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* “participate ... fully in the established suburban literary tradition.”⁴¹ As outlined in the Introduction, Knapp’s thesis asserts 9/11 as a major break in the way that fiction has treated the suburbs and, accordingly, her argument categorises the first two Bascombe novels as being radically different to the last. What I hope to have shown in this chapter, however, is that all three fictions do not only reflect structures of feeling contained in the larger national culture, whether hostile to the suburbs or nervous of threats to American exceptionalism. Instead, the trilogy as a whole, and Frank in particular, points to the way that spatialities can be negotiated through self-awareness.

So far, my focus has been on fictions that concern white middle-class men, although I have argued that the narratives under investigation do much more than represent such figures unproblematically as self-absorbed victims of their north-eastern suburban/postsuburban environments. In the next chapter I want to widen the scope of my investigation by considering a novel and some short-stories that represent postsuburban America as a phenomenon that is far removed from suburbia’s narrowly defined socio-cultural and geographical origins.

⁴¹ Kathy Knapp, “Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 American Novel,” in, *American Literary History*, 23 (2011), 504.

CHAPTER 3

Into the Postsuburban Third Space: The Immigrant Experience in T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* and Junot Díaz's *Drown*

More immigrants entered America in the 1990s than in any previous decade in American history: between the years 1990 and 2000, 11 million people arrived there to make new lives and by the end of the decade the immigrant population totaled 31 million.¹ Of these new arrivals, a majority settled in metropolitan destinations outside of the central city in a trend that grew more apparent over the course of the decade. In 1990, approximately 1.5 million immigrants settled in greater metropolitan areas, whilst 1.2 million settled in the central city; in 2000, approximately 3.2 million settled in greater metropolitan areas, whilst 2.5 million settled in the central city.²

In this chapter I will show how T. C. Boyle's 1995 novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, and certain of the short stories in Junot Díaz's collection *Drown*, published a year later in 1996, represent the immigrant

¹ Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short, and Thomas J Vicino, *Cities and Suburbs: New Metropolitan Realities in the US* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 132; Audrey Singer, "Twenty-First-Century Gateways: An Introduction," in, Audrey Singer, Susan W. Hardwick, and Caroline B. Brettell, eds., *Twenty-First-Century Gateways: Immigrant Incorporation in Suburban America* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 3.

² Singer, in, Singer et al., 15.

experience in two distinct types of postsuburban landscape: the exurb and the inner-ring suburb.

As Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short, and Thomas J Vicino have averred, “The variation in the distribution of immigrant suburbs across metropolitan space points to the increasing complexity of the metropolitan US.”³ As their work in urban theory demonstrates, the different ethnicities now established outside of the central city, as well as the variety of different types of metropolitan space in which these groups are found, means that conceiving of a single, undifferentiated suburbia is no longer possible. I argue that Boyle's and Díaz's fictions construct the postsuburban environment as a new site for the playing out of ideas and conceits that are undoubtedly familiar from previous literary depictions of immigrant lives, but that they extend fiction's concerns with the changing nature of the American metropolis. Whilst Hanlon et al. also identify the emergence of black and Asian immigrant suburbs, my focus in this chapter is on fictions that represent the emergence of poor Hispanic communities in postsuburbia.⁴

Both *The Tortilla Curtain* and the stories I analyse in *Drown* situate their immigrant characters in postsuburban milieus that are commonly associated with middle-class white people: in the former the area in and around an exclusive gated community in the canyons of the western fringes of metropolitan Los Angeles; in the latter, the area of New Jersey where postwar suburban developments – once established for

³ Hanlon et al., 151.

⁴ Hanlon et al. identify five different types of immigrant suburb: black; Asian; middle-class; poor, Hispanic; and, affluent. Ibid., 142 ff.

white-collar city workers and their families – are now inner-ring suburbs that have been superseded by further outward expansion.⁵ *The Tortilla Curtain* advances a vision of postsuburbia that draws explicitly on notions of assimilation, whilst the *Drown* stories engage with the imperatives of multiculturalism. Central to my argument, however, will be the idea that both Boyle and Díaz dramatise their very different postsuburban settings as spatialities in which immigrants can resist having to subordinate themselves to a particular culture, or resist having to live apart from that dominant culture in a ghettoised state. The fictions under consideration here thus represent postsuburbia as a site in which, to draw on Roger Rouse's work on Mexican migration and postmodern space,

ways of life commonly associated with the Third World are becoming increasingly apparent in a country often treated as the apogee of First World advancement. Extreme poverty, residential overcrowding and homelessness, underground economies, new forms of domestic service, and sweatshops exist side by side with yuppie affluence, futuristic office blocks, and all the other accoutrements of high-tech postindustrialism.⁶

If we view the postsuburban landscape as one of the spatial expressions of the postindustrial phase of the capitalist economy in the US then we need to recognise, as Boyle's and Díaz's works do, that the poverty and the alternative forms of entrepreneurial activity of immigrant groups are an inherent part of the way that the spatiality of postsuburbia is produced. In order to explicate this link, I want to consider *The*

⁵ Susan W. Hardwick points out that, at the time of the 2000 census, 29% of America's foreign-born population lived in older, inner-ring, or "first" suburbs. Susan W. Hardwick, "Toward a Suburban Immigrant Nation," in, Singer et al., p. 43. Hanlon et al. also use the same census data to highlight the fact that more than half of all poor Hispanic immigrants were living in rented units, and that a third of these were built in the forties and fifties. Hanlon et al., 142.

⁶ Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration: The Social Space of Postmodernism," in, *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 16.

Tortilla Curtain Curtain and the *Drown* stories alongside a body of poststructural and postcolonial theoretical work that is complementary to the way in which these narratives represent postsuburban space.

In *The The Tortilla Curtain Curtain*, T. C. Boyle portrays an undocumented Mexican couple's struggle for survival in the interstices of society in the outer limits of Los Angeles, juxtaposing their fortunes with those of an affluent Anglo couple living a fearful, self-absorbed existence behind the dubious protection of a walled development situated in Topanga Canyon, a development called Arroyo Blanco Estates. Boyle introduces Cándido Rincón when he is hit by a car driven by the male half of the novel's WASP pairing, Delaney Mossbacher. Cándido is in California with his young, pregnant wife, América, having recently braved another crossing of the border. Cándido and América are part of California's unacknowledged work force, doing a large part of the state's manual labour, whilst Delaney is a nature writer and his wife Kyra a realtor. The lives of the two couples become inextricably linked as the illegals take odd jobs working for the exurb's WASP residents, and Delaney and Kyra, and indeed the whole Arroyo Blanco community, try to come to terms with both the presence of the Mexican workforce and the harshness of the canyon environment. The novel climaxes in biblical style with a fire and a flood threatening the lives of all of those dwelling in Topanga Canyon, and with Cándido rescuing Delaney from a tumultuous landslide by pulling him to safety on the rooftop of a post office. I posit that *The The Tortilla Curtain Curtain*'s narrative shows how, through contact with the Mexican pair's incursions into the postsuburban environment, the

abstracted ideal of the Arroyo Blanco estate – an ideal founded on a quasi-colonial sense of difference – is undermined and hybridised.

Junot Díaz's short-story cycle, *Drown* is an inter-related collection of ten narratives – some set in the slums of Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, others set in the inner-ring suburbs of New Jersey. Whilst four of the stories concern the fortunes of a particular family and their efforts to establish themselves in America, the three stories I will focus on here, 'Aurora', 'Drown', and 'Edison, New Jersey' are narrated by young Dominican-American men who, given their familiarity with their environment, are, if not second-generation immigrants, seemingly figures who have been living in the U.S. for the majority of their lives. In the first of these, we follow the romantic entanglements of a drug-dealer named Lucero, who is also the story's narrator. In the collection's title story, 'Drown', the unnamed narrator is pitted against his erstwhile friend, Beto, as two people with differing perspectives on their postsuburban worlds. Lastly, in 'Edison, New Jersey', Díaz creates a first-person narrative that concerns the efforts of two pool table delivery drivers to fulfil one of their orders. In *Drown*, I will argue, the title story stands as a warning about the inhibiting nature of ghettoised thought processes, whilst 'Aurora' and 'Edison, New Jersey' are configured as narratives that celebrate the resourcefulness of their narrators.

For Rouse “Migration has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images” and Boyle's and Díaz's work gives fictional expression to the operation of the migratory process in highlighting “the social nature of spaces as something created and reproduced through

collective human agency and, in so doing, reminds us that, within the limits imposed by power, existing spatial arrangements are always susceptible to change.”⁷

Whilst, as we have seen, certain postwar suburban fictions often reinforce the idea that the suburbs of that time were socially and culturally homogenous even as they decry that fact, *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown*, in contrast, show the postsuburban landscape to be, if not the literal border associated with migration then a figurative one; that is to say a new terrain both produced by and productive of immigrant self-actualisation where, in the words of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, “the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous, internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable.”⁸ Indeed, under such circumstances, as bell hooks has argued, “home is no longer just one place, it is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.”⁹ This idea is of particular resonance for immigrant communities.

Similarly, in writing about the experience of Dominican immigrants to America, Janira Bonilla summarises that “living space after migration encompasses both the native country and the North American mainland” with the immigrant now able to “access a larger mental habitat within

⁷ Rouse, 11.

⁸ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 217.

⁹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 148.

which to configure their human identity.”¹⁰ If *The Tortilla Curtain*, in being structured around the fusing of Delaney's and Candido's perspectives, offers a hopeful vision of the postsuburban landscape as a spatiality built on mutual cooperation and the eradication of difference, then the stories in *Drown*, through their differing narrative perspectives, represent postsuburbia as a site in which the immigrant protagonists can evince a notable agency in their interactions with the host American culture. If these fictional expressions of postsuburban space offer a “larger mental habitat” and a home that allows for “varied and everchanging perspectives” we can begin to see how important *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown* are in bringing our understanding of a suburban literary tradition up-to-date. Therefore this chapter re-contextualises Homi Bhabha's theory of the “third space,” a model that emerges from Bhabha's work in the field of postcolonial studies and articulates a vision of hybridity that is brought about through the interactions of the respective cultures of the coloniser and the colonised, host and migrant, dominant and marginal.

For Bhabha, this third space is “in-between” and “displaces the histories that constitute it,” like those of the coloniser and the colonised, thereby allowing for “something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”¹¹ This chapter therefore seeks to position *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown* as fictions that propose the

¹⁰ Janira Bonilla, “Transnational Consciousness: Negotiating Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz,” in, Ernesto Sagas and Sintia E. Molina, eds., *Dominican Migration: Transnational Perspectives* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004), 203.

¹¹ Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in, Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211. See also, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

postsuburban environment as the expression of a hybrid space that is important to the efforts of diasporic peoples in constructing identity. Furthermore, in applying Bhabha's paradigm to these works, my aim is to demonstrate that in their fictions Boyle and Díaz move beyond fixed, exclusionary, and dichotomous notions of identity that have been fundamental to the normative cultural conception of suburbia. In these fictions the postsuburban landscape is a socio-spatial configuration in which identity is presented as a discursive product. Bhabha's third space has been paraphrased as a place where “inside and outside no longer remain separated as binary opposites but instead commingle and conflict. From this emerge new, shifting complex forms of representation that deny binary patterning.”¹² Substituting “inside” and “outside” for “city” and “suburb” creates a neat summation of the reality of the postsuburban spatial matrix that these fictions speak to – and a convincing case for the reasons why a postsuburban fictive imaginary cannot be seen in the same light as a suburban one.

So, in *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown* the postsuburban settings of the exurb and the inner-ring suburb are fictional expressions of a space that becomes what Henri Lefebvre terms a “region of resistance beyond the established centers of power.”¹³ That is to say that, as opposed to the spatial paradigm of the centre/periphery which informed perspectives on the postwar suburb as symbiotically linked with the city, postsuburbia

¹² John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 217.

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, quoted in, Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 30.

exists as a spatiality where marginalised subjects (such as Cándido and Lucero) are made definable. Conventionally, we might think of Cándido and América emerging *from* the thirdspace of the Mexican/American borderlands, or the narrators of Díaz's stories as emerging from the immigrant gateway of Newark airport, but in my appreciation of these narratives I contend that we should also think of these characters as emerging from the third space of postsuburban Los Angeles and New Jersey, spatialities defined as much by their lack of definition as the urban/suburban configuration was defined by the starkness of its polarity.

The Tortilla Curtain is a tale of the interlinked fortunes of illegal Mexican immigrants, Cándido and América, and their white, affluent counterparts, Delaney and Kyra, residents of an exclusive gated community, Arroyo Blanco, in the hills north-west of downtown Los Angeles overlooking Topanga Canyon. Given the allegorical nature of Boyle's novel, it is important to note at the outset the symbolic resonances of the names of both the characters and the primary location.

Arroyo Blanco, is “white stream” in English and initially seems simply to denote the fact that the white population has staked out the chaparral territory through development. However, there are layers of irony that need to be unpicked, here. Ultimately, it is the stream in drastic spate that threatens Delaney's life by causing a mudslide; furthermore, the

word arroyo also translates from the Spanish as “gutter” - a level of nuance that is of significance to my reading of the novel because it stresses the importance of Delaney's rescue by Cándido. The latter does not solely rescue the former from physical death, for he also offers Delaney salvation on a spiritual level, extracting him from the moral gutter into which he has fallen as a result of his attitude towards the Mexicans he comes across in his daily transactions. Also, in naming Cándido thus, Boyle deliberately invokes the comic hero of Voltaire's 1759 satire *Candide*. But Cándido is not quite the credulous sentimentalist of Voltaire's work; he is only shown to be foolish in the extent to which he is self-effacing and self-sacrificing. Indeed, Boyle also compares Cándido to Christ in the sense that both suffer extraordinary trials; at one point Cándido remarks that “as he looked down into the darkened canyon [following a fire that consumes all his possessions] he felt awed by the enormity of his bad luck.”¹⁴ The idea of Cándido as a humble redeemer is, of course, given final expression in his climactic act of bravery and kindness in rescuing Delaney.¹⁵

In describing the area around the Arroyo Blanco estate as an 'exurb,' I use the term to denote a constituent part of the postsuburban environment, a particular topography that is constituted by low-density residential and commercial development in the far reaches of a

¹⁴ T. C. Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997 [1995]), 277. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text. At the time of *The Tortilla Curtain*'s publication Boyle was referring to himself as T. Coraghessan Boyle; despite this, I will refer to him throughout as T. C. Boyle, the name Boyle now publishes under.

¹⁵ As far as América is concerned it might seem on first inspection that in her pregnant state she is meant to embody the promise of the country with which she shares a name, but, in the course of the narrative, if América stands for anything it is for the claims on the American land-mass that its indigenous peoples have. As the pet name of *Indita* that Cándido has for her demonstrates, América has “Indian blood” (204).

metropolitan area. The spatiality of this specific postsuburban environment, as outlined by Boyle at the opening of the novel, is one that seems engineered to ensure the privacy of the wealthy and the exclusion of the poor; in other words, the wealth of the WASP population ensures access to cars and amenities which in turn allow them to live a life removed, spatially and psychologically, from the indigence of the destitute Mexican workers who congregate elsewhere in the canyon along freeways, at malls, and in parking lots. For Delaney, the exurb offers a pointed contrast to the older suburbs of nearby San Fernando Valley that stretch to the east “ad infinitum.” To his mind, the exurb allows a “sense that you were somehow separated from the city and wedded to the mountains” (63). But, for Delaney and his wife, Kyra, it is precisely the fact that the city seems to be encroaching on the exurb that makes them intolerant of the Mexican immigrants in their midst. On Ventura Boulevard, close to the Arroyo enclave, Kyra keeps “a sharp eye out for change – restaurants closing, stores opening, condos going up” (157) and is horrified to see clusters of Mexican men looking for work there. She sees this as a “city problem” (163) that she does not want to experience this far from the metropolitan centre.

Along with Kyra and Delaney, the other Arroyo residents' mistrust of the illegal labour force with which they must share their postsuburban space is in part based on the belief that these immigrants do not profess the same attitude to the space as they do. The standards by which the affluent Arroyans judge others are their own: those of wealth and wealth-creation. Boyle establishes the estate as a bulwark against what the

Arroyans consider a hostile world. It is as a retreat from the increasing cosmopolitanism of the metropolis that Arroyo is conceived, as concisely expressed by Delaney's friend, and senior member of the Arroyo inner circle, Jack Jardine, who opines that, "It's an angry, fragmented society out there Delaney ... the torrents of humanity surging in from China and Bangladesh and Colombia with no shoes, no skills and nothing to eat" (342). It is notable, for instance, that whilst Kyra is distinctly edgy at the number of Mexican jobseekers she sees in the public parking lot that doubles as a labour exchange, she is completely at ease with two Asian store clerks who have assimilated into the commercial fabric of exurban life (157). Whilst Kyra's opinion is that the Mexicans, in their jobless state, are "death for business" (158), she nonetheless is happy to go for lunch at an Indian restaurant whose ethnic food, Delaney relates, is "big business" (147). Thus, the Mexican population's inability to make money, as opposed to contribute to the local economy as units of labour, is what marks them out for exclusion in the eyes of the Arroyo residents. Cándido identifies the matrix of what Kyra's sales patter calls "privacy ... value ... and exclusivity" (107), and which underpins the white upper middle-class version of postsuburbia, when he wonders about the purpose of this demographic's "constant hurry," before confirming to himself that it's all about "Making a buck ... Building ... glass office towers ... getting richer" (91).

Clearly, the residents of the Arroyo Blanco estate consider themselves to be colonists of the relatively unpopulated edges of the Los Angeles

metropolitan area. As such, the settlement is in marked contrast to the nearby inner-ring suburban communities of Canoga Park or the San Fernando Valley: in Arroyo Blanco, space is controlled in the name of privacy and exclusivity. Early in the novel, Arroyo is described as “a private community ... strictly conforming to the covenants ...[and] the Spanish mission style ... [decorated in] three prescribed shades of white” (30). These details are made significant because they position the estate within a national tradition of colonial power, specifically echoing both the early Puritan settlers whose communities were bonded by strict ecclesiastical covenants designed to encourage cooperation and civic responsibility in the face of a hostile environment, and the Spanish colonisers who settled what became the south-western corner of the United States. In Arroyo Blanco, the architectural style of the Spanish missions has been fetishised as a commodity, with the regulation “shades of white” conferring on the nascent community some semblance of historical authenticity, and a patriarchal system of meetings established to ensure the community's smooth operation.

Boyle leaves the reader in no doubt, however, that Arroyo is a community founded on a fantasy, a fantasy that has its basis in the particular spatiality of postsuburban Los Angeles. The logic of sprawl, by which the formerly clearly demarcated city and suburbs have become intermingled in an inexorable spreading outwards from a onetime predominant core, has left the inhabitants of Arroyo Blanco – on the edge of this progression – with the delusion that their need for space automatically makes space theirs. As Delaney states late in the novel in

defiance of what he sees as insurgent Mexican hordes, “this was his canyon, his house, his life” (313). The colonial endeavours that the estate recalls were predicated on the drawing of clear territorial lines between coloniser and colonised and both Kyra and Delaney display an urge to organise their exurban environment along similar lines. For Kyra society “isn't what it was – and won't be until we get control of the borders” (101); in Delaney's case, his instinctive liberal tolerance soon gives way to the unquestioned belief that “There ha[s] to be a limit, a boundary” in order to keep the Mexican immigrants out of Arroyo Blanco (159). When the hill-fire that Cándido inadvertently starts spreads across the canyon towards the estate, Delaney describes the panorama as being of such intensity it is “as if whole empires were aflame” (270). This is not simply empty rhetoric; Boyle awakens in Delaney the realisation that Arroyo has been founded on false pretenses. At the novel's conclusion, the landslide precipitated by the torrential rains that follow the fire wipes away all boundaries and borders, both literal and metaphorical, a narrative move which, as I will argue more closely in a following section, Boyle uses to underscore the importance of a postsuburban spatiality that need not be circumscribed in its socio-cultural characteristics.

The cultural critic Andrew Ross has pointed out that the sense of entitlement that characterises the upper middle class quest for privacy and security is echoed by the unilateralism of America as an actor in a globalised world. This is obviously a notion that has particular relevance to *The Tortilla Curtain* given that the central conflict of the narrative revolves around the clash of two different cultures. Yet, as Ross avers,

despite the rise in the sort of gated communities that Boyle sketches, “there is no immediate environmental rationale for the siege mentality that thrives behind the gates,” a conclusion echoed by the influential work of sociologist Ulrich Beck who confirms that the establishment of immunity to risk is an effort to mark privilege and status, not a response to actual threats.¹⁶ It is important to note here, then, that, for Boyle, the setting of the Arroyo Blanco exurb offers an opportunity to critique the inclination towards separatism and privatism on the part of certain sections of American society and the use of ironic detail offers the chief means by which this is achieved.

So, for example, despite the community's efforts to exclude the presence of Mexican immigrants from their exurban space, the functioning of its residents' lifestyles is guaranteed by the labour of the very same despised group, as Boyle repeatedly makes clear. The narrative strategy of linking Delaney's and Cándido's respective fates from the outset through the motif of the car accident in which the former knocks down the latter is a declaration of the way in which the Mexican immigrant population are already ingrained in the spatial fabric of the exurb.

Following the accident, Delaney sees his victim “in a book of stamps at the post office, reflected in the blameless glass panels of the gently closing twin doors at [his son] Jordan's elementary school, staring up at him from his omelette” (4). But whilst these lines metaphorically attest to

¹⁶ Andrew Ross, “Duct Tape Nation: Land Use, the Fear Factor, and the New Unilateralism,” in, William S. Saunders, ed., *Sprawl and Suburbia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 113-4. Ross's essay states that six per cent of the American population lived in gated communities in 2001, up from four million in 1995 to seventeen million. See also, Ulrich Beck, trans. Mark Ritter, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

Delaney's guilt and his gnawing anger that Cándido, in his opinion, had no right to be where he was when he was struck, the accident also forces Delaney to confront the fact that the Mexicans are “ubiquitous, silently going about their business, whether it be mopping up the floors at McDonald's ... or moving purposively behind the rakes and blowers that combed the pristine lawns of Arroyo Blanco Estates” (12).¹⁷ Ultimately, both Cándido and América gain employment within Arroyo Blanco, the former as a gardener, the latter as a maid, undertaking the sort of menial, but vital, tasks the Arroyans don't want to do themselves. There is a further irony in that the Arroyans expend much time and energy debating the best way to fortify their estate against what they see as the dangerous raids of the dispossessed Mexicans living in the hillsides, only freely to admit them so that their floors can be polished and their lawns can be mown.

By the novel's end the folly and arrogance of Delaney is placed in stark contrast to the generosity of spirit exhibited by Cándido, the supposedly inferior, pernicious, itinerant outsider. Throughout the novel, Boyle contrasts Delaney's and Cándido's respective attitudes towards the landscape. Delaney sentimentalises the expansion of the Arroyo exurb into the Southern Californian chaparral by conceptualising it as a social experiment by which enlightened lovers of nature might find accommodation in the landscape; for Cándido, however, his experience of the canyon spaces offers no such path to self-righteousness and his

¹⁷ The Mexicans are, however, not the only immigrant population in the exurb: the narrative mentions Italians, Guatemalans, Chinese and Koreans as being constituent parts of the social fabric (17 – 21).

primary concern is to make pragmatic use of his surroundings.

For example, when Cándido first establishes his and América's base near the stream down the hillside from the Arroyo estate, Boyle focalises his narrative through Cándido in order for the reader to understand that what he sees “wasn't stone and leaf and grain of sand, but a sitting room with a big shaded lamp dangling from the ceiling, with sofas and chairs and a polished wooden floor that gleamed beneath a burden of wax” (86). The difference in the two characters' approach to space is redolent of Gaston Bachelard's notions of space as always offering the promise of something else. For both Cándido and Delaney, the reconfiguring of Los Angeles' spatial make-up is a process full of potential in that it offers to both something that neither has. Bachelard has written of man's constant desire to inhabit spaces of difference so that, “When we live in a manor house we dream of a cottage, and when we live in a cottage we dream of a palace ... we know how to let the dialectics of cottage and manor sound inside us.”¹⁸ It is this desire that is made manifest in both Delaney's idealistic nature writings, when he talks of wanting to live in harmony with the natural world upon which the metropolitan sprawl (of which he is part) is encroaching, and Cándido's touchingly practical appropriation of the canyon spaces which he sees, in an inversion of Delaney's vision, as perfect spaces for domestication. The novel's narrative makes plain that it is only when the urge to engage with space is soured by a need to section it off and control it that problems arise. Although the Arroyo residents believe they are gravely threatened from without and need a security wall and gate to

¹⁸

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 63.

protect their community, they only succeed in effectively imprisoning themselves: at one point Delaney bemoans “being walled in, buried alive” (244).

The colonial, oppositional thought processes which lead to the Arroyans constructing a defensive spatiality around the estate, through the erection of a perimeter wall and gate, actually have the effect of making them prisoners of themselves. Here, for Delaney and the other residents, the map comes before the territory in the sense that their preconceptions are imposed on the landscape, whereas, for Cándido, the canyon spaces are a resource, not an ideal. As has been pointed out, “Maps ... start with abstractions, and fit the 'territory' into a numerical or conceptual grid. To suggest that the map is not the territory [however] is to recognize that the territory is more than the abstractions of the map.”¹⁹

Kyra also suffers from apprehending her exurban environment as a fantastical dreamscape. Throughout the novel, Boyle has her periodically return to the Da Ros mansion situated high in the hills of Topanga Canyon. The postsuburban environment allows Kyra to retreat from reality in the sense that its expansion beyond previous boundaries fosters in her a persistent urge to want what she hasn't got. This mansion becomes more than just another listing; in Kyra's mind it is the “fairy-tale castle you see on the underside of your eyelids when you close your eyes and dream” (222). Despite this dream, as Boyle creates access to Kyra's thoughts, the reader also learns that she is “intensely aware of everything around her”

¹⁹ Bruce Janz, “The Territory is Not the Map: Place, Deleuze and Guatarri, and African Philosophy,” *Philosophy Today*, 45 (Winter 2001): 393.

and that “she ... [understands] just how vulnerable she ... [is]” (221). Privileged and affluent, exurban spaces fill Kyra with a quiet dread: it is as if her immediate reaction is to worry about how they can be made private, removed from the world. The paradox is that this privatising impulse engenders a spatiality that is denuded of much of its vitality. As Kyra herself observes of the mansion grounds, “The shrubs and trees hung ... as if they'd been painted in place, flat and two-dimensional” (222).

So, Boyle suggests, the expanse of the postsuburban metropolis, becomes for Kyra, with her reductive perspective, a purely semiotic imaginary in which the language of signs can never refer somewhere other than the horizontality of the landscape. In cultural critic Donatella Mazzoleni's conceptualisation, Kyra becomes trapped in a “total interior”.²⁰ Kyra knows that the “fairy-tale castle” is actually a “white elephant” that has “cast a spell” over her (216), yet she is unable to do anything about this. It is not until the Da Ros mansion is destroyed in the canyon fire at the end of the novel that Kyra finally understands that her fantasy is exhausted and untenable.

Thus, the strand to *The Tortilla Curtain's* narrative that continually undermines a WASP attitude to space enacts what Edward W. Soja would term a “critical thirding”²¹ between the dreamspaces of the Arroyans and

²⁰ Donatella Mazzoleni, trans. John Koumantarakis, “The City and the Imaginary,” in, Erica Carter, et al., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 298.

²¹ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 5. Soja's formulation of a “thirdspace”, unlike Bhabha's, draws explicitly on Lefebvre's notion of the trialectical production of space. Given that, for Bhabha, the concept, which also has roots in the work of Michel Foucault, is one that explicitly allows for an understanding of hybridised space as related to nation formation and identity, for the purposes of this chapter, unless I am quoting Soja directly, I follow Bhabha's convention in spelling it as two words, “third space”. See Michel Foucault, “Of

the material deprivations that Cándido and América experience in looking for work and living a hand-to-mouth existence in the canyon. The Arroyo residents have founded a community based on an escape from the real world. This is evidenced by the outcome of an estate meeting called early on in the novel which concludes with Delaney, at this stage a lone moderate voice, being shouted down and left on the steps outside the meeting place for daring to suggest that the establishing principles of the estate had been to plant “an open community ... for anyone ... rich or poor” (43). It is not until the fire and the flood and the resultant establishment of a postsuburban third space that “a [potential] space of extraordinary openness [is established] ... where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives.”²²

In this way, then, the novel anticipates an argument that Mike Davis makes in *Ecology of Fear* (1998) in that it acknowledges the way that natural disaster is, in part, a “social construction” – that is to say the result of privileged Angelenos suffering avoidable problems by putting themselves in harm's way. By imposing “false expectations” on an environment that is not conducive to unchecked development – and then blaming “malign and hostile nature” for the ensuing disasters – the middle- and upper-middle classes seeking to establish their homes in the metropolitan hinterland have attempted to obscure the iniquities and exclusivity of this spatial practice.²³ In the way that the narrative

Other Spaces,” in, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999 [1998]), 9.

highlights the delusion of the Arroyans *The Tortilla Curtain* would seem to advocate that a postsuburban spatiality must not be divisive and marginalising.

The competition for the relative abundance of space in the postsuburban landscape becomes, for those who can arrogate to themselves new property and land, an expression of power through affluence and wealth. Whilst Cándido and América, making a more pragmatic use of space as circumstances allow, pursue security as a right and a necessity through an effort to remain inconspicuous, the Arroyo residents pursue security as a marker of success and exclusivity through the ostentation of, amongst other measures, the estate's gate and wall. From their camp in the canyon, Cándido ensures that “not even the faintest glimmer [of the fire] escaped the deep hidden nook where they'd made their camp” (179); meanwhile, Kyra frets over the aesthetics of the new fence being installed to circumscribe their garden: “she didn't want anything tacky-looking ... she wanted strength and impregnability” (160).

Julia Kristeva's work on the abject is useful to consider in this regard. The residents of Arroyo Blanco indubitably regard the Mexican illegals as a threat because of their status as marginal people to them. In her work, *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva explains that abjection (in this case the deep-seated fear and disgust of the Arroyo population for the Mexicans) is caused by a group's categorisation as a community which “does not respect borders, positions ... [the] in-between, the ambiguous”; in this way the abject “lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the ... rules of the game.” Moreover, Kristeva's later work,

Strangers to Ourselves (1989), speaks to ideas Boyle raises in the novel in the way that it associates the struggle to live with that which seems 'foreign' and 'alien' with the struggle to come to terms with the otherness within one's own psyche. Kristeva argues that only by acknowledging unconscious drives – the other within – can one accept others within society, concluding by calling for a new cosmopolitanism, a sort of integration that will, paradoxically, allow for the courage “to call ourselves disintegrated in order ... to welcome [foreigners] to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours.”²⁴

Where Kristeva's work can further understanding of the way in which *The Tortilla Curtain* functions as a novel is in reminding us that such defensive posturing as the building of gates, walls and fences is an expression of a fear of oneself as much as it is a fear of the designated other. It is my contention that Boyle's novel functions in a didactic manner in warning against the barricading out of people deemed to be different, as well as the barricading in of that part of ourselves which leads to paranoia and fear. To paraphrase Kristeva, *The Tortilla Curtain* seems to suggest that, in not being strangers to ourselves, we need no longer be strangers to others.

Boyle's narrative uses irony to subvert the paranoid approach of the Arroyans and highlight their inability to perceive people as individuals rather than groups to which easy and convenient (not to say prejudicial) labels can be applied. This is illustrated by Boyle's use of the shadowy

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” in, Kelly Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 232; Kristeva, “Foreignness,” in, Oliver, 290.

figure of the unnamed Mexican drifter who inhabits the same parts of the canyon as Cándido and América and who problematises the conception of all Mexicans as a perfidious threat to the white middle classes. Whilst in attributing the starting of the fire to this man, the Arroyans would prefer to see him as metonymically standing for the entire body of 'dangerous' Mexican immigrants at their gate, the narrative reveals him to be representative of humanity's shortcomings, rather than any particularly ethnocentric weaknesses; it is this man, after all, who assaults his fellow Mexican, América, in a secluded spot in the canyon whilst later leaving WASP Kyra untouched despite encountering her when she is similarly vulnerable.

Boyle further complicates this question of basic ethnic antipathy. Firstly, in a scene that foreshadows the one with which the novel ends, Cándido finds himself betrayed by a fellow Mexican outside a post office in Canoga Park where he and América have gone to seek permanent accommodation. Whilst Cándido rescues Delaney from the torrent raging around the exurban post office that serves the Arroyo community, in this instance, Cándido is robbed by an opportunist thief in his hour of need (209, 235). Secondly, Boyle reveals the teenagers of Arroyo as the vandals who have been graffitiing the white stucco exteriors of the estate's buildings, a defilement that Delaney and other Arroyans instinctively link to the Mexicans in general, and Cándido in particular (346).

Having established the extent to which *The Tortilla Curtain* works to reveal the fallacy of the Arroyans' approach to space, I turn now to the

alternative vision of the postsuburban environment that the narrative proposes. To do this I want to examine further the symbolic nature of the novel's dénouement. Across his work, Mike Davis has traced the suburbanization of the Californian landscape which has

only accelerated in the face of a perceived deterioration of the metropolitan core. As middle- and upper-class families flee Los Angeles (especially its older, 'urbanized suburbs' like the San Fernando Valley), they seek sanctuaries ever deeper in the rugged contours of the chaparral firebelt.²⁵

Davis' work reveals the long history of natural disasters in this landscape, and the importance of this history in shaping a popular imaginary of catastrophe where the Southern Californian environment is concerned. In *Ecology of Fear* Davis reflects on a series of serious floods that caused \$500 million worth of damage in the first part of the 1990s, the firestorms of autumn 1993 that resulted in \$1 billion worth of damage, and the January 1994 earthquake that left a \$42 billion repair bill.

Pertinently, Davis situates the L.A. riots of April 1992 in this timeline in order to point up the ways in which affluent residents of the metropolis have tended to conflate anxieties about the underclass with those of environmental upheaval. Davis notes that "there is widespread popular apprehension that the former land of sunshine is 'reinventing' itself ... as a Book of the Apocalypse theme park. First the natives rioted, then nature."²⁶ Boyle's novel, published in 1995, was written as these tumultuous events were occurring and, like Davis' analysis, engages with

²⁵ Davis, 142.

²⁶ Ibid., 6-7. In *Ecology of Fear* Davis recounts a number of instances of hillside fires in Topanga Canyon, the setting of Boyle's novel (see, 99-130). Interestingly, Davis also alludes to a "postsuburban fire regime" which, in its attention to preserving the affluent enclaves of the Malibu hills, he sees as being symptomatic of the unsustainable nature and social cost of continual development into the L.A. hinterlands (see 142-3).

the sublimation of class- (and ethnic-) based anxieties into a fear of the Southern Californian ecology.

As a naturalist, Delaney understands the regenerative power of the canyon firestorms (111, 313), and, in organising his narrative Boyle imparts this restorative effect to Cándido by having him inadvertently start the fire that precedes the flood, and which makes the effect of the heavy rains all the more destructive. For her part, following the damage wrought by the fire, Kyra retreats into a state of denial. In a scene in which she goes to collect her son Jordan from his babysitter, she gets lost in an area even further out from the city than Arroyo, “in the upper-left-hand corner of the map” where she sees “a burgeoning, bustling, mini-mall-building testimonial to white flight” (336).

Kyra finds this spatiality is “amazing” and, in a fog of infatuation with the place, forgets her appointment to pick up her son, following a *For Sale* sign and viewing a property that she envisages as “the anchor for a very select private community of high-end houses” (339). Boyle then cuts to Delaney who is caught out in the coming rains on a hillside where “Every least crack in the soil was a fissure and every fissure a channel and every channel a stream” (346-7). This sense of the ground being literally and metaphorically reconfigured is confirmed by Boyle when the mounting deluge and the associated torrents of water and mud have reached the Arroyo estate “hammer[ing] the walls flat and twist[ing] the roofs from the houses” (353). These details, when taken alongside Kyra's retreat from reality, seem to point to the way that the narrative consigns Arroyo Blanco – and the attitudes it is founded on – to the past. The final lines, in which

Cándido sees Delaney's "white face surge up out of the black swirl of the current and the white hand grasping at the tiles" before "he reach[es] down and ... [takes] hold of it" (355), instead point to a very different future and a very different socio-spatial arrangement. This ending confirms the novel's allegorical purpose by breaking the chain of association between social prejudice and panic at the hostility of the natural world. Delaney is rescued by the selfless intervention of Cándido, a figure he had previously come to despise as a harbinger of doom. Furthermore, the narrative tells us that Cándido and Delaney are washed up on the tile roof of a public building: literally they are "saved by the United States Post Office" (354). Figuratively they owe their lives to a structure that, whilst being an organ of federal government, is nonetheless emblematic of the way in which human transactions cross boundaries and borders, be they cultural, ideological, or national.

The postsuburban environment that Boyle's novel suggests should be possible to achieve is one in which space and land use are depoliticized, a third space that is democratic and open, not restrictive and divisive. It is a fiction that invites the reader to consider the changing nature of metropolitan space. It represents the postsuburban landscape as a spatiality that has the potential to surpass what Stephen Tatum calls the "one-to-one relation between place and culture" that characterised urban and suburban experience when the metropolis was organised along the lines of the center/periphery model.²⁷ It is, I want to suggest, a novel that

²⁷ Stephen Tatum, "Spectrality and the Postregional Interface," in, Susan Kollin, ed., *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* (Lincoln and London, University of

detritorialises the exurb it takes as its setting, in the process inviting the reader, in Soja's words, to "think differently about the meanings and significances of space and those related concepts ... place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region."²⁸

In a key section in part two, the men of the Arroyo estate convene to discuss the need for a security wall around the community. Delaney, at this stage of the narrative less of a reactionary than he later becomes, is initially aghast at the proposition and retorts that, "Next thing you'll want to wall the whole place in like a medieval city or something" (189). This sort of landscape, purposefully designed to preserve a status quo of wealth and top-down power, has been identified by the cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson as being one common to Europe from the 1400s onwards: a landscape in which land itself "means property and permanence and power"; a landscape designed to insist on distinctions between "public and private, rich and poor" as well as to uphold the "linear frontier between nations."²⁹ In contrast, what *The Tortilla Curtain* expresses is a hope for a landscape derived from, in Jackson's words, our "relationship with other people ... [so that] when we talk about the importance of *place*, the necessity of belonging to a *place* ... place means the people in it."³⁰

In his commentary on Jackson's work, Neil Campbell explains that Jackson's vision of the American West, including areas such as the Malibu

Nebraska Press, 2007), 11.

²⁸ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 1.

²⁹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

hills, was of “a complex network of 'sampled' cultures, forms, and ideas without the imposed metanarratives of the frontier, Anglo-Saxon authority, nationhood, or the geographical grid.”³¹ Writing in 1984 and anticipating/responding to the breakdown of previous urban/suburban binaries, the struggle over the outcome of which forms the essential drama of *The Tortilla Curtain*, Jackson identifies the emergence of a new type of landscape that articulates this radical topography. He notes a “kind of ... community that we are seeing all over America: at remote construction sites, in recreation areas, in trailer courts, in the shanty towns of wetbacks and migrant workers” and deems this “the emergence of what we may call vernacular communities.”³²

For Jackson, these spatialities refuse an essentialised hermeneutics which see landscapes “as profound expressions of ethnic or racial traits” wherein there exists “a cultural heritage that must at all costs be preserved intact.”³³ Such places are the very opposite of insular Arroyo Blanco and they exist in *The Tortilla Curtain* in embryonic form in spite of the estate's existence. Consequently, the novel recognises, in literary critic Brian Jarvis' formulation, the “counter-hegemonic potential of deviant, abject spaces”³⁴ such as the various hovels and camps Cándido and América build in and around the canyon, and the informal community of the labor exchange that establishes itself in the parking lot near the supermarket serving the Arroyo estate. Indeed, one might suggest, Cándido and

³¹ Neil Campbell, “Critical Regionalism, Thirdspace, and John Brinckerhoff Jackson's Western Cultural Landscapes,” in Kollin, 65.

³² Ibid., 156.

³³ Jackson, quoted by Campbell in Kollin, 69.

³⁴ Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 192.

América's attempts to carve out their own postsuburban space culminate at the novel's end in something of a provisional "vernacular community," including Delaney, atop the roof of the post office.

Within this context, the importance of Cándido to Boyle's narrative starts to become clearer. Boyle builds his narrative around the fault lines in the WASP attitude towards space and as a character Cándido exists in the interstices of this particular exurban configuration. As a result of the Arroyo residents' appropriation of the canyon space, he is at the mercy of their walls, gates, fences and roads, his individual agency limited as he is, in his words, "bounced from one to another of them like a pinball" (121).³⁵ Yet it is his ability to exist and survive, in spite of this, in order to then pull the paradigmatically solipsistic Delaney from the flooded river that is central to the novel and its suggestion that the postsuburban landscape can be a third space of radical reinvention. The postsuburban spaces of the Arroyo exurb, although designed to exclude, in fact become the lacunae through which Cándido creates his own resistant lived experiences.

Throughout the novel, Cándido exercises a vital and necessary pragmatism in ensuring his and América's survival by coexisting with the Arroyans. For example, the wall built by the residents of the estate and intended to keep the Mexicans out, ironically becomes for Cándido a

³⁵ A whole other paper could be written on the role of cars in *The Tortilla Curtain's* narrative. Whilst for Kyra, cars are a "sanctuary ... [in which] nothing ... [can] touch her" (73), for América cars are a terrible threat, "lethal" and "hissing" and "always [in] a chain" (19, 127). Compounding the sense that the main concern of the Arroyo Blanco residents is to control their space, América "wonders if ... [the drivers] were somehow grafted to their trucks, if their mothers had given birth to them right there" (127), an image that accentuates the threat to América at the same time that it reveals the absurdity of the car-owners' fixation.

symbol of hope: at a moment in the narrative when he is in despair at his misfortune in accidentally setting fire to the canyon he calls home, he recognises the wall as an opportunity, not a further obstacle. At this point, he casts off the burden of self-doubt recognising that whilst “The wall was there, a physical presence, undeniable ... it worked two ways, both for and against him, and if he was clever he could use it to his own advantage” (247). Cándido proceeds to work his way along the wall, “feeling for an opening” (280) and is able to find such a rupture in the defensive spatiality of the Arroyans' postsuburban world. He is then able to scavenge through the detritus of this community of excess, transforming such quotidian stuff as plastic sheeting for his own ends – in this case the building of a shelter for América and himself (304).

In a telling twist, Boyle also has Cándido and América take shelter in the estate's maintenance shed where América actually ends up giving birth. Thus, a modest outbuilding designed to house the materials necessary to keep the pools and sidewalks of the estate pristine ends up maintaining a Mexican family in dire circumstances (301). Later, when Cándido realises that they can no longer stay in the shed, he uses some of the materials he finds there to construct a shelter further up the hillside, away from the perimeter wall. In doing so, Cándido is inspired by his circumstances to effect a change in the spatiality he and América find themselves a part of: “As soon as ... [he] had laid eyes on those pallets an architecture had invaded his brain and he knew he had to have them. If the fates were going to deny him an apartment ... he would have a house, a house with a view” (301-2). Similarly, in his resourcefulness, Cándido is

able to tap into some of the estate's jealously-guarded resources by siphoning off water after “spending a whole night digging a trench up the hill and tapping into the development's sprinkler system” (325). Through the figure of Cándido, then, Boyle questions the Arroyo residents' exclusive use of land and calls for a more egalitarian approach to space based on need not status.

The novel derives much narrative momentum from a series of episodes in which Cándido's actions – sometimes inadvertent such as when he attempts to cross the road only to be hit by Delaney's car, sometimes intentional such as when he sets up camp on the periphery of the estate – disrupt the seemingly impregnable spatiality encouraged by the Arroyans. In this sense, Cándido becomes for Boyle a walking, talking expression of the way in which basic human rights are trampled on and denied by a certain logic of late capitalist society. As Cándido, at one of his lowest ebbs, considers just how much “a few hundred dollars” would improve his situation, Boyle's authorial voice intrudes on the narrative to observe that such an amount is “nothing” to the wealthy residents of the exurb, but to Cándido it is “the world” and in that moment Cándido figures that “the world owe[s] ... him something” (201).

This tension between what constitutes an equitable world in which all are afforded some measure of security, and the acquisitive, internecine precepts of the Arroyo residents is acknowledged by Delaney in one of his nature articles. In discussing the coyote, he refers to the need for something to be done “if we are to have any hope of coexisting harmoniously with this supple suburban raider” (214). Here Boyle invites

the reader to make the analogy that Delaney does not despite adopting a sympathetic stance towards the plight of the chaparral predator: we equate Cándido's plight with that of the coyote and Boyle suggests that a just society needs to be founded on a recognition of difference that does not lead to invidious comparison but rather a recognition of everyone's basic needs for survival. Postsuburban space provides that chance, so long as “vernacular communities” are established in preference to “medieval walled cities”.

Finally, I want briefly to explore the way that Boyle constructs *The Tortilla Curtain*'s narrative around its four central characters, Delaney and Kyra from Arroyo Blanco, and Cándido and América from Mexico, in the process offering the reader a serial narration from four different perspectives that draws parallels between not only the two couples' situations, but also their individual lives, too.

Whilst the opening chapter of part one of the novel is focalised through Delaney and relates his experience of the car accident in which he hits Cándido on a freeway, Chapter Two is channeled through the mind of Cándido and provides his perspective on the same event. As the narrative progresses, Boyle hints ever more strongly at the ties that bind the characters even as he relates the circumstances that separate them. By the end of part two of the novel, Delaney and Cándido are directly conflated by the fact that both are effectively prisoners in their own homes. On leaving his hovel in the canyon to try his luck in Canoga Park, Boyle describes Cándido as “an untamed beast let out of its cage” (208); likewise, as the

security wall is erected around the perimeter of the estate, Delaney is presented using similar figurative language – he is “like a caged beast” (244). *The Tortilla Curtain* – in fusing Delaney's life with Cándido's, the culmination of which process is the climactic act of kindness perpetrated by the latter in rescuing the former from the landslide – calls for what Homi Bhabha has termed a “culture of humanity”³⁶ to replace a hegemonic articulation of American culture which has defined itself in opposition to a notional other.

In the same way that he blurs the boundaries between heroes and villains, here Boyle is careful to portray his central male protagonists as indivisible in the crucial respect of their shared humanity. The novel thus contains a critique of the discourse of assimilation in the sense that the third space it imagines in postsuburban L.A. rejects the predominance of one culture over another. Boyle includes a number of details at the beginning of the novel that make clear the fact that both Cándido and Delaney are on an existential journey: for the former, this is obviously linked to the reality of his current status as an immigrant, but Boyle constructs Delaney's identity as very much founded upon his European, East Coast heritage, the import of which is signaled by his number plate which reads “PILGRIM” (5). Cándido's crisis of identity at being in America (“how could he not know himself?” [23]), is paralleled by Delaney's uncertainty over the way that some of his actions do not sit easily with his self-professed “liberal-humanist ideals” (13).

³⁶ Homi Bhabha, quoted by Geraldine Stoneham, “It's a Free Country: Visions of Hybridity in the Metropolis,” in, Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray, eds., *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 90.

In a sense, then, the narrative's arc describes Delaney's apostasy in backsliding from an understanding of the world that is instinctively tolerant and relativist to a position where, in the aftermath of the canyon fire and the various acts of vandalism perpetrated against the Arroyans' property, his ideals are described as a "sinking raft" (313). As Delaney's desire to respect the Mexicans' rights ("even illegals had rights under the Constitution") gives way to a desire to see them removed from the area and a self-recognition that "he ... [is] one of [the prejudiced] now ... the hater ... the redneck, the racist, the abuser" (290), the novel tests the limits of approaching ideas of culture and ethnicity as static categories that need to be ranked hierarchically. Given that Delaney has to be rescued from both the landslide *and* himself, we might say that *The Tortilla Curtain* represents postsuburban third space as having the potential to construct the sort of cosmopolitanism that Kristeva alludes to when calling for an integration between different groups that recognises the "uncanny strangeness" in everyone. Published in the same year as *The Tortilla Curtain*, David Hollinger's *Postethnic America* examines what Boyle's fictional work dramatises as a "Cosmopolitanism [that] promotes multiple identities, emphasises the dynamic and changing character of many groups, and is responsive to the potential for creating new cultural combinations."³⁷

The dramatisation of identity as multiple and subject to slippage is also in evidence in the drawing of the two women protagonists, Kyra and

³⁷ David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1995]), 3.

América. Not only are they signally more successful than their partners in bringing money into their respective households (América through her cleaning job, Kyra through her work as a Realtor), reversing a fundamental trope of the classic suburban novel that sees the man of the house as the main breadwinner, they are also revealed to share the same fears and vulnerabilities despite their differences in age, education, nationality and class. Additionally, the reader is told that both women have a fear of snakes: for América this is especially so when “the light ... [begins] to fail and they ... [come] out to prowl” (140); for Kyra the fear comes on at the thought of “the wicked glittering reptilian eyes” (160). This could be passed off as coincidence were it not for the fact that both women are threatened by the unnamed Mexican drifter, who, in a passage describing his appearance at the Da Ros place is directly compared to a snake by Boyle who writes of the man's eyes flashing as he emerges from the grass at the back of the property (164).

The symbolic intertwining in the narrative of these four lives is initiated by the car accident, but much of the novel's tension is generated by the subtlety of Boyle's disclosure of the qualia³⁸ of the characters as their individual lives rub up against each other. Structuring the novel in this fashion generates a number of ellipses, the most striking of which is the ending which resists revealing not only what happens in the aftermath of the flood and rescue, but also the perspectives of both Delaney and América. Yet, I would argue that such a schema allows Boyle to emphasise

³⁸ Qualia is a philosophical term employed by narratologists which refers to the sense or feeling of what it is like for someone to have a given experience.

the interconnectedness of his two superficially irreconcilable couples so that by *The Tortilla Curtain's* conclusion, the different perspectives have merged, fused in the service of a narrative that is finally a fable about America's need to embrace the third space of its postsuburban future.

Reflecting on Bhabha's third space formulation, Robert C. Young writes that it is a paradigm that reveals the ways in which colonial discourses are “effectively decentred from [their] position[s] of power and authority” and that this process occurs “when authority becomes hybridized when placed in a colonial context and finds itself layered against other cultures.”³⁹ This analysis of *The Tortilla Curtain* has argued that Boyle's novel breaks down the dichotomous formula of 'self' and 'other' in the process writing into existence a fiction that can be constituted as a new metropolitan literature. This is a literature no longer interested in urban/suburban, coloured/white oppositions, or, what Stephen Tatum calls the “isomorphic ... relation between a local or regional culture and a particular topography.”⁴⁰ The postsuburban landscape of the novel is one in which, following Bhabha, its “heterogeneous subjects of hybridity” are forced to confront the “mythical homogeneity of the hybridized nation state,”⁴¹ and where Delaney, Cándido and América are united by their similarities as people and not separated by their differences as American and Mexican nationals.

³⁹ Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 161.

⁴⁰ Tatum, “Spectrality and the Postregional Interface,” in, Kollin, 10.

⁴¹ Homi Bhabha, quoted by Stoneham, “It's a Free Country,” in, Bery and Murray, 92.

I have tried here to position *The Tortilla Curtain* as a novel that takes as its central concern the emergence of a new type of metropolitan space, and, with the antonymical city/suburb paradigm now redundant, attempts to define the changed nature of the metropolitan socio-spatial configuration in Los Angeles. I have also sought to show that Boyle's work suggests that the decentralised spaces of the postsuburban environment should, and could, be founded on a way of life that insists on a recognition of shared humanity, rather than an accentuation of otherness and difference. In his 1993 work on the state of contemporary American literature and theory, *The Pleasures of Babel*, Jay Clayton avers that "one responsibility of a critic in the present is to identify ways of living in a multicultural society, not to lament uselessly the perceived loss of a single, unified culture."⁴²

With *The Tortilla Curtain* T. C. Boyle makes such a responsibility that of the novelist, too; indeed, as I have argued, Boyle constructs his narrative as an intervention in the debate to which Clayton refers. Certainly my reading of the novel would dispute the claims made by one of its few academic critics, that, by its end, "The rigid binaries of the story remain intact" with Boyle clearly re-inscribing "the asymmetry of ... power relations."⁴³ *The Tortilla Curtain* demonstrates that American fiction of the mid-1990s explicitly engages with the spaces of the postsuburban metropolis in order to represent it as a spatiality that resists

⁴² Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 151.

⁴³ Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, "Borders and Catastrophes: T. C. Boyle's Californian Ecology," in, Klaus Benesch and Kerstin Schmidt, eds., *Space in America: Theory, History, Culture* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 407, 405, 406.

reductive categorisations. Another critic of the novel describes Cándido and América as “new immigrants” in that they “refuse the label of victim, they eschew the ghetto, they exploit their opportunities.”⁴⁴ Next, I want to turn my attention to the stories in Junot Díaz's *Drown* which construct a similarly enabling postsuburban spatiality.

In the story 'Fiesta, 1980' one of a number in *Drown* that tells of the experiences of a Dominican family's migration to the U.S., Díaz represents the immigrant experience as that of “inhabit[ing] multiple spaces at once.”⁴⁵ This process is initiated by the father, Ramon, who emigrates ahead of his wife and two sons in order to secure work, but it is also an imaginative act for the boys Rafa and Yunior, and their mother, Vita, in the sense that, respectively, they adopt make-believe identities drawn from American popular culture even as she recalls the injuries suffered in the course of the American invasion of the island in 1965.

For example, the reader is told that moving to the U.S. has “finally put some meat” on the boys' mother and that, according to Yunior, who narrates the story, “she was no longer the same flaca [skinny woman] who had arrived” in America “three years before.”⁴⁶ And yet, Vita is a woman

⁴⁴ Stoneham, “It's a Free Country,” in, Bery and Murray, 91.

⁴⁵ Bonilla, “Transnational Consciousness”, in, Sagas and Molina, 229.

⁴⁶ Junot Díaz, *Drown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997 [1996]), 17. All future references to this work will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

for whom “American things” seem to have an “intrinsic badness” (20) about them, and who still observes traditional Dominican customs and superstitions, as well as cooking traditional Dominican meals of “rice, beans and sweet platanos” (19). Likewise, the boys' lives exhibit this sense of being constituted by different socio-spatial influences. When explaining about life in their New Jersey apartment block, Yuniór reveals the endurance of the merciless attitude cultivated by a childhood on the Santo Domingo streets when he tells the reader that despite the fact that neither he nor Rafa have much affection for baseball, they nonetheless like playing with the local kids “thrashing them at anything they were doing” (18).

Although the stories I want to focus on in the rest of this chapter do not feature Yuniór and his family as main protagonists, they likewise suggest a Dominican-American experience that is characterised by an ability to negotiate postsuburban space and transform it for particular ends. As Nahem Yousaf argues, in this way Díaz's fiction explores “the tension between the centripetal pressure for cultural unity and the centrifugal force of ethnicity.”⁴⁷ One of the formal strategies that Díaz employs to do this is his refusal to put Spanish words and phrases into italics or speech marks; indeed he has said in interview that he sees his writing as a “site of struggle to maintain space” for a “formerly colonial language”⁴⁸ now being reasserted in the face of a dominant American-English. Díaz thus sees himself as an author who is deliberately trying to

⁴⁷ Nahem Yousaf “‘Come change your destiny, turn suffering into silver and joy’: Constituting Americans,” in, Jay Prosser, ed., *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 35.

⁴⁸ Junot Díaz quoted in Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, *Weird English* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 209.

remould standard American-English. With this firmly in mind, my analysis of *Drown* seeks to highlight the ways that this socio-linguistic process has a spatial parallel in the remaking of the ecology of postsuburbia in general and the poor and Hispanic spaces of the inner-ring suburbs in particular.

At the outset of his book on immigrant fiction, *Trailing Clouds* (2006), David Cowart states that there is a body of such writing – including *Drown* – that evinces how writers “have come to ... [America and] embraced its culture, and penned substantial literary work in English.”⁴⁹ The opposite view is taken by Andrea Levine who assesses that “the whole text of *Drown* works to illuminate the failed promise of North America.”⁵⁰ My reading of Díaz's work falls between these two poles, each of which oversimplifies the work. It follows Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's observation that Díaz's linguistic strategy is designed to reject the tenets of both assimilation and multiculturalism and therefore “shows us linguistic utopias of heterogeneous discourses where no group has more dominance than any other in terms of linguistic power.”⁵¹ Whilst I would query the degree to which the stories in *Drown* describe any sort of utopia, discursive or otherwise, I hope my contribution to this debate will illuminate the extent to which this linguistic equilibrium is mirrored in the processes by which the characters negotiate a postsuburban third space.

Alongside his idiosyncratic use of Spanish and English, Díaz also

⁴⁹ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2.

⁵⁰ Andrea Levine, “Joining the State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Junot Díaz and Chang-Rae Lee,” in, Nicholas De Genova, ed., *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 154.

⁵¹ Ch'ien, 202.

uses the collection's structure to reflect his belief in the emergence of a new spatial order. Discussing the cycle of stories in *Drown* as a whole, Cowart refers to “The paradoxes of unity and division [that] manifest themselves at every level of the book ... [with] discontinuities of form seem[ing] to coexist with teasing intimations of larger coherence.”⁵² Here Cowart refers to the many geographical and temporal shifts between the various stories, as well as the use of different narrators and narrative styles. In the three stories that I will be focusing on, 'Aurora', the title story 'Drown', and 'Edison, New Jersey', Díaz's refusal of a sense of narrative coherence is manifested not only among the stories but also within them through the ambiguous identities of the three narrators, and the use of shared locales and a recurring character. Despite many critics seeing what Díaz has described as his “tapestry”⁵³ effect as a problem that rendered *Drown* something of an unfinished novel rather than a collection of short stories,⁵⁴ for Kasia Boddy such a refusal of coherence is “crucial to a book which is all about living in gaps and fissures, between childhood and adulthood, between countries and between languages.”⁵⁵

In 'Edison, New Jersey', the Dominican-American narrator who has been in America since he was a young boy speaks of his job driving a delivery truck in the New York metropolitan area as being akin to “stitching city to city,” (109) making a logistical whole out of the various constituent parts of his route. As such, *Drown* represents the

⁵² Cowart, 204.

⁵³ Junot Díaz quoted in, Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 129.

⁵⁴ Boddy, 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

postsuburban spatiality of New Jersey as variegated and atomised with a further layer of discontinuity that has to be negotiated by the immigrant characters. However, Díaz also makes the larger experience of such disorientating conditions predispose them to achieving some measure of fixity in the flux of this landscape. As Mike Davis writes, conceiving of immigrant communities in the postsuburban landscape in this way is “not merely metaphor,” it is the new reality with which Díaz's fiction engages.⁵⁶

In a *Los Angeles Times* article written in 1994, Davis excoriates the conditions of the “inner metropolitan ring[s]” across America, drawing attention to the fact that these “aging suburbs” are trapped in a “downward trajectory” and that they display “pathologies typically associated with a battered city.” Davis believes this is the cruel reverse of the “salvation” to be found in the suburbs where “Beaver Cleaver and Ricky Nelson used to live.” He notes that “hundreds of thousands of blacks and Latinos are finally finding it possible to move into ... [these] subdivisions,” but only because of the fact that they have fallen into disrepair, with “What seemed from afar a promised land ... becoming, “at closer sight, a scorched earth.” Davis reconstitutes the white middle-class vision of a postwar suburban dystopia as a compromised material reality for the ethnic communities now inhabiting these spaces. But, does this undeniable “structural decay”⁵⁷ necessarily equate to compromised lives? And is Davis' lament unconsciously informed by the powerful suburban archetypes prevalent in

⁵⁶ Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 96.

⁵⁷ Mike Davis, “The Suburban Nightmare: While Older Suburbs Experience Many Problems of the Inner City, 'Edge Cities' Now Offer a New Escape”, in, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1994. Accessed online, 20/04/11: (http://articles.latimes.com/1994-10-23/opinion/op-53893_1_edge-cities/3).

the wider culture? My analysis of Díaz's stories will answer 'no' to the first question and 'yes' to the second; indeed, Davis' stance on such landscapes seems to have changed since the publication of his 1994 *L.A. Times* article.

In *Magical Urbanism* (2000), Davis observes that immigrant experience is now subject to a “logic of social reproduction under conditions of rapid and sometimes catastrophic global restructuring [that] compels traditional communities to strategically balance assets and population between two different, place-rooted existences.” As immigrants have settled increasingly in the inner-rings of the metropolitan U.S., so these spaces have been transformed into what Davis terms “transnational suburbs,” places that involve “radical new social and geographical lifelines that have been forged by the cunning of communities and households.”⁵⁸ The subtitle to *Magical Urbanism* is *Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* and I want to suggest that Díaz's short fiction draws on this idea that immigrant communities, and in the case of the stories in question, Dominican-American communities, are re-shaping these inner-ring spatialities and the assumptions previously held about them. In a recent continuation of Davis' reconsiderations, Audrey Singer strikes a note of caution in wondering if these new suburban communities “are just possibly forming as immigrant enclaves” deeming it to be “unclear how their role will play out over time and whether they will become identified with single origin groups or multiethnic groups.”⁵⁹

In essence, despite Davis' positive views about the remarkable

⁵⁸ Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 96-7.

⁵⁹ Singer, “Twenty-First-Century Gateways: An Introduction”, in, Singer et al., 16-17.

spatial scope of “transnational suburbs,” the question remains over whether or not ghettoisation will nonetheless ensue. For Singer, under the global conditions of the postindustrial era that Davis alludes to, in which flows of people, capital, and images are predominant, “Enclave neighborhoods represent both *stability* (that is, a constant presence that ‘institutionalizes’ the immigrant experience) and *flux* as continuous waves of newcomers enter the neighborhood and use its services and structures at the same time that others are moving out to better opportunities elsewhere.”⁶⁰ In my readings of Díaz's stories it is the negotiation of this tension between “stability” and “flux,” between, in effect, the origin culture and the host culture in which the characters are forced to engage.

The decaying inner-ring suburbs of New Jersey where Díaz sets the stories were parts of the state originally suburbanized by “people looking for sylvan environs” but which were then “urbanized when they brought their jobs with them.” As several commentators have noted, the eclipse of the postwar suburbs has in large part been a result of freeway development and the locales that Díaz uses in *Drown* – the areas around Paramus-Montvale and the Amboys, for example – are “where all the major north-south highways on the East Coast merge, scramble, and peel off.”⁶¹ Geographers M. Gottdiener and George Kephart identify twenty-one postsuburban areas across America, two of which, Middlesex and Monmouth Counties, are to be found in New Jersey. Gottdiener and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁶¹ Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, Toronto, London and Sydney: Anchor Books, 1991), 39. See also, Singer, “Twenty-First-Century Gateways: An Introduction”, in, Singer et al., 16. Singer points out that the kind of urban growth associated with the arrival of immigrant communities to older suburban areas “necessarily occurs around transportation hubs and along transportation corridors.”

Kephart describe such landscapes as “metropolitan regions composed of polynucleated and functionally differentiated spaces that are no longer extensions of the traditional city” with many of the counties in their sample being “less like affluent suburbs and more like industrialized cities.”⁶²

The settings of Díaz's stories become, like the exurb of Topanga Canyon, a postsuburban third space of negotiation in which the Dominican-American characters are able (if they so choose) to produce a spatiality that, again, seems to refer to Hollinger's idea of a cosmopolitanism that is postethnic in its accent on the performative nature of affiliation to social groups, as well as Werner Sollors' earlier notion of individuals consenting to join social groups.⁶³

In their 1998 study of the experience of Dominican-Americans, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández describe the transnational experience of immigrants as a “cultural state of mind” arguing that one of the “most obvious” results of the immigrant experience “is that the space of their physical and existential mobility increases tremendously.”⁶⁴ This conclusion chimes with Hollinger's call to recognise that “Any individual's life-project will entail a shifting division of labor between the various overlapping 'we's' of which he or she is a part. A postethnic perspective

⁶² M. Gottdiener and George Kephart, “The Multinucleated Metropolitan Region: A Comparative Analysis,” in, Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995), 34, 38.

⁶³ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁶⁴ Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández, quoted in, Bonilla, “Transnational Consciousness: Negotiating Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz”, in, Sagas and Molina, eds., *Dominican Migration*, 203.

thus resists the pluralist temptation to depict society as an expanse of internally homogeneous and analogically structured units.”⁶⁵ In what follows, I will argue that selected stories in *Drown* represent the postsuburban landscape of New Jersey as a site of hybridity where postethnic identities can be constructed, rather than only the site of various diasporic experiences.

In her recent book on landscape and American immigrant fiction, Sarah Phillips Casteel writes that, “The spatial turn in critical theory has enabled important new insights into the production of (post)colonial, diasporic, and globalized environments ... [but] it has ... [led to] a tendency to put an exaggerated stress on displacement, dislocation, and movement at the expense of place.”⁶⁶ Díaz writes fictions that fuse the binary of space and place and whose meaning is enhanced by employing a Lefebvrian understanding of the ways in which space is continually reproduced through social processes – thereby making place less about fixed points of reference and more about an evolving sense of a particular spatiality. Díaz positions his immigrant characters as figures with the agency to (re)construct the postsuburban spaces of New Jersey. His stories do not script postsuburban New Jersey as a landscape of “displacement” or “dislocation,” just as they don't compare it invidiously to an idealised homeland.

⁶⁵ Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 12.

⁶⁶ Sarah Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2007), 3.

Rather, the stories in *Drown* both reflect and constitute an effort by Dominican-Americans to redefine a sense of the local under the conditions of diaspora, and this sense is intimately associated with the remaking of former suburban spaces. Immigrant authors are recalibrating the established tropes of American fictions set in rural areas and the spaces of the American West. As many critics have noted, most recently Sarah Casteel, by inserting “minority presences into iconic landscapes ... [these authors] contest a spatial vocabulary of the nation that would contain minorities within the city and bar them from the ... spaces that represent an uncontaminated national essence.”⁶⁷ As we have seen, some commentary on suburban fictions, and on the suburbs as a more general socio-spatial phenomenon, has drawn on this idiom in advancing suburbia as a static, unquestioned reflection of white middle-class self-conceptions.

In contrast to this, my analysis of *The Tortilla Curtain* showed how the novel can represent a postsuburban spatiality of deterritorialised belonging, in the process reflecting the move much critical theory has made in coming to see the assumed links between geography and identity as deeply suspect. Similarly, my analysis of Díaz's stories uncovers the ways in which postsuburbia is constituted by a demographic often overlooked in approaches to fictions that privilege the rhetoric of settlement and the link between cultural economies and specific physical territories.

One of Díaz's key concerns in *Drown* is to counterpoint the Dominican-

⁶⁷

Ibid., 6.

American community found in the central city – in particular Washington Heights in Manhattan – with that of postsuburban New Jersey and the various centres that comprise it: New Brunswick, Hoboken, and Bedminster to name a few. Casteel observes that even in a globalised age the city “remains deeply bound up with modernist tropes of alienation and exile”⁶⁸ and Díaz's portrayal of the insular Dominican communities in the boroughs of New York City itself is suggestive of this notion. In 'Fiesta, 1980', whilst on a visit to his Aunt and Uncle's place in Queens, Yunió disparagingly describes their apartment as being furnished in “Contemporary Dominican Tacky” (24), reflecting a sense of disappointment at the limited range of cultural reference points on offer there. In 'Edison, New Jersey', as we shall see in more detail, the narrator, despite being born in the Dominican Republic, is bemused by the inward-looking nature of the Dominican community that he finds in Washington Heights. All of which echoes the speculations of two immigration scholars, who, in a contribution to a special issue of the *International Migration Review* propose the idea that the “parochialism” of big city ethnic ghettos is a problem “implied in [the] fiction by contemporary second-generation novelists such as Chang-Rae Lee ... and Junot Díaz.”⁶⁹ In Díaz's case, this problem is brought to our attention by the contrast he establishes between these more parochial communities and the lives of his characters in postsuburban New Jersey. Díaz resists having his characters follow a familiar trajectory from sending state to city ghetto; instead, by

⁶⁸ Casteel, 4-5.

⁶⁹ Josh DeWind and Philip Kasinitz, “Everything Old Is New Again? Processes and Theories of Immigrant Incorporation,” *International Migration Review* 31 (1997): 1101.

representing their lives in the flux of the outer city and severing their ties to the inner city, Díaz is able to contest exclusionary narratives of space and nation whether narratives of assimilation or multiculturalism. The test that Díaz then applies to his characters is to see how well they are able to resist constructing their postsuburban locales as ghettos and make a virtue of space.

The title story, 'Drown' is a cautionary tale about the way in which immigrant lives can be stymied by ghettoised thinking. The narrator's friend Beto "hate[s] everything about the neighborhood," he grows up in, an environment comprised of "break-apart buildings" and "the dump" (71), and, unlike the narrator, Beto formulates a plan to leave and has been at college for a year. The locales Díaz describes in 'Drown' suggest a landscape that is postindustrial and postsuburban, not in the sense that technology parks and retail outlets proliferate, but in the sense that the manufacturing jobs of the Fordist economy that initially transformed the area from its suburban iteration are now gone. As the narrator relates, "The dump has long since shut down, and grass has spread over it" (78).

Here we have a vision of the postsuburban landscape that has less to do with continual development and growth, and more to do with obsolescence and abandonment, and the narrator's tone in imparting this vision to us makes it quite clear that, unlike Beto, he feels himself to be "Going nowhere" (84). Unlike the imagined suburban ghetto of Frank and April Wheeler, in 'Drown' Díaz presents a former suburban space that in becoming postsuburban has in reality assumed some of the material conditions of the ghetto – its 'post-ing' has turned it into the very thing

that it was previously – and groundlessly – thought to be. And yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes quite clear that Díaz has little sympathy with the fatalistic causal relationship the narrator establishes between place and prospects.

In the neighbourhoods of Madison Park and New Brunswick, the community to which the narrator and Beto belong, is one that is described by Díaz in lyrical language that strives to convey the way in which the neighbourhood's spatiality is both bleak and beautiful, a product of its occupants' activities as well as the over-arching forces of macro-economic change. Kasia Boddy quotes James Wood's 1996 *Esquire* review of *Drown* when she asserts that Díaz “may not strive for 'stylistic lavishness' but nor is ... [his writing] consistently 'stripped down'.”⁷⁰ The very fact that, for Díaz, “authenticity does not preclude poetry” is indicative of the way that his work finds the transcendent in the mundane and the marginal. So, in the story 'Drown,' “nights were what we [the narrator and Beto] waited for” when families “arranged [themselves] on their porches, the glow from their TVs washing blue against the brick” (71-2). The narrator continues:

From my family apartment you could smell the pear trees that had been planted years ago, four to a court, probably to save us all from asphyxiation. Nothing moved fast, even the daylight was slow to fade, but as soon as night settled Beto and I headed down to the community center (72).

Thus, Díaz implies that the narrator is a far more sensitive observer of his neighbourhood than his curt denunciations initially suggest him to be. The ways in which the reader shares this insight into the narrator's psychology, whilst the character himself remains lacking in the sort of self-

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Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950*, 132.

awareness that might allow him to derive some appreciation from his environment, only increases the story's tone of tragic irony.

Similarly, the narrator recounts a time from their past when Beto becomes jealous of the fact that he does not know the meaning of a word but the narrator does; this section of the story ends with the narrator sadly remarking that Beto “thought I didn't read, not even dictionaries” (73). This incident is echoed at the story's conclusion when, having refused to meet up with Beto who is recently returned from his studies at Rutgers, the narrator recalls the moment when Beto first left for university and gave him a leaving present, a book which, “after he was gone I threw ... away, didn't even bother to open it” (85).

The sense that the narrator is on the cusp of making something of himself but is unable to resist undermining his cause is irreducibly linked to his perception that restrictive socio-spatial boundaries operate in his part of postsuburban New Jersey. At one point, when describing one of his and Beto's old haunts, he remarks that, “In the distance you can see the Raritan, as shiny as an earthworm, the same river my homeboy goes to school on” (83). Whilst it is clear that the narrator has the capabilities to go to the very same school, he perceives Rutgers as literally and metaphorically out of reach: he feels unable to cross the river (the phonic similarity between 'Raritan' and 'Rubicon' takes on a symbolic resonance here) and Díaz's choice of simile makes plain the narrator's lack of inspiration at the prospect of following Beto's path.

Likewise, the swimming pool at the community center where Beto and the narrator spend so much of their time is used by Díaz as a figure to

reveal the narrator's self-circumscription. The narrator confides that the water of the swimming pool “feels good,” and that “Starting at the deep end ... [he] can glide over the slick-tiled bottom without kicking up a spume or making a splash”; he “can still go far without coming up.” In the pool “everything above is loud and bright everything below is whispers” (73). As Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien has shown, this passage works metaphorically to suggest that the narrator's reluctance to come up for air, leaving the “whispers” of his own myopic view of his community for all that is “loud and bright” above and beyond, puts him in danger of drowning. But, as Ch'ien also points out, in a swimming pool, “the boundaries separating water from air are permeable, so there always exists a possibility of reaching higher places. The metaphor of a swimming pool is an apt representation of this permeability.”⁷¹

The story's tragedy is derived from the way in which Díaz contrasts Beto's ability to overcome the insularity of the neighbourhood by realising his desire to get to university at Rutgers in nearby New Brunswick with the narrator's refusal to emerge from the depths. On the night on which the narrator learns Beto is back visiting from university he goes down to the pool certain that his erstwhile friend will call there. For the narrator “Little has changed” since the days when he and Beto frequented the place and he is immediately at ease with the familiar “stink of chlorine” and “bottles exploding against the lifeguard station” (72). Waiting for Beto, the narrator sits “near the sign that runs the pool during the day,” a sign that lists the rules of the pool but onto which someone has scrawled “No

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Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 233.

Whites” (73).

In this sense, then, Díaz's critique of the isolation inculcated by the tenets of multiculturalism builds on Hollinger's insights discussed earlier. In Hollinger's view a postethnic cosmopolitanism recognises the way individuals balance “communities of descent” with “a determination to make room for new communities” through self-determined affiliations.⁷² What 'Drown' points up in contrasting the narrator's and Beto's attitudes is the fact that such an outlook also affords individuals the agency to leave a community as well as join one. Significantly, Beto never returns to the pool where the narrator is waiting.

Of course, one of the chief reasons for the narrator's reluctance to follow Beto's path is the awkwardness he feels at the memory of two homosexual encounters they had previous to Beto's departure for university. As David Cowart observes, in 'Drown' sexuality “seems intimately related to changing one's circumstances” in that the narrator's inability to come to terms with his relationship to Beto is analogous to his inability to come to terms with remaking his circumstances and environment. But, as Cowart continues: “the story has little to do with gay apologetics. Rather, Díaz brilliantly devises a set of images and situations that make compelling the otherwise clichéd message of how ghettoized thinking perpetuates itself, how an underclass connives at its own entrapment.”⁷³

⁷² Hollinger, 3.

⁷³ Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*, 196.

If 'Drown' is an indictment of this sort of thinking, 'Aurora' and 'Edison, New Jersey' follow the fortunes of two Dominican-American characters, also the stories' narrators, who eschew the ghetto and all that it stands for.

In 'Aurora' the narrator is a delinquent drug-dealer, Lucero, who makes money pushing to various gangs and who is struggling to maintain a relationship with his addict girlfriend. In 'Fiesta 1980' which immediately precedes 'Aurora' in the collection, Díaz has Yunior repeatedly vomit in the back of his family's van every time they undertake a journey. Yunior confides in the reader that, having “never had trouble with cars before,” the van and the numerous journeys along the New Jersey Turnpike seem to act on him like a “curse” (20). Given that this story concerns the efforts of Yunior's family to establish themselves in New Jersey after Ramón, the father, sends for them to leave the Dominican Republic, there can be little doubt that the vomiting episode is suggestive of the disorienting nature of Yunior's experience of being transplanted from one place to another, as well as of the initially confounding nature of the postsuburban landscape and its multiple freeways.

The poignancy of this aspect of 'Fiesta, 1980' contrasts strikingly with the opening of 'Aurora'. Here Lucero has a completely different relationship to the synaesthetic effects of automobiles to that of the discombobulated Yunior. At the beginning of the story, as he and his friend and fellow petty criminal, Cut, return from a deal, Lucero describes how the effects of the “superweed” he has just smoked, combined with the fact that their route home takes them past a biscuit factory, means they “could have sworn ... [they] smelled cookies baking right in the back seat [of their

vehicle]” (37). With Lucero far more established in New Jersey in this story than the newly-arrived Yuniór in 'Fiesta, 1980', I suggest that by abutting these two car/travel-related incidents, Díaz foregrounds the fact that Lucero is far more at ease in this particular spatiality because he has the means necessary to negotiate it.

'Aurora' is a story that confirms the importance of arterial freeways to the functioning of postsuburbia. For Lucero, cruising around in his Pathfinder truck, the roads of this part of middle New Jersey are indelibly associated with formative experiences; he says: “Everything that catches in my headlights – the stack of old tires, signs, shacks – has a memory scratched onto it. Here's where I shot my first pistol. Here's where we stashed our porn magazines. Here's where I kissed my first girl” (46). The roads linking the nucleated parts of postsuburbia are more than just conduits for cars, however: they are repositories of deeply personal associations. Moreover, Lucero adds that, contrary to the common perception that it is impossible to navigate a path through postsuburban spatialities without recourse to a car, he actually prefers to conduct his business on foot: “That's the way we run things, the less driving, the better.” Lucero's preference for navigating around his neighbourhood through “foot action” (40), as opposed to relying on his truck, makes him a character whose freedom in not being dependent on the automobile seemingly makes him far more comfortable using one when he has to.

What is also noteworthy about 'Aurora' is the way in which Díaz balances the unstinting exposition of the indigence of Lucero's existence with a desire to celebrate both his naïve efforts to save his deeply drug-

addicted girlfriend, the eponymous Aurora, and his resourcefulness in appropriating space to his own ends, even if those ends are very often criminal. Díaz's use of free indirect discourse leaves Lucero's rhythmic street-talk intact and its observations unquestioned, so that when he relays to us the way in which a significant Dominican-American sub-culture has sprung up in and around, beyond and below, the various highways that traverse his neighbourhood, the reader comes to admire the way that life – of a sort – is flourishing in these spaces.

In a sub-section of the story entitled 'Corner', Lucero describes a particular part of his postsuburban world in language that attests to its organic, evolving quality. After leaving his apartment, part of a collection of such buildings which “are all the same, no surprises, whatsoever,” the narrator proceeds to the corner where, by contrast,

You watch anything long enough and you can become an expert at it. Get to know how it lives, what it eats ... You can hear the dice clicking on the curb and every truck and souped-up shitmobile that rolls in from the highway announces itself with bass. The corner's where you smoke, eat, fuck, where you play selo (45).

This sense of a postsuburban landscape that is mutable and evolving is also conveyed by Díaz's parodying of one of the central tenets of postsuburban theorisation – that of the importance of office space to booming businesses.⁷⁴ He has Lucero and Cut appropriate the utility room in their apartment block by forcing the lock, thereby creating something “like an extension, an office” (38) from which they can conduct their drug-dealing business. This gesture is evident later on in the story, too, when Lucero employs the idiom of a corporate executive alongside his usual hip

⁷⁴ See in particular, Garreau, *Edge City*, and Robert E. Lang, *Edgeless Cities: Exploring the Elusive Metropolis* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

slang when relating that because he and Cut have been “making mad paper” he's now “thinking it's time to grow, to incorporate” (41).

One reading of 'Edison, New Jersey', the final story analysed in this chapter, is as a narrative that confirms the fashion in which the narrator and his co-driver, Wayne, “as delivery men ... return, over and over, to the home of the master, the home of the gallingly rich and superior Anglo for whom, now and forever, they labor.”⁷⁵ My reading of the story, however, disputes this position. In my view, 'Edison' actually serves to show how in the postsuburban landscape of New Jersey the “gallingly rich and superior Anglo” is very much a minority figure who exercises surprisingly little influence over the production of this particular spatiality.

In the opening page of the story we read that the Anglo customer they're trying to deliver to, a man by the name of Pruitt, lives in a residential area that seems still to be under construction. Whilst Wayne attempts to get someone to come to the door, the narrator relates that, fancying a break, he walks around “the newly-planted rosebushes” and “over to the ditch that has been cut next to the road” where there is “a drainpipe half filled with water” (93).⁷⁶ This intimation that the customer's neighborhood is in a transitional phase of development is confirmed later in the story when the delivery men revisit and the narrator lets us know that “Pruitt's neighborhood has recently gone up and only his

⁷⁵ Cowart, 202.

⁷⁶ Díaz himself worked as a pool table delivery driver before he became a full-time writer. See Edward Marriott, “The Return of the Young Master,” *Observer*, February 10, 2008. Accessed online, 10/05/2011: (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/feb/10/culture.fiction>).

court is complete” (101). Pruitt is conspicuous by his absence. The reader learns that he is away on business and the simple fact that he is so rarely at home is the main reason why the two men return. When Wayne and the narrator do manage to make the delivery, it is only because Pruitt's Dominican maid finally lets them in. But, more than this (and in a characteristically subtle allusion), Díaz suggests just how redundant Pruitt's 'sort' is becoming in this evolving environment when he has the narrator notice that “New gingkoes stand in rows” beside Pruitt's driveway. Gingkoes are ancient trees that the narrator recognises as “Living fossils ... Unchanged since their inception millions of years ago” (105). The gingkoes are a synonym for the man who owns the land on which they stand; like him they seem curiously anachronistic in the postsuburban landscape. Indeed, Díaz makes plain the multi-ethnic nature of the places to which Wayne – an African-American – and the narrator deliver. They are just as likely to deliver to “a dentist from Ghana” (94) as they are to an Anglo.

It is also significant to note that, in a world in which Anglo influence and presence is diminishing, it is not, however, his fellow Dominican-Americans with whom the narrator identifies. Despite his somewhat half-hearted seduction of Pruitt's maid – a seduction which, despite the maid reminding him of his ex-girlfriend, Jeva, is conceived out of contempt for Pruitt more than anything else – the narrator signally fails to forge any sort of personal bond with her. The maid lives in the Dominican community of Washington Heights in Manhattan, and it is back to this enclave, thinking that he is rescuing her, that the narrator takes her after

he and Wayne are finally successful in delivering Pruitt's Gold Crown pool table. But the maid herself struggles to identify the narrator as being of Dominican origin ("You don't look it" [103]) and she comes to realise that, unlike her, he no longer maintains a close family link to Washington Heights. The narrator's indifference to what Washington Heights represents is borne out by the ambivalent tone he adopts when describing the street scene he encounters there: "I could be the guy who's on the street corner selling Dominican flags. I could be on my way home to my girl" (107). But he is not.

Díaz seems to imply that the postsuburban landscapes of New Jersey at least offer the prospect of something different, beyond the ghetto. At the climax to the story, the narrator discovers that, despite having returned her to her family in Washington Heights, Pruitt's maid is back in his employment against her previously expressed wish to be rid of him and the job. When the narrator asks the maid how she likes the States, a question that alerts the reader to the fact that she has not been in the country long, certainly not as long as her interlocutor, she replies that she is "not surprised by any of it" (107). It is a conclusion that hints at her experience of America as an immigrant, and her work for Pruitt, as being a reiteration of the sort of exploitation that the Dominican Republic experienced at the hands of the US when she was still living on the island. The narrator moves to the US as a little boy and, as such, is at a different stage of immigrant experience.⁷⁷ In this way, it seems that the maid is

⁷⁷ We might even see the narrator as a different type of immigrant to the maid belonging to what Rubén Rumbaut terms the "one-and-a-half" generation, a generation

caught in a cycle that the narrator, having grown accustomed over a number of years to life in postsuburban New Jersey, is not. When the narrator returns the maid to Manhattan, he asks her which street in “Dominicana” she lives on; her reply is that she doesn't know but that her mother and brothers live there (103). The contrast between the narrator's experience and the maid's could not be more stark: it seems that she is destined to remain subservient to either Pruitt or the dictates of her Dominican background. Either way, in continually swapping one insular and embattled existence for another, her individual agency is curtailed in a way that the narrator's is not.

For the narrator, life in postsuburban Jersey is akin to what he terms a “prediction game” (102), in that he never entirely knows what to expect but covets this same uncertainty. In this sense, the “philosophical approach” (93) he takes to his job by treating it as an opportunity to accommodate himself to the everyday, and find satisfaction there, echoes Frank Bascombe's. In contrast to the more uptight Wayne, the narrator is just as likely to poke subversive fun at a rich customer (the “Doctors, diplomats, surgeons, presidents of universities”) by insisting – on spurious health and safety grounds – that they pick up the newspaper path laid down “from the front door to the game room” (94) as he is to wander off mid-job for a smoke, and to watch in a drainage ditch “a mama duck and

whose members were born in one country and then grew up in another. Gustavo Pérez Firmat points out that such individuals are unique in that they “may find it possible to circulate within and throughout both the old and new cultures. While one-and-a-halfers may never feel entirely at ease in either one, they are capable of availing themselves of the resources – linguistic, artistic, commercial – that both cultures have to offer.” See: Rubén Rumbaut, “The Agony of Exile,” in, F. Ahearn and J. L. Athey, eds., *Refugee Children* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 61; Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 4-5.

her three ducklings scavenge the grassy bank and then float downstream like they're on the same string. Beautiful" (93). The figure of the narrator, then, in the self-confident ease with which he negotiates life beyond the central city, could not be more different from the nervous and reticent maid who appears uncomfortable at both Pruitt's and in Washington Heights.

Additionally, Díaz presents him as a figure who has reconciled himself to a life without much money. At one stage, relating how "I can build a table with my eyes closed," the narrator expresses admiration for, and aligns his somewhat lesser craft with, the skills of artisans in previous civilisations:

Most people don't realize how sophisticated pool tables are. Yes, tables have bolts and staples on the rails but these suckers hold together mostly by gravity and by the precision of their construction. If you treat a good table right it will outlast you. Believe me. Cathedrals are built like that. There are Incan roads in the Andes that even today you couldn't work a knife between two of the cobblestones. The sewers that the Romans built in Bath were so good that they weren't replaced until the 1950s. That's the sort of thing I can believe in (99).

The narrator thus becomes a figure who is removed from the affectations and acquisitiveness of a market-driven society; as he says of himself, "Money's never stuck to me, ever" (99). But if he is a figure more concerned with other definitions of wealth, he also seems comfortable with his lack of financial security, despite his compulsive petty thievery. In discussing the rise of "transnational suburbs," Mike Davis observes that "sending communities have become fully integrated into the economy of the immigrant metropolis,"⁷⁸ but, in 'Edison', Díaz qualifies this idea

⁷⁸

Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 96.

through the example of the narrator showing that such immersion does not necessarily mean complete deference to consumer imperatives.

The story engages the ways in which immigrants have to negotiate a balance between stability and flux, and between absorption and resistance. The narrator is successful in this, I would argue, and his opinion of Pruitt's lavish lifestyle is conveyed in an exchange with the maid in which he tries to explain to her that what she sees as her boss's love of clothes is just "A habit of money" (105), although pertinently, the phrase doesn't translate into Dominican-Spanish and the maid is left none the wiser.

Díaz embeds the narrator within a working class that constitutes the significant demographic in the area in which he lives and works. He tells of how on the bus home he sits "next to this three hundred pound rock-and-roll chick who washes dishes at the Friendly's" and who "tells ... [him] about the roaches she kills with her water nozzle" (97). The sense of solidarity that the narrator feels with this woman is indicated not only by the fact that he sits next to her and listens, but that he takes the trouble to relate the encounter, apparently fascinated by the woman's story in which she describes the way that the water "Boils the wings right off them" [97]).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the narrator's relative poverty, Díaz scripts a postsuburban imaginary that functions as something of a playground for his lead protagonist. As with Lucero in 'Aurora', Díaz's narrator in 'Edison' is someone who has a slightly anarchic relationship with the spaces around him and the ambivalence Díaz shows towards 'Drown's' narrator is similarly discarded here in favour of something approaching admiration for the tenacity and spirit of this particular

Dominican-American immigrant. The narrator is not shy to recount the occasions on which, during deliveries, whilst Wayne is building the pool table, and if the owners of the house leave them to it, he prefers to “explore” and “take cookies from the kitchen, razors from the bathroom cabinets” (94); although he's been “caught roaming around plenty of times ... you'd be surprised how quickly someone believes you're looking for the bathroom if you don't jump when you're discovered” (95).

This impression is bolstered by Díaz's use of the lottery as the story's central metaphor. The narrator is a habitual buyer of lottery tickets, a practice that perhaps informs the way that he plays his “prediction game” with Jeva in which they imagine the sort of routes, deliveries, people and places his job will throw up on any given day, and underlines a similar game he plays with Wayne in which they guess which city they'll be visiting first, a game that “gives us something to look forward to” in the same way that “the numbered balls pop out during the lottery drawings” (109). What this points to figuratively is the notion that the postsuburban spatiality that the narrator navigates on a daily basis functions as the biggest lottery of all; not in the sense of it perhaps being a passport to Pruitt-like riches, but in the sense of it offering a diverting variety of experiences if directly engaged with.

Díaz calls the story 'Edison, New Jersey' because, at the end of the narrative, the narrator nominates this place as his predicted destination for the next day's deliveries. But, as the narrator himself admits, “It could be anywhere” (109). This is a concession that speaks to the extent to which he is comfortable in this postsuburban third space, and to Díaz's

recognition that the immigrant experience in contemporary America renders deeply questionable the claims of a particular geographical site to signify any one thing in particular, culturally or socially. This is an idea that is also germane to the next chapter's discussion of Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995), a novel published, like *The The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown*, in the mid-1990s, and which examines the way technological innovation contributes to the instability of the relationship between place, space, and identity.

CHAPTER 4

“A kingdom of a thousand princes but no kings”: The Postsuburban Network in Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*

The network is the urban site before us, an invitation to design and construct the City of Bits ... this new settlement will turn classical categories inside out and will reconstruct the discourse in which architects have engaged...

This will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its places will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets.

How shall we shape it?¹

- William J. Mitchell

In the first full-length study of Douglas Coupland's writing, Andrew Tate makes a case for the Canadian as an author concerned with rewriting the “perceived blandness of the middle-class periphery ... the much maligned world of suburbia.”² As Tate sees it, the “alleged sterility and blandness of suburban life ... holds a paradoxical sense of creativity and mystery for Coupland”: as the “ordinariness of the suburbs evaporates ... the banal is remade as a magical space.”³ Whilst Tate positions Coupland as a writer who, through his love of the ephemerality of consumer-culture manifested

¹ William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 24.

² Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 109.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

in the suburbs, strives to portray them as places of engaging eccentricity, in this chapter I am interested in re-casting Coupland as doing more than just re-writing the suburban periphery. I want to propose that with his third novel, *Microserfs* (1995), Coupland, like Boyle and Díaz, scripts a particular facet of an emerging postsuburban spatiality. Where *The Tortilla Curtain* and certain of the short stories in *Drown* represent postsuburbia in the forms of the exurb, and the inner-ring suburb as a spatiality that might be transformed by the impact of immigration, *Microserfs* explores the relationship between socio-spatial change and technology and suggests that, in a networked society, the centre/periphery model for understanding metropolitan forms is no longer useful.

Silicon Valley, in *Microserfs* the place to which the titular computer whizzes relocate following their departure from Microsoft, can be characterised as an “Edge City,” a postsuburban form of development identified by Joel Garreau in 1991.⁴ In Garreau's formulation, an Edge City essentially represents a newly established built environment that features the sorts of jobs and services that would previously have been found in downtown areas. Whereas, in *Revolutionary Road* Frank's workplace, Knox Business Machines, occupies a central location in midtown Manhattan, in Coupland's novel the work of those involved in the development of new technologies is undertaken in a place beyond even the

⁴ Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, Toronto, London and Sydney: Anchor Books, 1991). Garreau declares that an Edge City should display the following characteristics: five million square feet of leasable office space; six hundred thousand square feet of leasable retail space; more jobs than bedrooms; perceived by the population to be one, mixed-use place, from shopping, to jobs to entertainment; was nothing like a city thirty years ago (6-7).

original city periphery. In the case of Silicon Valley, Garreau relates that its founding was part of a trend in which “new jobs and wealth ... [were] pushed as far as physically possible from the ... old urban core”⁵ in the San Francisco Bay Area, itself no longer viable for development on the basis of geographical and political constraints. Whilst Garreau acknowledges that Silicon Valley emerged from what was once San Francisco's “far suburbs” in “arid farm country,”⁶ his categorisation of it as a self-sufficient, mixed-use Edge City departs from that of another observer of Valley life, Po Bronson. For Bronson, writing in 1999, Silicon Valley is just “an endless suburb, hushed and nonchalant, in terrain too flat to deserve the term 'valley'.”⁷

However, Garreau asserts that Silicon Valley cannot be understood through previous conceptions of the urban and suburban, and that it is a problematic place, not least for its residents who can “find the swirl of functions intimidating, confusing, maddening” because few who “bought into the idea of quarter-acre tranquility [the clichéd suburban dream] ever expected to take a winding turn [in their car] and suddenly be confronted with a 150-foot colossus [of an office block] looming over the trees.”⁸ This particular expression of the postsuburban ecology is on the edge both literally and metaphorically.

As the subtitle to his book suggests, Garreau understands Silicon

⁵ Ibid., 310.

⁶ Ibid., 315.

⁷ Po Bronson, quoted in, Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 178.

⁸ Garreau, 9-10.

Valley to be another manifestation of the frontier in American life.⁹ This chapter is not an effort to assess, geographically, sociologically or ethnographically, the viability of Garreau's model. Instead, through a close reading of *Microserfs*, it will show that an understanding of Edge Cities as a discrete type of postsuburban spatiality is important to my purpose of revealing a trend in contemporary American literature towards re-assessing the notion of suburbia as a cultural site. Moreover, the ensuing analysis of *Microserfs* will establish that, despite the often confounding nature of Silicon Valley as an Edge City habitat, where, in Garreau's words, "the delicate balance between unlimited opportunity and rippling chaos"¹⁰ is forever having to be struck, in Coupland's novel it is a habitat that markedly complicates conventional understandings of the way in which frontiers operate. I argue that *Microserfs* represents the Edge City frontier as a democratic spatiality, and that the novel's characters are involved in a process by which traditional modes of entrepreneurial capitalism centred on ruthless acquisitiveness are questioned and transformed.

Garreau is a journalist, but, like him, academic historians of Silicon Valley utilise the trope of the frontier as an evolutionary proving ground when writing about the functioning of its society. It has been suggested that, in the Valley, "social capital and trust" are generated through

⁹ Recourse to the discourse of the frontier seems to be common amongst journalistic accounts of the Valley's rise to prominence: David A. Kaplan writes that "Like the West of earlier generations, it is a state of mind, combining real-life drama and unadulterated myth," whilst Michael Lewis refers to Jim Clark, the founder of Netscape, as the archetypal Silicon Valley entrepreneur in the sense that he seemed "built to work on the frontier of economic life when the frontier was once again up for grabs." See, David A. Kaplan, *The Silicon Boys* (New York: Perennial, 2000 [1999]), 17, and Michael Lewis, *The New New Thing: How Some Man You've Never Heard of Just Changed Your Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), xii.

¹⁰ Garreau, 8.

“instrumental interactions among actors that have specific economic aims, and not through intense civic engagement,” thereby making it “a community of performance” in which “capital gains are the objective.”¹¹ In this paradigm, each new arrival to the Valley is branded a “new user,”¹² interfacing with rapidly evolving technologies simply to acquire capital.

Coupland advances a very different socio-spatial model of the Valley. Whilst in *Microserfs* postsuburban Silicon Valley is constructed as a frontier in the sense that the programmers are at the vanguard of technological development, it is, nonetheless, represented as a spatiality that is predicated on the inter-personal collaboration of the inhabitants who work together in order to engage with ideas, above all else. Indeed, in one historical account of Silicon Valley's emergence acknowledgment is made of this aspect of the Valley's socio-spatial configuration, and it is this “story of Silicon Valley as a practiced and creative process among people networked within a habitat”¹³ that *Microserfs* elaborates upon. As has been seen previously, in contemplating the architectural limits of postmodern landscapes, the anthropologist Marc Augé has advanced the conception of a “non-place” as a space which denies the animating force of society. However, Augé's theorisations also seem to point to a way in which such liminal spaces might be seen more positively as a type of frontier. He writes:

¹¹ Stephen Cohen and Gary Fields, paraphrased by Martin Kenney in his introduction to, Martin Kenney, ed., *Understanding Silicon Valley: The Anatomy of an Entrepreneurial Region* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 10. See also, Chong-Moon Lee, William F. Miller, Marguerite Gong Hancock, and Henry S. Rowen, *The Silicon Valley Edge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹² Martin Kenney, “Introduction,” in, Kenney, 11-12.

¹³ Lee et al., 15.

A frontier is not a wall, but a threshold. It is not for nothing that in all the world's cultures, crossroads and boundaries have been the focus of intense ritual activity ... our ideal ought not to be a world without frontiers, but one where all frontiers are recognized, respected and permeable; a world, in fact, where respect for differences would start with the equality of all individuals.¹⁴

The audacity of Coupland's narrative lies in the way it dares to inscribe such a notion of what a frontier should be into the very heart of an environment commonly regarded as being at the expression of a runaway capitalist system to which there is no alternative.

Tate's study champions Coupland as an author whose work "echoes the objectives of Edward Soja's groundbreaking and polemical study, *Postmodern Geographies* (1989)" through a "turn to a space-oriented mode of thought."¹⁵ Yet, Tate's study only comments on suburban space as traditionally conceived in cultural forms, focusing on those novels of Coupland's which deal with the "faux utopian ... myth of shallow suburban serenity."¹⁶ It feels like a missed opportunity that his insights into Coupland's fiction do not discern his subject also identifying and representing new forms of space. I agree with Tate that Coupland is a writer concerned with spatial issues; however, my analysis of *Microserfs* will suggest that, more than this, Coupland is a writer engaged with the changing nature of socio-spatial forms, as expressed in postsuburban Silicon Valley in particular.

On settling in Silicon Valley, Coupland's eponymous code writers

¹⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Super-Modernity* (London: Verso, 2008 [1995]), xiv.

¹⁵ Tate, 109. The novels Tate refers to are *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), and *Miss Wyoming* (2000).

¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

undertake to devise a piece of computer software that enables its users to both reflect and reconstitute the built environment around them. The Oop!¹⁷ software is effectively a computerised version of Lego, a product that, in its shiny plasticity and capacity to be endlessly reproduced in differing forms, is redolent of the sort of 'big-box' architecture that might be seen as characteristic of postsuburban development.¹⁸ Like computers, Lego needs a particular application in order to be utilised – of itself it is simply a collection of knobbly bricks that do not constitute anything, just as a computer is an assemblage of different bits of hardware. This is an idea on which Abe, one of the group of programmers, elaborates: “Lego is ontologically not unlike computers. This is to say that a computer by itself is, well ... *nothing* ... Ditto Lego. To use an Excel spreadsheet or to build a racing car – this is why we have computers and Lego.”¹⁹

Pursuing this analogy, it could be argued that Coupland invokes Lego in the novel to criticise the aesthetic of Silicon Valley with its uninspiring buildings housing uninspiring machines that only come to life in the quest for a new application. In countering this view, however, I would echo the opinion of Robert Latham that, rather than summoning up the clichéd critical idiom of suburban commentaries in order to indict the

¹⁷ Oop is an acronym with common currency in the computing world. It stands for object-oriented programming and refers to such computer languages as C++. Such programming languages are regarded as having initiated a move towards conceiving of the computer as an expressive medium. See N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 59.

¹⁸ “Big-box” architecture is typically associated with large, free-standing, single-floor stores that specialise in selling large quantities of a product or products. Generally such stores are found alongside freeway exits. Examples of these outlets would include Home Depot and Target.

¹⁹ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004 [1995]), 82. All future references to this novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

postsuburban Valley as blandly uniform in its architecture, the way that the Lego-like components of Oop! are used in the programme is actually indicative of a “spirit of play.” This spirit imbues the “blighted fragments of a capitalist object ... with a dimension of subjectivity it has otherwise lost – hence the name of the [former Microserfs'] start-up company: “Interiority.”²⁰

What *Microserfs* depicts then, is a postsuburban environment that is superficially bland, but not superficial; rather, it is its very malleability, and reproducible spatiality, that is indicative of, and conducive to, invention and autonomy. Neil Campbell has argued that the American West is a “schizo-space” which is “at once gridded, rooted, and territorialized ... while [being] simultaneously ungridded, routed, and deterritorializing.”²¹ As such, Interiority's development of Oop! Along Lego-like lines becomes a virtual representation of the way in which the emergence of a postsuburban environment in the Valley reflects the very real deconstruction of the region's previous spatial patterning. If, as Abe observes, “code is the architecture of the '90s” (23), then that architecture, in the virtual dimension as well as in reality, is an architecture that is playfully utilitarian.

Writing about *Microserfs*, Nick Heffernan proposes that

Oop!'s defining feature is precisely the way it abstracts the object world into virtual building blocks with which users play at constructing an unlimited range of simulacra ... Thus ... increasing distance from the site of material production and disengagement from the physical world ... [making it] at once the cause of anxiety and the

²⁰ Robert Latham, *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 178.

²¹ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 11.

strategy for its management.²²

Yet, I would argue that the Oop! Code works in just the opposite way to this. More than simply a way of managing a retreat from reality, it actually allows for a heightened engagement with the material world as constituted in the socio-spatial conditions of the postsuburban Edge City environment. As the central character Daniel Underwood observes in the diary that comprises the epistolary form of the narrative, the Oop! project is designed as a “powerful *real-world* modeling tool usable by scientists, animators, contractors, and architects.” It is, in Abe's words “a 3-D modeling system with almost unlimited future potential” (72).

Thus, the ascendant information economy that the Interiority group is part of has not totally replaced the Fordist economy that had manufacturing at its base; rather, this new phase in capitalist development promises to absorb and transform elements of its predecessor. In fact, one of the other coders, Bug, remarks that the Oop! software will retain all that is stimulating about manufacturing because of its use of bricks as constituent parts; whilst the virtuality of the modeling tool is remarkable, it still relies on imagination to get the most out of it (76). This sense that the Oop! project prioritises a sense of fun and improvisation – and, of course, the very name itself is redolent of a childish utterance – marks the novel out as an early index of what Richard Florida has since termed the “creative economy.”²³ I will return to the class implications of such a shift in the way that capitalism is apprehended later in my analysis, but at this

²² Nick Heffernan, *Capital, Class and Technology in Contemporary American Culture: Projecting Post-Fordism* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 93.

²³ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class (And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life)* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 44.

point it is sufficient to note that *Microserfs* does seem to fictionalise a new phase in the economic order in which

entirely new forms of economic infrastructure, such as systematic spending on research and development, the high-tech startup company and an extensive system of venture finance, have evolved to support creativity and mobilize creative people around promising ideas and products. Capitalism has also expanded its reach to capture the talents of heretofore excluded groups of eccentrics and nonconformists.²⁴

Furthermore, Coupland's commitment to this task is evidenced by the techniques he employs to give his narrative shape, with the diary format allowing the reader direct access to Daniel's thoughts, the very eccentric, nonconformist subjectivity that Florida identifies as key to this new strain of capitalism. Indeed, Coupland's insistence on including a variety of puns, cultural references, and typographical experiments in the novel confirms his own place, as an author of experimental fiction, at the forefront of this nascent form of late capitalism.

Microserfs is also a novel that represents the passing of the formerly predominant model of understanding urban forms, the suburb/city binary. Redmond, where the Microserfs are living at the outset of the novel, is a classic postwar residential suburb to the east of Seattle's downtown. Coupland's narrator, Daniel Underwood, has a deeply equivocal relationship with Redmond and his suburban home – but not because he feels the weight of a soul-destroying conformity. Rather, he is ambivalent about this environment simply because it seems to be in decay: the group house he shares with his fellow Microsoft workers is a typical “split-level ranch-type” (4) construction, but it is “colonized” by “moss and algae.” All

²⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

around “many a Redmond garage contains a never-used kayak collecting dust” (7), confirming the general sense of ennui and dissolution.

What is evident here is that Coupland is drawing on a rich stock of suburban cliché. The sense of people passing through but never really inhabiting suburban space is redolent of William Whyte's work on suburbanites as transients, whilst his use of the imagery of colonisation, disembodiment, and possession draws on the tropes of much suburban Gothic literature.²⁵ Coupland is deliberately foregrounding the conventional suburban imaginary which advances the suburbs as a white middle-class dystopia, insisting on a deterministic link between space and character, in order that the distinction between Redmond and Silicon Valley might be made more explicit. In effect, Coupland uses parody here to sever the suburban from the postsuburban; the latter, in its Silicon Valley incarnation, is, in Bug's words, “a purposefully blank location ... you feel as if you're nowhere. Feeling like you're *somewhere* must be bad for ideas” (193). Bug's observation echoes Augé's contemplation of the characteristics of “non-places,” but conveys a sense in which such spatialities may actually be empowering.

In this way, the novel's representation of the postsuburban Valley becomes an exercise in casting off the baggage of an overdetermined sense of what suburbia should look like in fiction. Tellingly, not long after the Microserfs begin their journey south to Silicon Valley, they pass “a suburb of Eugene, Oregon” and Daniel observes that developers have put

²⁵ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [1956]); Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

“desperate signs up to flog [the redundant housing stock]” (98). We can therefore see the protagonists of Coupland's novel as undertaking a physical and psychological journey away from – and beyond – suburbia as a socio-spatial expression.

This is an idea that is explored further when the group learns of the destruction caused by the earthquake that strikes Los Angeles in January 1994, a few months after they first arrive in California. Ethan, recruited by Michael to secure capital for the Oop! project, and a Los Angeles native, reacts badly to the news reports that detail the extent of the damage caused to the suburban areas to the north of downtown: “‘The freeways!’ moaned Ethan. ‘My beloved freeways – Antelope Valley, ripped and torn, the 405, rubble – the Santa Monica freeway at La Cienega – all collapsed’” (223). By way of consolation, Daniel reports that they all “ate breakfast ... [and] leafed through the *Handbook of Highway Engineering* (1975), and watched all the collapsed structures [on the TV news footage]”. He notes sombrely that “it really *did* make us sad to see all of this glorious infrastructure in ruins, like a crippled giant” (223). Later, the Microserfs attempt to ease their disquiet by displacing their sorrow onto a fictional representation of a comparable cataclysm as they rent the film *Earthquake* and watch LA “dismantle itself about fifty times, frame-by-frame” (232). What is worth noting here is that Ethan and the others seem to be mourning the passing of an infrastructure purpose-built to support the postwar boom in suburban living. By having the group relocate to postsuburban Silicon Valley at the very time when the structural underpinnings of suburban Los Angeles seem to be breaking, Coupland

sets his narrative up purposefully to represent the transition from one epoch to another.

Whilst, materially, the Microsoft campus (located in a different part of Redmond), with its manicured lawns and vast expanses of “sea foam green glass” (14), foreshadows much of the nondescript, easily replicated building style of postsuburban Silicon Valley, in terms of the novel's narrative, Coupland has it function primarily as the sort of monolithic corporate headquarters that suburbanites had been travelling back to the city to for decades. It is significant to note that when Daniel and his friends relocate to Silicon Valley he writes in his diary that leaving Microsoft and the corporate bind was like emerging “into the real world after spending two years in a hermetically sealed, self-referential, self-sufficient environment” (98), and that “the Valley is a whole multi-city complex of persnickety eggheads, not one single Orwellian technoplex, like Microsoft” (116). At the outset of the narrative in one of his first diary entries, Daniel confides in the reader that his “universe consists of home, Microsoft, and Costco” (3) and the inflexibility of this spatial matrix is mirrored by a sense in which time also seems to be stuck: “Everyone at Microsoft seems, well, literally 31.2 years old” (15). This atmosphere of stasis is confirmed when Daniel writes of how his girlfriend, Karla, likens his brain to mouldy beef (“kind of pink, with gray fuzz growing on it” [90]), an effect brought about by the mundanity of his Redmond existence. This is in stark contrast to the way in which the characters conceive of the Valley as a place in which, spatially and temporally, they will be more free; a place where they will be able to “*speed up the dream ... dream in volume*

[my emphasis]" (89). Indeed, Coupland repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the fact that the Interiority members are not working in a large tech complex, even though such environments, for example the Palo Alto Research Center, are to be found in the Valley.

What *Microserfs* represents, then, is an alternative to this campus model of development. When they first arrive, the programmers, to a large degree, live *and* work in Daniel's parents' home²⁶; Daniel relates that "We work at the south end of the house in a big room that was supposed to be the rumpus room ... paper is everywhere, just like gerbils nesting inside a Kleenex box." This is a well-chosen simile because, in fact, Michael "has installed his own two pet gerbils ... [in a space] which encircles his office" (117). Even at the point at which Interiority moves into its own offices, the distinction between home and workplace remains blurred. Daniel's Mom likes to leave the Underwood family cat, Misty, with the programmers whilst she goes shopping (230), and Michael's gerbils, and their offspring, still have pride of place in the workspace ("it's as if the walls are alive" [268]). As Graham Thompson has argued, as represented in American literature, the opposition between the spaces of work and home – sociologically-speaking one of the chief frames of reference for understanding the relationship of the suburb and the city – has always been incoherent.²⁷ What *Microserfs* seems to assert, however, in contrast to the prevailing tech culture in the Valley, is the distinct desirability of

²⁶ Whilst Michael, Daniel, and Karla live and work at the Underwoods', Todd, Bug, and Susan live elsewhere, although they spend much time there. Todd lives nearby in Silicon Valley, whilst Bug and Susan, in another twist on suburban convention, live in San Francisco and commute to the Valley.

²⁷ Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance*, 165.

this state-of-affairs when established on a small-scale – the scale of the start-up as opposed to the multinational.

Even before the Microserfs escape their servitude at Microsoft, the distinction between the home and the workplace is beginning to be eroded. Daniel relates that the layout of the group house is not dissimilar to that of Building 7 on campus in which their offices are situated. He dolorously observes that his PC is “hooked up by modem to the Campus” (29) in order to facilitate round-the-clock working. Whilst the boundary between home and work becomes even less distinct when the protagonists get to Silicon Valley, at Redmond their lack of autonomy and individuation is directly related to the fact that their lives – and the spaces of their home and their minds – are centralised in the service of the Microsoft Corporation. In the decentralised environment of Silicon Valley there is no corporate HQ, no intimidating CEO, and no crumbling suburb; instead there is, for Daniel and his friends, the freedom to work for whom they want, when they want, and where they want. Although this might seem to be akin to what some theorists discuss as the ‘corporatisation of the self’,²⁸ it is significant that

²⁸ For more on this idea see Catherine Casey, *Work, Self and Society: After Industrialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) and Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (London: Sage, 1986). Casey suggests that in a post-industrial economy “post-occupational work” is now the norm; that is to say that corporate culture transforms the previous understanding of “the psychic salvation of reparation, fellowship, righteous satisfaction of the fruits of one’s labor, and in serving one’s community and the reciprocity of interdependence.” Instead, Casey continues, work is now about the displacement of “one’s calling and its accompanying rules and ethics into the hands and direction of the company” which “seeks to gain a pervasive influence in every area of the employee’s life.” (See 196-197.) This pessimistic conclusion jars with Casey’s introductory remarks that she hopes that “social and cultural life after industrialism will be qualitatively better for selves than that under the iron embrace of industrialism” (6). Whilst *Microserfs* is equally critical of corporate culture, it does, nonetheless, through its representation of the Interiority group, describe a working existence that is both free of corporate influence, and intensely satisfying. As such, the novel has something in common with *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* which, as we have seen, also advances a thesis about finding fulfillment in work independent of the corporation.

there is never any doubt about *with* whom the friends would like to work, or *how* they see their working lives as being organised. For the Interiority members, the informality *and* integrity of the group is key.

The development of this idea marks *Microserfs* out as more than a continuation of the narrative of slacker attitudes presented in Coupland's debut novel, *Generation X* (1991). Unlike the triumvirate of Generation X dropouts, disillusioned with corporate culture,²⁹ in *Microserfs* Daniel, Michael, Karla, and the rest actively choose to work long hours, but, as their predilection for self-employment, improvisation and instinct shows, this is hard work that seems to be entirely in keeping with their demographic's most cherished mores. As if to prove this point, Coupland, in typically knowing fashion, comments on the way the phrase Generation X has passed into everyday use when he has Daniel record Michael's indignant, but "quite justified," rant "about all of this media-hype generation nonsense going on at the moment" (242). Abe, the only one of Daniel's Microserf friends to remain in Redmond after the others decamp to the Valley, sends an e-mail to Daniel that reveals his frustration at staying put, not only through its spelling mistakes and grammatical oversights, but also through its tone and content. In it, he alludes to the powerful stereotypes that have informed perceptions of suburban life and wonders about the possibility of discarding these by joining the others in Silicon Valley:

Maybe thinking you're supposed to "have a life" is a stupid way of buying into an untenable 1950s narrative of what life *supposed* [sic]

²⁹ See Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1992 [1991]). The novel concerns the efforts of Andy, Dag, and Claire to resist defining themselves by status, money, and jobs.

to be.

How do we know that all of these people with “no lives” aren't really on the new frontier of human sentience and perceptions? (187).

It is my contention that Coupland posits the postsuburban habitat as one in which those who found suburbia too prescriptive a spatiality can now realise a fuller expression of their agency. Abe wonders whether their role in advancing computer technology will elevate those with “no lives” to a more exalted status in society. But, more than this, the novel suggests that the “new frontier of human sentience and perceptions” is not just that involving cyborg technology, or the like. Despite its many ironic, playful gestures, the narrative privileges emotion and sentiment in a postmodern, postindustrial age that seems to threaten both, and it is the Microserfs themselves, the very people who seem most indivisible from the machines they work with, who are the exemplars of this reassertion of conscientious and good-natured feeling. This is a point to which I will return directly.

The Microserfs' unanticipated glee at escaping the auspices of their erstwhile boss is revealed when Daniel confides in his diary that, “Nobody rules here in the Valley,” and the absence of a central authority to which they have to defer comes as an initial shock: “It takes some getting used to” (108). As Paul Giles reminds us, it has also become convention to conflate the abstractions of a postmodern landscape such as Silicon Valley with the abstract languages of technology.³⁰ Doing so can uphold the sense in which both can seem to be impenetrable to all but those in positions of power; yet, the narrative of *Microserfs* is constructed to resist such totalising interpretations of Silicon Valley's socio-spatial pattern. Daniel's

³⁰ Paul Giles, “Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53 (2007), 334-335.

diary entries are replete with descriptions of the Valley's geography. He writes of “a tastefully landscaped four-lane corridor of franchised food and metalically-skinned tech headquarters” (109), and in an e-mail reply to Abe excerpted in his diary, he notes the low-density of the settlements in the area, writing of a “J-shaped strand of cities,” one of which is Palo Alto, a place that boasts a population of only 55,900 spread over an area of 25.9 square miles (129). As Daniel describes it to Abe, Palo Alto is “half bedroom suburb, half futuristic 1970s science fiction movies starring Charlton Heston” (130).

In his journalistic investigation into the careers of some of Silicon Valley's most successful entrepreneurs, David Kaplan figures the place as a “force field” where the “center of gravity is neither” San Francisco to the north, nor San Jose to the south, but somewhere “in between”.³¹ In contrast to suburban Seattle where, from manicured campus lawns to standardised office carpets, the indices of Microsoft's presence are inescapable, in the postsuburban Valley what Daniel defines as, “the ACTION” (the innovative work of the multitude of start-ups), is “invisible from the outside” (137), adding to the sense of emancipation and freedom accorded by the decentralised spatiality. For Kaplan, the “invisibility” of the Valley's diffuse built environment has a direct correlation in what he terms its “social architecture” which is resistant to the 'vertical integration' model of hierarchical organisation utilised by most large companies. Such a socio-spatial configuration leads to a network of “interacting competitors” in which “Notions are continually shared, teams formed,

³¹

Kaplan, *Silicon Boys*, 25.

favors exchanged.”³² Indeed, what the young entrepreneurs discover in the valley is an environment free of the cult of “Bill” (Gates) and his influence over activity; as Ethan, himself the nominal President of the group's new venture, observes, “There is no center to the Valley in any real sense of the word ... [it is] a kingdom of a thousand princes but no kings” (136). Reflecting on the difference in working conditions between Redmond and Silicon Valley, Daniel, too, is in no doubt that he “prefer[s] the chaos of *here* to the predictability of ... *there*” (131).

One of the organising conceits of Coupland's narrative is the way in which Daniel's and his Dad's roles are reversed, with Daniel supporting his father after he is made redundant. By placing this father/son relationship at the heart of events, Coupland spatialises the generational nature of socio-political and socio-cultural change. Suffering following the loss of his job, Mr. Underwood exclaims that it is, “Funny how all those things you thought would never end turned out to be the first to vanish – IBM, the Reagans, Eastern bloc communism” (41), name-checking some of the institutions around which American society, as he knew it, cohered. It is significant that, in the immediate aftermath of being made redundant by IBM, Mr. Underwood flies up to Redmond to seek solace at Daniel's Microsoft group house. On arrival, Mr. Underwood looks “tired and scared” (40), but Daniel reveals that, over the course of his stay “he'd come sit with me in my office,” and that “He seemed to like that” (47). The

³² Ibid., 26-27. For more about 'vertical integration' and the pressures exerted on the traditional structures of large corporations in the early 1990s, see, William H. Davidow and Michael S. Malone, *The Virtual Corporation: Lessons from the World's Most Advanced Companies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

source of Mr. Underwood's disquiet seems to be located in a realisation that the time of what William Whyte referred to as the "Organisation Man" is passing.

Given the way that Coupland represents his visit to Redmond as an impulsive reaction to losing his corporate job, it might be argued that Mr. Underwood's stay is a valedictory attempt to reconcile himself to the passing of this aspect of American working life through an immersion in the Microsoft culture. Deep down, however, Mr. Underwood recognises that generational change is upon him and that, as he tells Daniel, "It's your world now" (41). In terms of the way the narrative operates, Mr. Underwood's observations also work to convince Dan and Karla, and the other members of what will become Interiority, that leaving Microsoft to join Michael's start-up in the Valley would be a good idea. Dan's father goes on to observe wistfully that, "As you get older, the bottom line becomes to survive as best you can" (41). Whilst I have already suggested that this adaptive process is one which the *Microserfs*, in embracing Silicon Valley, relish, for the older generation it is a less happy proposition. Whilst Daniel and his friends are sanguine in talking of the "end of history" as a teleological inheritance,³³ remarking that panic is a "corny reaction to all of the change in the world" (198) and dismissing history as "no longer useful as a tool to understand current changes" in the sense that there are "no historical precedents" for this moment (99), Coupland has Mr.

³³ This is clearly a reference to Francis Fukuyama's famous thesis that, by the end of the 1980s, the western model of neoliberal capitalism had triumphed over other economic and political systems, particularly Soviet Union-style communism. See, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992). At one level, *Microserfs* is Coupland's response to this postulation and attempts to correct Fukuyama's undifferentiated conception of capitalist structures.

Underwood strike a more regretful tone. He ponders the passing of monolithic institutions and ideologies, not because of any adherence to them, but rather because of the way that life was ordered around them.

However, as the young entrepreneurs develop their Oop! application and form their own company, Mr. Underwood, too, becomes more at ease with the cultural tenor of the times when he admits that, “We old folks mistake the current deluge of information, diversity, and chaos as the ‘End of History.’ But maybe it’s actually the Beginning” (203). Ultimately, Mr. Underwood finds employment on the Oop! project designing and building the team’s office, then learning C++ and joining the team as a coder, a development that “appeals to all ... in the office” (278).

In defining the emergence of a “creative” branch of capitalism, Richard Florida straightforwardly opposes it to the corporate world from which Mr. Underwood emerges before having his skill-set recalibrated through working for Oop!. Florida asserts that, in this sort of economy, “Individuality, self-expression and openness to difference are favored over the homogeneity, conformity and ‘fitting in’ that defined the organizational age.”³⁴ For Coupland, the figure of Mr. Underwood seems to embody this shift, and he gives him the following words, uttered to Daniel, at the unveiling of Oop!’s new premises: “You and your friends helped me ... when I was lost. The whole crew of you – your casual love and help – saved me at a time when no one else could save me ... If it weren’t for you and your friends, I would never have found the green spaces or the still waters” (222).

³⁴ Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 9.

We might say, then, that Coupland's intention with *Microserfs* is to make an affirmative statement of the benefits of a time *and space* in history which allows society to engage in a whole range of activities that previously it would not have been able to pursue. In an article written just a few years after the publication of *Microserfs*, Frederick Buell notes the way that information technology is the “means by which the interlinking and penetration of the world is being rapidly accomplished,” referring to this moment as “the electronic era.”³⁵ Jim Collins, writing in 1995, also identifies an “Age of Information” that “refers not to a hegemonic worldview or set of intellectual paradigms, but modes of transmission, storage and retrieval that destabilize the temporal delimitation and ideological cohesiveness essential for any *Zeitgeist*.”³⁶ For Collins the “Age of Information” offers a proliferation of alternative histories and the chance to recover neglected subcultures.

In Coupland's novel, the networked, codified environment of postsuburban Silicon Valley also disrupts the notion of a prevailing spatial order in the sense that it is depicted as being malleable and enabling. Such a reading of Coupland's novel positions it in opposition to critics of cyberculture. One such critic, Arthur Kroker, has written that the emergence of a digital economy has led to the development of a “Virtual Class” – of which the members of Interiority are part – that is “Against democratic discourse” instituting anew the “authoritarian mind ... against

³⁵ Frederick Buell, “Nationalist Postnationalism: Globalist Discourse in Contemporary American Culture,” *American Quarterly* 50 (1998): 561, 565.

³⁶ Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

social solidarity.”³⁷ Similarly, Pam Rosenthal posits the effects of the technological developments of a post-industrial economy as irreducible from the destabilising effects of capital and commodification. In analysing the attitudes of the individualist characters of William Gibson's influential novel *Neuromancer* (1984), she declaims against this new epoch by constructing it as

at best a set of mixed messages within an environment of shifting boundaries and rapidly transmuting rules ... [in which] The ability to decode such messages – or more likely, to accustom oneself to occupying shifting epistemological terrain – engenders a jumpy kind of cool, the nonchalance of cyberpunk toward the bad new future that is upon us.³⁸

Buell points out that it is also possible to read *Neuromancer* as a libertarian defence of cyberspace, seeing it as a new outgrowth of the traditional American myth of the frontier, a frontier that “helps to justify and contain society throughout a harsh period of corporate restructuring, dismantled public services and safety nets, and growing social inequality.”³⁹ Of course, Gibson's novel was written against the backdrop of the Reagan presidency, and with this context in mind, it is possible to draw a link between the anarchic solipsism of that novel's central character, hacker Henry Case, and the diffidence of Coupland's Generation X.

I want to suggest here, however, that *Microserfs* reveals Coupland's stance on the “end of history” and the rise of a new, postindustrial phase in capitalist development as distinctly opposed to the pessimistic visions

³⁷ Arthur Kroker, “Virtual Capitalism,” in, Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons and Michael Menser, eds., *Technoscience and Cyberculture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 168-9.

³⁸ Pam Rosenthal, quoted in, Buell, 565-566; William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Gollancz, 1984).

³⁹ Buell, 566-67.

outlined above. Although Coupland satirises the short-lived infatuation with Marxism of two of the programmers, Todd and Dusty,⁴⁰ and limns a postsuburban spatiality that is decentralised in its constitution, he nonetheless stresses a sort of collective, communal approach to social, and work, relations. In this way, the former Microserfs show a capacity to evolve along with the technology they work with: they are not cast adrift in an electronic era that is destructive of traditional categories of time and space; rather, their engagement with information technologies bespeaks, to borrow Jim Collins' words, a "determination to describe and ... establish geographic and historical reference points within an allegedly unmappable terrain."⁴¹

The Underwoods' home acts as the most important of these reference points and, as the Oop! enterprise develops, it becomes fused with cyberspace. When Abe eventually leaves Microsoft and joins the others Coupland conflates the spaces of cutting-edge technology with those of domestic life. Daniel greets Abe by saying "welcome home" (313), not only recognising that Abe's programming talents are best deployed on a project like Oop!, but also acknowledging that Interiority's engagement with cyberspace offers security and comfort. Coupland confirms this

⁴⁰ Todd's and Dusty's brief flirtation with Marxist politics allows Coupland to suggest that Marx's theories are useful as a socio-cultural hermeneutic, but less so as a form of political engagement. The "political realm – as such" (255) for Dan is the knowledge that a dialectical approach to understanding consumer society allows him to be emancipated from the imperatives of marketing and advertising. This awareness in turn frees him, and the other Interiority members, to engage in self-aware games such as the one he and Karla play in order to list the most "decadent cereals". Lucky Charms, for example, are revealed to be decadent in the sense that the "Sprightly twinkle motif on [the] packaging (putatively an allusion top flavor) are, in fact, metaphors for soul-deadening sucrose." (266). See 260-270 for further instances of the group's detached relationship to consumer society.

⁴¹ Collins, 32-33.

impression through the use of a pun. Describing the power of the mutuality that self-confessed technology geeks such as him can harness, Abe exclaims that “People without lives like to hang out with other people that don't have lives. Thus they form lives.” To which Daniel adds, “Even better, he'll have *company*” (313), a reference to the social nature of the Oop! *modus operandi*, and to the fact that Michael is now an equity partner in the business.

Even more pertinent is the fact that the novel ends with a tableau of the ten Interiority friends and Mr. and Mrs. Underwood, standing by the Underwood family home's swimming pool under the night sky, together affirming that they are not broken but “whole” (371). Reflecting on the journey they've been on, Karla says to Daniel “We all fall down some day. We all fall down ... and we'll all pick each other up” (367). Fittingly, as the dozen of them stand by the pool, Michael, Oop!'s founder and the first to have left Microsoft, dives into the pool to rescue the robot pool cleaner “from its endless serflike toil” (370). As Nick Heffernan has suggested, *Microserfs* is a fiction that sees IT as a condition of community's possibility with Coupland positioning the successful relationships in the narrative as being “made possible, mediated and cemented by information technologies.”⁴²

Yet, as Michael's strangely touching and revealing act of charity shows, Coupland sees the relationship between humanity and technology as one that should not be characterised in terms of the one's dependence

⁴² Heffernan, *Capital, Class and Technology in Contemporary American Culture*, 98.

on the other, but by a spirit of posthuman interactivity in which, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.”⁴³ Daniel Grassian posits that, “If computer memory or cyberspace becomes the next embodiment of human history, then the next step in technological progression would seem to be inhabiting cyberspace, or creating a home for humans to live in cyberspace amongst their collective memories.”⁴⁴

With *Microserfs*, Coupland is taking the first steps in imagining what home and community might look like in this new age. For in this postsuburban, postindustrial era, notions of community and belonging are unglued from geography. Community derives from the Latin *civitas*, a term which denotes the way that, in the classical world, civic principles determined the configuration of urban space. However, as W. J. Mitchell also points out, in a networked society, communities no longer define themselves over chunks of geographic territory but over a network topology of connectivity and access.⁴⁵ Given this, a postsuburban appreciation of peripheral city space allows us to move beyond the strictures of the suburban mindset as articulated by sociologists and literary critics, a conception that explicitly links territory with human status and purpose.

⁴³ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

⁴⁴ Daniel Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2003), 139.

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *City of Bits*, 160, 151.

Before the relocation to Silicon Valley, Karla passionately details her hope that the socio-spatial changes of the information age will take humanity to the “next level”; for her, “we’re trying to dream our way out of ... [our] problems and we’re using computers to do it” and that what might be perceived as “a vacuum is an earthly paradise ... [affording] the freedom to, quite literally, line-by-line, prevent humanity from going nonlinear” (61).

For Andrew Tate, *Microserfs* is, in one sense, a fiction concerned with exploring the evolution of non-standard family groupings, the “new forms of family unit that became a basic theme of 1990s pop culture and fiction,” units in which “loyalty and friendship” and inclusivity were as important as blood ties.⁴⁶ What interests me about this idea is the way in which the postsuburban spaces of the Valley function as an environment that fosters this recalibrated sense of community: whereas the Redmond experience threatens to “dissolve” the group house (5), the Valley offers a different, more democratic experience. Here the people intent on founding “small, content-based start-ups,” of the sort that provides the foundation for the establishment of the Microserfs’ new collective of shared responsibility, have “abandoned” the “tech megacultures” or “big companies” (69) where it is possible for a manager to “have fourteen direct reports (serfs) [working] underneath him” (33). As Daniel explains in one of his later diary entries, working at Microsoft allowed him “to feed the introversion” to the detriment of his sense of self and his relationships;

⁴⁶ Tate, *Douglas Coupland*, 20. Tate cites the sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004) as an example of this trend.

now he “can't retreat like that [in the Valley] ... There's no excuse anymore to introvert” (317). The sense that everything is up for grabs in this space, far from promoting isolation and relational fragmentation, in actual fact promotes a sense of empowerment amongst the members of the Interiority start-up.

The trajectory of the novel's narrative towards the realisation of this unconventional family is further described by Abe's eventual abandonment of Microsoft and his joining the Oop! project. Certainly, it can be argued that the novel's *dénouement* reveals nothing more than the reassertion of the power of market forces; for Heffernan the problems the characters face in trying to establish their new identities as entrepreneurs are “ultimately dissolved in the narrative solution of Oop!'s spectacular triumph in the marketplace.”⁴⁷ Yet, the extent of Oop!'s financial success as a product is not clear from what Daniel writes in his diary. In a brief entry he notes, almost as an aside, that “Oop!, I might add, is going to be a hit” and that this realisation “has been lost on everybody in the Las Vegas blur” in which the convention they've been attending has been taking place. Daniel states that “our risk has become solid equity” (358). But it is debatable as to the extent the role Oop! has played in this new-found security; it may well be that the equity Abe brought with him on leaving Microsoft and cashing in his stock has been more than enough to ensure the project's continued existence.

Whilst one reading of the novel would be to insist that Coupland uses his

⁴⁷ Heffernan, 101.

characters to satirise the avarice that undoubtedly did exist at the time of this technological revolution,⁴⁸ I see *Microserfs* as Coupland suggesting that hi-tech innovation, in the advancements it offers for developers and consumers alike, is beneficial for society as a whole, rather than for the few.

John Beck has written of the way in which the American West has become synonymous with the proliferation of technologies, both industrial and military, to the extent that the spatiality of the region itself seems to be “forever on call as a potential technological resource” and reflective of a state in which “human life [itself has] become 'human resources' to be deployed.”⁴⁹ However, the symbolism of the coming together of the Interiority family suggests a different, more optimistic vision. Coupland also has his characters state repeatedly that they are involved in Oop! because of the intellectual challenge it poses them as programmers, and because of the potential change that the programme could affect. In his 1991 book, *The Work of Nations*, the political economist Robert Reich advances a thesis that *Microserfs* would seem to support. Reich argues that in the evolution of late twenty-first-century capitalism a new type of worker is emerging, what Reich calls a “symbolic analyst.” These workers, Reich suggests, “solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols. They simplify reality into abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with, committed to other specialists; and then, eventually, transformed back into reality.” Reich identifies IT workers, as

⁴⁸ Grassian, 134-140.

⁴⁹ John Beck, *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste in Western American Literature* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 123, 124.

well as management consultants and lawyers, as being amongst this new constituent of the economy. In the light of this, Reich poses two questions: “Are we still a society, even if we are no longer ... [a traditional] economy ... Are we bound by something more than the gross national product?”⁵⁰ Whilst Reich is ultimately sceptical of the good that symbolic analysts might bring to the restructured economy, fearing that they will aggregate wealth unto themselves, I want to argue that Coupland represents such a demographic, through the members of Interiority, as being far from simply acquisitive. Although the financial viability of Oop! remains uncertain until the narrative's closing stages, Daniel confides in his diary that, nonetheless, all he cares about is “that we're all still together as friends ... and that we can continue to do cool stuff together”; whilst he “thought that the money would mean something ... it doesn't” (358). Even before news of Oop!'s success is confirmed, Daniel reiterates that “It's not the money ... It wasn't with any of us” (318), that “Oop! Isn't about work. It's about all of us staying together” (199). Instead, the motivating force behind Oop!'s genesis is the desire to do “something worthwhile” (319), something that reveals in the group a “One-Point-Oh” sensibility whereby they become the first to “do something cool or new” (87).⁵¹

More than this, Daniel indicates that this kind of thinking permeates much of the Valley, where corporate bosses are mostly absent

⁵⁰ Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for Twenty-first Century Capitalism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 178, 9.

⁵¹ 1.0 is a term used to denote, in particular, the state of web technology before the bursting of the dot.com bubble just after the turn of the millennium, after which Internet developments were categorised as being 2.0. The web in its 1.0 incarnation is synonymous with, for example, static pages rather than more dynamic user-generated content. When Susan refers to being 1.0 in the quotation above, she is referring to a state-of-mind dedicated to advancing the functional parameters of new technologies.

and profit margins are less of a concern. Marvelling at how “*together*” geeks are in the Valley,” he continues that “it’s so much more complicated [here]” as opposed to the “black and white” of Microsoft; in the Valley, “you’re supposed to have an exciting, value-adding job that utilizes your creativity,” something that he finds “inspiring” (226) compared to the “Grind, grind, grind” (6) he experienced previously.

If *Microserfs* constructs a new model of work, a model which is symbiotically linked to the development of what Manuel Castells calls “The Informational City” – “not [so much] a [socio-spatial] form but a process ... based upon knowledge, organized around networks, and partly made up of flows [of technology, information, capital and symbols],”⁵² then it is also a novel concerned with thinking through the effect of all this on the make-up of the middle class.

Microserfs dramatises explicitly the break between the titular coders’ generation and the Professional Managerial Class of white collar workers drawn from the postwar baby-boom generation. Yet it also scripts the Interiority members as markedly different from other members of their generation. Heffernan points out that these “educated, middle class Americans coming to maturity in the 1980s and 90s faced far greater difficulties and pressures in converting their cultural capital into secure and materially rewarding professional positions within the fluid and volatile occupational structure of post-Fordist capitalism.”⁵³ This is the dilemma of Generation X, but, in leaving Microsoft, the novel’s central

⁵² Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, Volume 1: The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 [1996]), 429.

⁵³ Heffernan, 90.

characters are released not only from the servitude of their work there, but also from the afflictions of a Generation X sensibility. In effect, Dan, Karla, Michael and the others understand that, in Robert Reich's words, they are “citizens as well as economic actors” and that “they may work in markets but ... live in societies.”⁵⁴ If we conceive of class as signified by something other than income, then, we are left with a definition of class that looks like this one formulated by Richard Florida: “A class is a cluster of people who have common interests and tend to think, feel and behave similarly, but these similarities are fundamentally determined by economic *function* [my emphasis] – by the kind of work they do for a living.”⁵⁵

It is this way of thinking about class that Coupland utilises in *Microserfs*. The Interiority workers are not concerned with how much money Oop! might make them, and Coupland does not represent them as a collective who can be categorised in terms of material reward. Rather, their identities are affirmed through the fact that their work is not directed towards bettering the profit margin of a corporation, but in furthering the impact of “something worthwhile” (319) that also happens to be “cool or new.”

The novel also shows the central characters as entirely uninterested in wielding the sort of power often associated with middle-class elites. In his book on the network society, William J. Mitchell expresses a concern that “control of code is power” wondering “who shall be privileged by it

⁵⁴ Reich, 304.

⁵⁵ Florida, 8.

and who shall be marginalized?”⁵⁶ But, the Interiority 'family' gains a number of new members in the course of the narrative, each of them becoming an integral part of the team and having their own insecurities salved in the process. Mr. Underwood is one example, but Coupland also has Dusty, a neurotic, thirty-something body-building coder who goes on to have a child with Todd, and Amy, a twenty year-old passive-aggressive computer science student who becomes Michael's girlfriend, join the Interiority group and find new direction in their lives. Concerns over the way “emerging technological elites tend to be fiercely individualistic ... [and therefore] ... remarkably uncommitted to their locales”⁵⁷ are also unsubstantiated by the novel. The former Microserfs revel in the postsuburban spatiality of Silicon Valley, as this excerpt from Daniel's diary attests:

Today was one of those anything's possible days: blue skies and fluffy clouds; smooth-flowing freeways; all plant life on 24-hour chlorophyll shift after three days of rain. So alive!...

And then we went into the mountains, into the greenery, so dense, with the sun dappling through, walking across a small wooden bridge and we had to remind ourselves we weren't dead and not in heaven...

On the way back we drove past Xerox PARC on Coyote Hill Road, and Bug swooned only mildly...

After that, we pulled into the Stanford Shopping Center mall to cool off and shop for short pants. Amid the Neiman Marcus, the Williams and Sonoma, the NordicTrack, and the Crabtree & Evelyn franchises we discussed subatomic particles. At Stanford Laboratory they're hunting down the magic particles that hold together the universe. There's one particle that's still unfound. I asked the carload if anyone knew what it was (289-90).

What is significant here is not only the language Daniel uses to convey a Romantic sense of emotion recollected in tranquility – and emotion deeply bound up in a sense of place, too – but also the revealing fact that there is a

⁵⁶ Mitchell, 112.

⁵⁷ Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 2001 [2000]) 176.

“carload” of Interiority members out in the Silicon Valley landscape, none of whom seems to dissent from Dan's deep commitment to the locale. Moreover, the “swooning” that the day-trippers do on surveying their surroundings is directed at the manifestations of man's technological prowess as much as it is at the sublimity of nature. In this western postsuburbia there seems to exist a harmonious fusion of computers and countryside.

Although Coupland does express some reservations about the synergy of man, machine and environment in Silicon Valley,⁵⁸ ultimately his intimation is that, paradoxically, the closeness and purposefulness of the Interiority group allows each individual member to develop so that they reach the point where, in Daniel's phrasing, they “unravel,” leaving behind the institutionalised agglomeration they were as Microserfs, and begin instead to “sprout” as individual contributors to the collective aims of the Oop! undertaking (194). Interestingly, whilst Daniel does devote a section of his diary to explaining the various roles the members of the group have on the Oop! project, there is as much space given over to recording the other statuses they enjoy. For example, whilst Susan is officially Oop!'s “User-Interface Designer” (120), she is also, as part of a Star Trek crew that the group like to imagine themselves as being, “the erotic female interest demanded by TV networks ... [who] designs castles while sleepwalking ... [has] flawless plastic skin ... [and whose] thighs

⁵⁸ Employing one of many computer-based metaphors to describe the human experience, he implies through Daniel's narrative voice that a bout of flu affects the group like a debilitating computer virus as their immersion in the project and proximity to each other impacts upon their physical health (174).

conceal bevatron guns” (263). And then she is also the Susan who, when at the Underwoods' home, spends time “washing and cutting ... [Dan's] Mom's hair” (365).

Microserfs is a novel that seeks to engage with contemporary society's fears of a posthuman future in which technological advances have rendered mankind's agency obsolete. The blurring of man and machine is a trope that recurs from the moment that Daniel introduces himself using his e-mail address, thereby effectively assigning part of his identity to his computer, and opens up a file dedicated to recording what he imagines might be the effusions of his computer's subconscious, right through to the novel's finale when his mother is hooked-up to a computer to enable her to communicate following a stroke. Yet, *Microserfs* refuses a reactionary fear of the emerging cyberculture, problematising the perception of machines as dehumanising and threatening. For Coupland the defining characteristics of our posthuman future are those to do with the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of non-biological components. This understanding of the posthuman places the emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment – it is a condition of being that is not concerned with simply transcending the limits of human corporeality.⁵⁹

Accordingly, Coupland invites the reader to consider both Dan and his Mum as posthuman. Following her paralysis, Mrs. Underwood is only able to interact with the others by punching words into a computer keyboard to be displayed on a monitor, yet Coupland describes her as being “at the center of it all” despite being “part woman/part machine”

⁵⁹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3, and passim.

(369). Here Coupland borrows from the toolkit of classical tragedians as Mrs. Underwood, “Emanating blue Macintosh light” (369), functions as a *deus ex machina* in the resolution of the narrative: as the friends have various moments of epiphany and realise they are happier than ever before, ironically, it takes his Mom “speaking like a license plate” for Daniel to finally realise that he is part of “real life” (370), rather than some abstraction, thereby conclusively resolving his existential crisis. For Daniel, such activities as the keeping of the file on his computer’s subconscious become a cure for, rather than a symptom of, personal uncertainty. Hayles writes that the posthuman need not be antihuman or apocalyptic and stresses that there is another account in which

emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will ... and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject’s manifest destiny to dominate and control nature.⁶⁰

For Hayles the liberal-humanist philosophy erroneously promotes the subject as an autonomous self independent of its environment, a pattern of thought that inevitably leads to fears over a loss of agency when a subjectivity is challenged or compromised, as with Delaney’s reaction to the canyon fire in *The Tortilla Curtain Curtain*. However, “By contrast, when the human is seen as part of a distributed system [of which technology is an integral part], the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice [with such environmental factors], rather than being imperilled by it.”⁶¹

For the purposes of this thesis’ argument, I want to suggest that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁶¹ Ibid., 290.

conventional thinking about suburbia and its representation in literature is informed to a considerable extent by this liberal-humanist worldview. At a point twenty years after *Microserfs*' publication, it seems a matter of necessity for scholars to acknowledge the emergence of a postsuburban environment, and to recognise the ways in which its networked reality might allow us to appreciate it as a spatiality that sees human agency as intertwined with environment, not removed from, and therefore subservient, to it.

That Coupland sees no threat from technological innovation does seem to be confirmed by the symbolism that Mrs. Underwood is a librarian; in effect, Coupland is fusing a present civilisation in which the repository of culture and knowledge is books with a future civilisation based on virtuality and computer memory. It is the Macintosh which will now enable Mrs. Underwood to tell her story, further entangling the relationship with the computer and the printed word.

It has become commonplace for critics of suburban fiction to see it as a genre that validates a distinct strain of middle-class self-pity, particularly on the part of men. Yet, as Graham Thompson notes, the sentimentality of *Microserfs*' ending is "of a different order to the kind of sentimentality and self-pity ... that would work to identify the pain of masculinity and then displace [it]."⁶² In both style and substance, *Microserfs* confirms the belief that Coupland sees the computer "as the inspiration for even more narratives,"⁶³ rather than simply a threat to

⁶² Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance*, 199.

⁶³ D. Quentin Miller, "Deeper Blues, or the Posthuman Prometheus: Cybernetic

existing ones. Consequently, we can see the novel as an attempt at what Paul Giles has referred to as the “humanization of the digital sensibility,”⁶⁴ and by extension the socio-cultural landscape of postmodernity in which a whole host of competing narratives circulate.

Much of the novel's formal experimentation reflects this central theme of the merging of man and machine, and the potentialities of such a confluence, as is evidenced by Daniel's use of computer notation in his diary-writing, a stylistic flourish that speaks to the way in which information technologies redefine the relationship between space and personal identity. Daniel's file for his computer's subconscious thoughts, manifested in the narrative as pages of apparently unconnected words and phrases such as “Aspirin” and “Russian winter” (161), and the “challenge of newness” and “sneakers” (171) is, in “the fact that he substitutes the computer's subconscious for his own,” evidence for one critic of the novel of “the degree to which he feels integrated with computers.”⁶⁵ Certainly, we should regard this process as less about Daniel metaphorically excavating his computer's mind, and more about the way the electronic era permits – as in Gibson's *Neuromancer* when characters resort to downloading their psyches onto computer hardware – the dissolution of the opposition between the anachronistic (diary-writing, for example) and the futuristic (hardware, or even virtual, memory stores).⁶⁶

Another way to think about how *Microserfs* represents this

Renewal and the Late Twentieth-Century American Novel,” *American Literature* 77 (2005): 383.

⁶⁴ Giles, “Sentimental Posthumanism,” 334-5.

⁶⁵ Miller, 403.

⁶⁶ For more on the collapse of this distinction see Collins, *Architecture of Excess*, 5-7.

conjunction is through the tensions between code/simulation and language/narrative. The novel proposes that the two cannot be considered separately: Daniel is a programmer, articulate in both English and the language of computers, who tries to translate code. At two stages in his diary-writing he reverses the process, translating one entry *into* a code that Todd has created and scripting another in binary. As Dan acknowledges, “after a certain point, real language decomposes into encryption code” (19), a point-of-view that anticipates N. Katherine Hayles’ idea that “language alone is no longer the distinctive characteristic of technologically developed societies; rather, it is language plus code.”⁶⁷ One of the strands of my argument has been the assertion that this contented confluence with technology has its corollary in Daniel’s, and the other Interiority members’, engagement with a nascent postsuburban spatiality of dynamic flux that opposes the prescriptive suburban spaces of the past.

In his analysis of cyberculture in recent American literature, D. Quentin Miller persuasively argues that *Microserfs* is one of a body of novels that positions computer technology as a potential salve for the existential wounds of the late twentieth century. Miller postulates that Coupland “entertains the possibility that computers can help humans understand some of our most complex problems” and that if “alienation” is one such problem afflicting Daniel at the outset of the narrative, his engagement with the Oop! project is a “potential cure.”⁶⁸ If we take all of the Interiority members to be cyborgs in the Haylesean sense of what

⁶⁷ Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*, 16.

⁶⁸ Miller, 381, 404. The other novels Miller’s article considers are *Roger’s Version* (1986) by John Updike and *Galatea 2. 2* (1995) by Richard Powers.

posthumanity means, then it must be said at this stage that the name the group gives their start-up is no reflection of an impulse towards solipsism. Indeed, the novel articulates the notion that, “For cyborgs, the border between interiority and exteriority is destabilized. Distinctions between self and other are open to reconstruction. Difference becomes provisional.”⁶⁹

If identity becomes as intrinsically bound up with code as it is with language, then the fact that code is a universal system of communication that is easily transferable between contexts collapses the distinction between private and public as reference points for the construction of the self. This beneficent fusion of human and computer is nowhere more strikingly evinced in the novel than in the establishment of the start-up's headquarters in the Underwood family home. As previously noted, this is a spatial configuration that radically reduces distinctions between home and the workplace, and, in a statement that cuts to the essence of the manner in which the society of the Valley has produced an altered spatiality of capitalist production, Graham Thompson explains that “Once the architecture of code [for example, the Oop! programme] replaces the architecture of the built environment as the site for the creation of value in a capitalist economy, the need for the workplace to be discretely marked and separated becomes less and less important.”⁷⁰

What I hope to have demonstrated is that, as well as reflecting this change in the culture, Coupland also suggests, through the way in which

⁶⁹ Mitchell, 31.
⁷⁰ Thompson, 178.

his narrative represents this home/office group hub, that this aspect of the postsuburban spatiality may be distinctly to the advantage of everyone. Writing in 1995 W. J. Mitchell opines that the era of the “virtual organization” requires “business arrangements that demand good computing and telecommunications environments rather than large, permanent home offices.”⁷¹ He is referring to the obsolescence of the “tech megaculture,” but, actually, *Microserfs* advances a new kind of “home office,” one that is both an office at home and a home in an office – in the course of the narrative, the Oop! team occupies both.

A further consequence of the group's mutually beneficial relationship with technology is the way in which they forsake their previous dependence on an appreciation of Bill Gates as a God-like figure. At the outset of the novel, the Microserfs are in thrall to Bill as the archetypal frontier hero – a self-made man carving out a fortune in the West.⁷² Daniel's opening diary entry concludes with a list of Bill's qualities (“Bill's so smart. Bill is wise. Bill is kind. Bill is benevolent” [1]) and this sense of veneration is typified by Abe when he expresses incredulity at the absence of such a totemic figure in his friends' new project: “Who's your Bill?” (111). Even as the narrative approaches its end with the Oop! team travelling to Las Vegas to promote their software, video footage of Bill is

⁷¹ Mitchell, 97.

⁷² In his account of a year spent observing Microsoft's working practices, Fred Moody writes of how the ethos of the frontier was evoked in Bill Gates' approach to project teams of the sort that the Microserfs comprise at the start of Coupland's novel. Moody recounts how success was often made to look like failure specifically so the team in question would be motivated to tackle the next task: “There would be no laurels for them to rest upon; instead, they would dive immediately into the next project hoping to redeem themselves.” Fred Moody, *I Sing the Body Electronic: A Year Spent with Microsoft on the Multimedia Frontier* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 301.

projected above them at the convention centre. Daniel's reaction to this spectacle reveals the way in which Bill, never physically embodied in the narrative acts as a signifier for the socio-cultural imperative of the frontier spirit: "it was so bizarre ... Like a distant dream. Like a dream of a dream. And people were *riveted* to his every gesture ... not listening to what he was saying but instead trying to figure out what was his ... *secret*" (355).⁷³ In one of his diary entries Daniel writes that "the presence of Bill floats about the [Microsoft] Campus, semi-visible, at all times ... Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds" (3).

However, the Oop! innovators come to realise that the validity and usefulness of defining success in relation to such a stereotypical sense of economic destiny is questionable at best. Indeed, Daniel provides personal testimony to this when he discloses through his diary that, after joining Oop!, his Dad finally acknowledges that, "[the Underwood] family erased itself as it moved across the country" (190) pursuing an unrealisable migratory dream that had California as its final frontier and end point. It is the example of the Interiority project, with its democratic style of operation and shared investment in success that changes the project members' conception of how ambition can be channelled. Coupland's novel proposes that, rather than adhering to a metanarrative that promotes the unlikely success of an exceptional individual, true satisfaction for the former Microserfs comes instead from becoming

⁷³ For Nick Heffernan, the way Coupland represents Bill as omnipotent and immortal stands for "capital's inherent need to perpetuate and reproduce itself on a constantly expanding scale." Heffernan, *Capital, Class and Technology in Contemporary American Culture*, 95. This, of course, is a process only made possible through the continual opening up of new frontiers.

masters of what Jean-François Lyotard would call their own “little narratives” of object-oriented programming, narratives which allow them to work towards establishing Interiority as a credible research and development group, but also provide opportunity to do as Todd says, “a *hundred* different things” now that work is “so much better” (195).⁷⁴ One of the side projects that Michael asks the Oop! members to undertake is the design of a “starter module so that ... [they] can utilize all segments of ... [their] brain[s] aside from the ... coding part” (241). Daniel decides to design a space station and the way that he records in his diary his involvement in this task is telling: at one point, whilst most of the others take some time off, Daniel describes how he heads to the office to “*play* [my emphasis] with Oop! for a while to work on my space station” (290).

This idea of the frontier, so formative in the establishment of American identity, is recalibrated further in *Microserfs* by the fact that, whilst the postsuburban environment of Silicon Valley is at the head of technological development, in important respects it can't be said to represent the sort of frontier summoned up in American myth.

As Thompson points out, the discourse of the frontier in American culture – of “its establishment, its breeching, and its [eventual] displacement into the realms of technology” – brings with it “a concomitant notion of gender and masculinity,” but the Silicon Valley environment of the novel is one that seems to resist domination by

⁷⁴ For more on the idea of “little narratives” as it relates to postmodernism, see, Jean-François Lyotard, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

powerful individuals, whether men or women.⁷⁵ It is significant that, away from the hierarchy of Microsoft, both the male and the female members of the Oop! initiative make significant contributions to the project at the same time as they become more rounded people: Michael gets a girlfriend; Bug comes out after years in denial; Daniel and Karla's relationship flourishes; Todd and Dusty have a baby; and Susan uses the Internet to found a support group for Valley women who code. Daniel remarks that the culture in the Valley is one in which there is a "collective decision to disfavor a Godhead" (136) – and that means there is no place for Bill. Of Coupland's fiction William H. Katerberg writes that, in contrast to classic frontier narratives in which "the pioneer is redeemed by being freed from society and tradition," it is a body of work that has characters seeking "liberation from their rootless individuality. They search for communities and connections to something larger than themselves."⁷⁶ In *Microserfs* it is against this background that the Oop! software takes off as a viable proposition. Again, the narrative suggests a frontier that, in Augé's words, is "permeable."

Daniel Grassian argues that Coupland has a "Marxist intention ... to criticize the corporate environment of Microsoft and like-minded corporations that exploit their workers," going on to say that the novel reveals Coupland to be of the opinion that "The computer industry is ... free enterprise at its worst."⁷⁷ As I hope to have demonstrated, this a

⁷⁵ Thompson, 167.

⁷⁶ William H. Katerberg, "Western Myth and the end of History in the Novels of Douglas Coupland," *Western American Literature* 40 (2005): 286.

⁷⁷ Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions*, 134, 136.

reductive analysis in that it does not differentiate between the computer industry as represented by the “tech megacultures,” such as IBM and Microsoft, and the activities of start-ups such as Interiority. In my view, *Microserfs* is a novel that resists the facile assertion that the characters are simply victims of the postindustrial phase of a capitalist economy, and, a consideration of the spatiality of Silicon Valley allows us to approach Coupland's text afresh. Certainly, as the work of Henri Lefebvre has shown, each phase of capitalist production creates a distinct and particular space, but this is a space that is, in turn, recalibrated by the actions of society in a mutual process of change.⁷⁸ Therefore, such a dialectical conception allows us to consider *Microserfs* as a narrative which proposes that Silicon Valley, in its decentralised state, is a place that is conducive to both enterprise *and* fulfilment in a way that the old frontier of Microsoft-dominated Redmond was not.

By way of some concluding thoughts, I want to suggest that such a reading of Coupland's novel can, in turn, be used to reconsider Lefebvre's theories about the production of space. The postsuburban environment of *Microserfs* is comprised of what the American architect Lebbeus Woods has termed, “spaces of uncertainty.” Woods defines this as a spatiality produced in response to a contemporary culture that emphasises the individual, something that can itself be compounded by technological innovation of the sort we see emerging in Coupland's novel, specifically the personal computer and the Internet. However, in Woods' formulation,

⁷⁸ Henri Lefebvre, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

such “spaces of uncertainty” are uncertain not because of anything inherently forbidding about them, but because they are ephemeral, elusive and private in their virtuality and, as such, are opposed to established spatial hierarchies.

Following this model, my argument in this chapter has been that the suburban spatial configuration of Redmond and the Microsoft campus reveals the institutional authority of the corporation and its head, Bill Gates. By contrast, the more dynamic postsuburban spatiality of Silicon Valley constitutes what Woods calls a “heterarchy,” a space defined by the authority of many, “a self-organizing system of order comprised of self-inventing and self-sustaining individuals, the structure of which changes continually according to needs and conditions”⁷⁹ and, ultimately, allows for the pernicious effects of individualism to be transcended. Daniel reports Todd's pleasure at the “diversity of interruptions” (195) that his Oop! role entails. Mention has already been made of Dan's belief that time seemed to slow in the prescribed spatiality of the Microsoft-Redmond axis; as Karla points out, time's unfolding has a distinct spatial expression and “One's perception of time's flow is directly linked to the number of connections one has to *the outer world* [my emphasis]” and “Technology increases the number of connections, thus it alters the perception of having 'experienced' time” (200).

The Interiority members' particular uses of technology allow them to enjoy a diversity of spatial experiences denied to them in their former

⁷⁹ Lebbeus Woods, “The Question of Space,” in, Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons and Michael Menser, eds., *Technoscience and Cyberculture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 280-8.

lives as Microsoft coders. In the Valley they leave the workplace more frequently for leisure and recreation (258), whilst the informality of their working environment – the new office they move to two thirds of the way into the narrative features “disassemblable” (285) wall partitions that provide a stark counterpoint to the strictly demarcated zones in which the coders worked at Microsoft [1-27]) – means that it now “reeks of sex” (271).

For Coupland's characters, the consequence of their migration to Silicon Valley is an existence that isn't bound by the same rules as those that dictate life in the old city-oriented suburb. Karla tells Daniel how she feels that, socially and culturally, Silicon Valley lacks “the traditional identity-donating structures like other places ... have: religion, politics ... roots, a sense of history or other prescribed belief systems that take the onus off individuals having to figure out who they are.” Instead, she continues, “You're on your own [in the Valley]. It's a big task, but just look at the flood of ideas that emerges from the plastic!” (236).

Thus, *Microserfs* dramatises a paradox that N. Katherine Hayles calls “the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality,” a modality that “implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with each other” but which, nevertheless, undercuts “the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self ... [that is] clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others'.”⁸⁰ This is a “collective heterogeneity” that is manifested repeatedly throughout the novel. In one of his early ruminations on the

⁸⁰ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3-4.

emergence of the Net, Daniel writes that “There's something there for everybody” (84). Even whilst “the palette of identities you create for yourself in the vacuum of the Net” (327) is a direct result of a lack of external “identity-donating structures,” this new technology, and the way it is applied, enables, for example, “Susan, Emmett, Dusty, and about a dozen [other members of her Internet support group for women]” to organize a picket outside of a department store (307).

The Microserfs' migration from Redmond to Silicon Valley, then, is a migration that marks “The transition from history at the center to memory at the periphery” (253) – from a spatiality that reinforces adherence to an unquestioned grand narrative, to a spatiality that engenders the construction of disparate and personal lifeways. The structure of Coupland's narrative, with its gradual unfolding of the former Microserfs' processes of maturation, leaves the reader in no doubt that this new type of frontier environment, one that does instil in them a sense of purpose and individual responsibility, is far more advantageous in their quest for fulfilment than that which they have escaped from.

CHAPTER 5

Is the city becoming suburban? Exploring gentrification in *Lush Life* and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

The final chapter explores literary representations of gentrification as part of this thesis' broader inquiry into the ways in which contemporary American fiction has engaged with postsuburban space. As such, this chapter – unlike previous chapters focusing on works by Ford, Boyle, Díaz, and Coupland – addresses the postsuburban environment less in terms of the variety of its forms and more as an overarching concept that reflects the decline of the suburbs as a socio-cultural signifier.

As has been made clear in a recent empirical study of new metropolitan realities in the U.S., the case is compelling for seeing gentrification as a corollary of the changes which have rendered the older postwar suburbs “the devalorized urban form” as inner suburbs “lose out to edge city development *and* [my emphasis] the revitalization of housing in central city neighborhoods.”¹ As my analysis of Díaz's work shows, the class (and concomitant ethnicity) implications of this change are clear: with the poor leaving the inner-city for the inner-ring suburbs, declining density has led to a diversification of the demographic in the central-city as

¹ Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short, and Thomas J. Vicino, *Cities and Suburbs: New Metropolitan Realities in the U.S.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 159.

the middle classes have returned and former solidly working-class areas have been broken up.

For Sharon Zukin, this phenomenon is nothing less than “a reversal of meaning that challenges most of the social and spatial assumptions of the past fifty years” with the urban centre reasserting its power over the periphery.² The danger, of course, with following Zukin's position too closely is that her perspective simply reasserts the central city over the suburb as the dominant ideal in the white middle-class imagination. As one commentator has rightly warned, “It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to compare the suburban ideal of order and perfection with recalcitrant urban disorder and imperfection.”³ But, neither should it be possible to construct the central city as the privileged space of the white middle classes in the light of a rapidly changing suburban fabric. Just as seeing the suburb as offering a balm to the exigencies of the city on the basis of its appeal to a certain aspirational lifestyle establishes a false dichotomy between the two, so any engagement with gentrification that overlooks the diverse realities behind the demographic and lifestyle profiles of gentrifiers is destined to reach similarly superficial conclusions.

In this chapter I will show how Richard Price's *Lush Life* (2008) and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007),

² Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 180. Fundamental to Zukin's analysis is the assertion that, whilst economic power might remain dispersed across the whole spread of the contemporary metropolis, the gentrified city is notable for the way in which cultural power is aggregated to the centre in the service of the affluent and at considerable cost to marginal communities.

³ Lucy R. Lippard, “Seven Stops in Lower Manhattan: A Geographic Memoir,” in, Jerilou Hammett and Kingsley Hammett, eds., *The Suburbanization of New York: Is the World's Greatest City Becoming Just Another Town?* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 85.

complicate this paradigm and offer a more complex view of gentrification as a postsuburban process. I argue that both novels show the production of urban space under the conditions of gentrification to be more than a simple matter of one class's dominance over the other, and that, moreover, it is not a process that is inevitably linked to material gain.

The term “gentrification” first came into use in the 1960s and its meaning has changed significantly over subsequent years.⁴ Initially, it was used as a way of describing the process by which small-scale owner-occupiers established themselves in decaying neighbourhoods in order to restore individual properties for personal consumption. From the 1980s onwards, however, the term has also come to encompass the activities of government and corporate developers,⁵ with these organisations particularly prevalent in large north American cities such as New York and Washington in the aftermath of the recession of the early 1990s.⁶ With Price's novel set in the early noughties, and Mengestu's in the late 1990s, it is on this post-recession backdrop that the narratives unfold. Both works reflect the fact that predictions of “de-gentrification” (and an attendant

⁴ The term was coined in 1964 by the German-born English sociologist Ruth Glass. See Mark Davidson and Loretta Lees, “New-build 'Gentrification' and London's Riverside Renaissance,” *Environment and Planning A* 37 (2005): 1165.

⁵ Neil Smith and Jason Hackworth have modelled a history of gentrification along these lines. Their schema draws on neo-Marxist rent gap paradigms and is concerned with various New York neighbourhoods. See Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith, “The Changing State of Gentrification,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 92 (2001): 464-77.

⁶ In order to survive the recession, inner-city real estate capital reorganised through consolidation with large developers, investment trusts and mortgage brokers merging with smaller firms. Jason Hackworth, “Postrecession Gentrification in New York City,” *Urban Affairs Review* 37 (2002): 818-9. At the same time, shifts in the governance of the housing finance industry overseen by the government initiative the HOPE VI program allowed for reinvestment in low-income housing thereby expanding the process of gentrification through an integration of publicly-owned, affordable, and market-rate housing. Lance Freeman and Frank Braconi, “Gentrification and Displacement: New York City in the 1990s,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 70 (2004): 40; J. Peter Byrne, “Two Cheers for Gentrification,” *Howard Law Journal* 46 (2003): 429.

return to suburban expansion)⁷ in the wake of economic uncertainty were unfounded, and both portray the process as one that involves multiple actors in multiple contexts.

Similarly to my analyses of fictional representations of the postsuburban environment, with this chapter my aim is to show that the refashioning of the inner-city is not the sole preserve of an undifferentiated and uncomplicated white middle class. It is undoubtedly true that, as Lance Freeman states in *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (2006), “gentrification is a means of ... [a] new middle class expressing its identity outside of the mainstream suburban subdivision that had come to dominate much of middle-class North American life in the post-World War II era.”⁸ Indeed, as the previous chapter on *Microserfs* showed, the rise of suburban forms radically different to those of the subdivision is indissolubly tied to the rise of this “new middle class.” However, as Freeman's own work demonstrates, an exclusive focus on the white middle class risks missing the bigger picture. My chapter on the fiction of T. C. Boyle and Junot Díaz explicitly suggests that a full sense of what the postsuburban landscape looks like cannot be gained without reference to immigrant and working-class populations.

Unfortunately, the extant literature on gentrification as a cultural, social, political, economic, and geographic epiphenomenon of

⁷ See Larry Bourne, “The Demise of Gentrification? A Commentary and Prospective View,” *Urban Geography* 14 (1993): 95-107.

⁸ Lance Freeman, *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 195.

postsuburban change is disproportionately informed by this narrative of the process as primarily concerned with the white middle classes. Whether or not the 'classic' definition of gentrification (the direct displacement of the working class from residential quarters in the inner-city), or the more recent variation (referring to the production of all urban space including non-residential) is used, the process is defined by the antinomy between the affluent and the subordinate.

This literature can be seen as representative of two schools of thought. On the one hand, the analyses of those observers writing from a "demand" perspective explain gentrification as a reaction against the repressive institutions of suburban life, and thus see the return to the city of the white middle classes as a liberating process that has beneficial effects not just for the former suburbanites, but also for the indigenous urbanites, with everyone benefiting from a greater range of opportunities for social interaction and tolerance. Opposed to this view is the perspective of the "supply" school which considers gentrification as the means by which the affluent white middle classes actively displace the disadvantaged communities of the inner-city in order to make a profit on the back of rising rents.

The work of David Ley is integral to the first approach. For Ley, gentrification is "a redefinition of the nuclear family itself" primarily animated by cultural forces that require "a rejection of the suburbs and their perceived ... conformity in favour of the more cosmopolitan and permissive opportunities of the central city." In Ley's conception, the gentrifying white middle classes are notable for their rejection of the mass

market and Fordist models of consumption; the return to the inner-city is, in fact, the quest to secure a more distinct identity and is not just “the production of a submarket in a restructuring economy.” As such, gentrification as enacted by this demographic becomes “a symbolic movement to a site that is perceived to support certain adversarial cultural identities.”⁹ The opposing position to this view of gentrification as an emancipatory process is most forcefully advanced by Neil Smith. Like Zukin, Smith also conceives of gentrification as a manifestation of the iniquitous socio-economic forces inherent in the structures of late capitalism. For Smith, recent gentrification is nothing less than a “vehicle for transforming whole areas into new landscape complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflected remake.”¹⁰

There are problems with both points of view. The “demand” school analysis sees gentrification as a process that is mutually beneficial to all involved but suffers from the fact that it comes at the issue from one perspective – that of the white middle classes. Similarly, the “supply” school analysis is founded upon a view of this demographic that is limited at best and prejudicial at worst. To Smith the white middle classes embody a “menacing suburban intent”; as “Edge Cities mix suburb with city ... [so] gentrified cities do the same ... [and] gentrification becomes

⁹ David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9, 18, 362, 364. See also, Jon Caulfield, *City Form and Everyday Life: Toronto's Gentrification and Critical Social Practice*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Neil Smith and Jeff Derksen, “Urban Regeneration: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” in, Christine Ritchie et al., *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002), 73-4. See also: Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Neil Smith and Deborah Cowen, “Suburban Manhattan,” in, Hammett and Hammett, eds., 33-42.

suburbanization.”¹¹ Such a conclusion suits Smith's aims but it fails to consider the question of just what suburbia means and denies the complications of the (post)suburban environment that this thesis has sought to uncover by examining recent fictions set there. Having established the “menacing intent” of the returning suburbanites, Smith continues with his theme in invoking the paradigm of the frontier as a useful means of understanding the gentrification process. As my chapter on *Microserfs* demonstrates, the notion of the frontier as being defined primarily by economic accumulation cannot unquestioningly be applied to the postsuburban environment. Similarly, my analysis of *The Tortilla Curtain Curtain* focused on the ways in which Boyle's novel satirises conceptions of the changing suburban environment as an ever-shifting site of social and cultural conquest. Furthermore, the idea of the postwar suburban environment of the subdivision as being frontier-like is equally problematic in the sense that these landscapes were very often *tabula rasa* from which any displacement of people or resources was hardly a factor. For Smith, then, to construct the return of the suburbanite to the city as the means by which the perfidy of the white middle classes “infects working-class communities, displaces poor households, and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves” in an inevitable re-instigation of a “frontier of profitability”¹² seems somewhat hyperbolic. By turning to the work of Price and Mengestu I hope to address the failure of some sociological assessments of gentrification to consider that it is a

¹¹ Smith and Cowen, in, Hammett and Hammett, 36, 39.

¹² Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 17.

phenomenon that does not take place in a vacuum but occurs in spatialities that are long-established and complex.

Not only will this chapter show how fiction can shed a different light on gentrification as a process by intervening in the debates of social scientists and geographers, it is also an effort to advance the way literary criticism apprehends fictional representations of the gentrifying city. In just the same way that the critiques outlined above privilege a view of gentrification that is filtered through the involvement of the white middle classes, so critics of gentrification fictions have approached them – much as early readers of suburban fictions did in establishing a particular way of understanding a new genre – as indicators of an enfeebled demographic's struggle to negotiate an alien environment.

William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, writing in 1987 about the novels of Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, and Paul Auster, identify an aesthetic common to fictional representations of gentrification, pointing to “an analogy between a spruced-up city and a slicked-up city fiction.” For Sharpe and Wallock, the type of writing that came to be known as “blank fiction.” It was described as a spare, postmodern style that reflects the characters' obsession with consumerism and gestures towards a city no longer moored in any social reality, an increasingly superficial and unknowable space whose “deracinated inhabitants lose their ability to interpret themselves or the world around them.”¹³ In a more recent article,

¹³ William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 25-7. For more on “blank fiction” see James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

Matt Godbey draws on this notion of “literary gentrification” in analysing Jonathan Lethem's 2003 novel *Fortress of Solitude*. To Godbey's mind, Lethem's work explores how the process of gentrification converts specific city sites into “powerful symbols of authenticity,”¹⁴ with the work of the narrative ultimately being the exposure of the false promise of the white middle class return to areas such as the featured Brooklyn neighbourhood. In essence, then, this particular brand of criticism proposes gentrification fiction as just another iteration of the literature of white middle-class despondency.

In neither form nor content can *Lush Life* or *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* be said to fall into this category of gentrification fiction, however. In an important intervention in the field of gentrification studies, Damaris Rose, insists that gentrification be thought of as a “chaotic concept.” For Rose, both the demand and supply approaches assume that gentrification is “a coherent concept that refers to a single or unitary phenomenon.” Yet, as Rose points out, “there are many different routes to the gentrification of a neighbourhood, with different types of actors taking the lead in different contexts.” To think about gentrification as necessarily “chaotic” is to acknowledge that a “multiplicity of processes” are involved and that the “concepts 'gentrification' and 'gentrifiers' need to be disaggregated so that we may then reconceptualise the processes that produce the changes we observe, and so that we may change, where necessary, our 'ways of seeing' some forms of 'gentrification' and some

¹⁴ Matt Godbey, “Gentrification, Authenticity and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude*,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* 64, no. 1 (2008): 134.

types of 'gentrifiers'." This chapter, then, is an effort to show how fiction can serve to remind us, following Rose, "not to assume in advance that all gentrifiers have the same class positions as each other and that they are 'structurally' polarised from the displaced."¹⁵

Neither Price's nor Mengestu's novels deny the very real material hardships indigenous inner-city communities face as their neighbourhoods gentrify. However, both works complicate the picture of what constitutes a "typical" gentrifier, and the extent to which gentrification can be conceptualised as a deterministic, monologic process. My argument follows observations made by social scientist Jon Caulfield in suggesting that these novels allow us to see gentrification as "a local manifestation of wider patterns of urban change and as the outcome of specific local processes of social action and conflict."¹⁶ This, of course, is a view that very much chimes with Lefebvorean notions of the way that space is produced; more than this, it also foregrounds the role that individual lives – the very stuff of Price's and Mengestu's narratives – have in revealing a discourse of the inner city that is more alive to contingency than generalised views on gentrification allow for.

So, for example, we can approach the polyphonic *Lush Life*, a novel that shifts between a number of different perspectives, as a demotic text that represents the gentrifying Lower East Side as a flux of competing interests out of which no dominant stratum emerges. Equally, we can read

¹⁵ Damaris Rose, "Rethinking Gentrification: Beyond the Uneven Development of Marxist Urban Theory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2 (1984): 57, 62, 67.

¹⁶ Caulfield, xii.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears, concerned as it is with the intertwined fortunes of two people who move to the inner-city but have profiles far removed from that commonly ascribed to gentrifiers, as a narrative that explicitly allows for a variety of motivating factors behind their existences in the Logan Circle neighbourhood of Washington D.C. Such readings position the gentrifying city not as an environment of estrangement akin to Sharpe and Wallock's vision, but, rather, as a spatiality that denies any sort of conclusive theorisation as to the distribution of agency and power. As Richard Lehan has written in his sweeping *The City in Literature* (1998), the urban novel abstracts reality in order to give us "a way of conceptualizing the city so that it can be retrieved in human terms ... thus making an intellectual understanding of the city separate from its physical reality."¹⁷ What the two novels under consideration here suggest is that, in such "human terms," the production of gentrifying city-space is a process that both liberates *and* alienates.

Set in August 2002, *Lush Life* dramatises what Michiko Kakutani calls a "hinge point in time" when "young hipsters"¹⁸ were becoming prevalent in inner-city areas previously identified with the urban poor. It takes as its setting New York City's Lower East Side and recognises the return to the

¹⁷ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 291.

¹⁸ Michiko Kakutani, "Review of *Lush Life*," *New York Times*, March 4, 2008. Accessed online, 22/02/11: (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/books/04kaku.html>).

city of people who have previously abandoned it. So we have, in a “typical” early morning scene on a Lower East Side street, “a shirtless, bearded man sticking the top half of his body out of a sixth-floor tenement window and screaming at everybody to shut the fuck up and go back to New Jersey,” as well as the omniscient narrator informing the reader that, “Each December you could track the increase in gentile couples living in this formerly all-Jewish enclave simply by counting the new Christmas-light-trimmed terraces along the twenty-story building front.”¹⁹ The novel acknowledges that the gentrification of New York is a process that has been going on for decades: whilst, in the language of sociological models of recent gentrification, it points to the impact of “white pioneers in the mid-seventies” (400), it looks further back, to the ways in which the urban palimpsest has been added to over the years in ongoing acts of creative destruction. We read that

Harry Steele [a restaurant owner] lived in a desanctified synagogue on Suffolk Street, which had itself been converted from a standard tenement ninety-five years earlier. And now it was a private palazzo, the huge stained-glass oval above the door, overlaid with a wooden Star of David, the only outward sign of its nearly century-long stint as a house of worship (247).

It is clear, however, that the novel's focus is a very postsuburban wave of gentrifying activity. The “hinge point” that Kakutani refers to acknowledges the influx to the city of young adults who have grown up in the Edge Cities and exurbs of the changing outer city. These incomers are not “pioneers” in the way that previous gentrifiers have been conceptualised; instead, in the context of post-recession New York, they

¹⁹ Richard Price, *Lush Life* (New York: Picador, 2009 [2008]), 146, 160. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

are simply the latest group to associate the city with opportunity. In the novel these figures are “mainly in their twenties, mainly white with a sprinkle of everything else; genteel rebels with colored hair, androgynous crops or shaved-headed ... They ... [are] the crest of the wave, young, gifted, privileged, serious for now about making art or launching some kind of maverick free enterprise or just being citizens of the world” (300).

Price's narrative offers three different insights into this phase in the transformation of the Lower East Side: those of Matty Clark, a detective in the area; Delancey Street bar manager Eric Cash, in his mid-thirties and Matty's contemporary; and Tristan Acevedo, a naïve teenager from the housing projects squeezed between the Lower East Side and the financial district who is determined to prove himself to the gang leaders who loom large in his life. What links these characters' lives – and unites the three interwoven strands of the narrative told from their different perspectives – is their involvement in the murder of one of the “young hipsters,” Ike Marcus, a bartender from Berkmann's, the restaurant owned by Harry Steele at which Eric works.

Yet, given the purpose of this chapter, it is important to state that *Lush Life* is as much a novel of the city as it is a crime novel. As I will discuss, the novel's form – the way in which Eric's, Matty's, and Tristan's points-of-view are intermingled with none ever becoming predominant or offering an authoritative view of events – perfectly reflects the thematic effort to portray the gentrifying Lower East Side as a sea of competing interests from which no prevalent perspective is identifiable.

So, despite formal similarities to previous works of fiction that have

sought to portray the city as a problematic and deterministic environment (John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* [1925], with its multiple voices and debt to cinematic techniques, is perhaps the best point of comparison),²⁰ *Lush Life* is a fiction that queries the extent to which overarching structural forces have total influence on individuals' lives. Like the postsuburban spatiality of Silicon Valley in *Microserfs*, Price represents gentrifying New York City at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a place without "identity-donating structures."²¹ The very fact that the novel's form – with the identity of Ike's killer made known to the reader very early in the narrative – renders the satisfactory resolution of the crime secondary to the painting of a panoramic picture of the workings of the city. This only confirms the sense in which *Lush Life* is an urban novel that takes, as Pete Messent's argues,

a more complicated and ambivalent attitude to state power – that explore[s] doubts and anxieties about the nature of U.S. social organisation and operation; about the meaning of, and relationship between, such terms as justice, morality, community and law, and the extent to which ... civic systems operate efficiently and in the communal best interest.²²

As Price himself has remarked, "An investigation will take you through a landscape" and, as such, any effort to distinguish between genres is a wasted one. Another critic argues that for Price "the social novel is also a crime novel, or maybe it's just that in the intersection between criminality and citizenship we get our truest sense of what the city means."²³ Such a

²⁰ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²¹ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004 [1995]), 236.

²² Peter Messent, "The American Police Novel: 'The Real Goods from the Gate'," unpublished conference paper presented at the Crime Across Cultures conference, University of Leeds, September 10, 2010.

²³ David L. Ulin, "Lush Life Review," *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 2008. Accessed online, 15/02/11: (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/02/books/bk-ulin2>).

summation is indicative of the way that the novel suggests that meaning is created by people: it is out of the social that the urban emerges.

On a metatextual level, an argument can be made that, in its similarity to Price's own, it is Eric Cash's voice that the narrative privileges. Price has made explicit comment to the effect that Eric, in many ways, embodies the sense of himself that he had when he lived in the Lower East Side as a young man. He has said that writing Eric was a case of thinking "And there, but for the grace of God, go I."²⁴ But it is not just the fact that Eric is paralysed by aimlessness as he struggles to work out what he wants to do with his life, or the fact that he is held prey by a drug habit, that parallels Price's own experience. Eric, like Price, is a writer of screenplays.

As the novel begins, Eric confides that he is working on a script that has to do with the neighbourhood's "metaphorical ghosts" (92) and the way in which the different residents of the Lower East Side fail to see each other properly despite living in such close proximity. This is the sort of language he uses when he reflects on the events of the night of Ike's murder, to which he is a witness. Eric finds it baffling "how easily two rollers could attempt to snatch a wallet, throw a shot, then just vanish into the darkness in the span of a heartbeat" (183); the supernatural powers he bestows on the assailants here confirm the degree of difficulty Eric has in understanding the way the Lower East side functions. By extension, then, one might say that Eric is Price's fictional avatar, not only because his circumstances match some of Price's own biography, but also because

²⁴ Nicholas Wroe, "Interview with Richard Price," *Guardian*, August 16, 2008. Accessed online, 15/02/11: (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/16/fiction1>).

Price's novelistic technique, favouring dialogue as a mode of exegesis, and the rapid cross-cutting of scenes, is akin to the writing of a screenplay (and, of course, Price is famous for the scripts he has written for television which are novelistic in structure).²⁵

Both author and character conduct a similar inquiry into the nature of the gentrifying Lower East Side; Eric, however, exists in the story-world, Price does not. And yet, Price gives up any semblance of authorial power over events, both for himself and for Eric. Tristan, Ike's killer, is given up to the police as the perpetrator by his accomplice, Little Dap, a turn of events that underscores the reliance of the detectives on serendipity and sheer toil, and that denies Price the chance to construct a dazzlingly clever dénouement. Likewise, Eric never gets to finish his screenplay because, after spending the majority of the narrative practically catatonic with self-pity at having been wrongly accused of Ike's murder, he is, at the novel's end, dispatched to Atlantic City by his boss, Harry, there to establish a Berkmann's franchise.

Eric's perspective on the gentrifying Lower East Side is never established as normative and is considered alongside Matty's and Tristan's. A sense of this narrative strategy is conveyed in the very first chapter of the novel. Before introducing the three central characters, Price provides a paragraph detailing the sights of the Lower East Side from the point-of-view of the occupants of a police car making endless right-turns

²⁵ Price wrote several episodes of the television show *The Wire* (HBO, 2004-2008), which dramatises issues to do with drug policy, education, politics, and policing in Baltimore, Maryland. He also wrote the screenplays for the films *The Color of Money* (1986), and *Shaft* (2000).

as it negotiates the neighbourhood's grid-patterned streets looking for suspect goings-on:

Restless, they finally pull out to honeycomb the narrow streets ... : falafel joint, jazz joint, gyro joint, corner. Schoolyard, crêperie, realtor, corner. Tenement, tenement, tenement museum, corner. Pink Pony, Blind Tiger, muffin boutique, corner. Sex shop, tea shop, synagogue, corner. Boulangerie, bar, hat boutique, corner. Iglesia, gelateria, matzo shop, corner. Bollywood, Buddha, botanica, corner. Leather outlet, leather outlet, leather outlet, corner. Bar, school, bar, school, People's Park, corner. Tyson mural, Celia Cruz mural, Lady Di mural, corner. Bling shop, barbershop, car service, corner (4).

This technique not only has the effect of immersing the reader in the police officers' experience, but also signals the themes of the novel to come: the glaring juxtapositions of form and function that constitute the architecture of the gentrifying Lower East Side; the associated sense in which the constitution of the streets is the product of an endlessly recycled matrix of commerce, leisure, and culture; and, perhaps most significantly, the difficulty of extracting any single meaning from such an environment, something which is here illustrated by the cops' failure to find any criminal activity of true consequence. Despite the recent and overt influence of the “young hipsters,” the area has, in fact been subject to cycles of change for a long time. It is a place with

traces of the nineteenth-century Yiddish boomtown everywhere: in the claustrophobic gauge of the canyonlike streets with their hanging garden of ancient fire escapes, in the eroded stone satyr heads leering down between pitted window frames above the Erotic Boutique, in the faded Hebrew lettering above the old socialist cafeteria turned Asian massage parlor turned kiddie-club hot spot” (15).

This is not the unknowable postmodern city that Sharpe and Wallock assert as central to previous gentrification fictions. Instead, Price seems to be saying that it is the condition of living in an inner-city area that has been subject to many cycles of change is inherently unsettling, but

not necessarily dismaying. Furthermore, in its portrayal of the police as an organisation which has no power to dominate city-space, this opening scene seems to counter external and sociological positions on New York City gentrification, such as Neil Smith's, which takes the police as agents of a city government that favours the white middle classes and actively seeks to reclaim the inner-city from minorities and working classes through a policy of "revanchism," or revenge – a policy driven by a middle-class 'belief' that the city has been stolen from them.²⁶

Consequently, in *Lush Life* Matty's perspective on the Lower East Side is not scripted by Price as that of an agent of an all-encompassing officialdom. As a police officer, Matty does not enjoy any panoptic oversight on the city or the investigation into Ike's murder. It is of symbolic importance that the terrace to Matty's seventeenth-floor apartment, which overlooks the financial district to the south from a position well within the boundaries of the Lower East Side, offers no privileged vantage point, just "an aerial checkerboard of demolition and rehabilitation" (159). This confirms an earlier impression of the gentrifying Lower East Side as a spatiality that is resistant to domination by one particular section of society. When up on the roof of the precinct headquarters considering the initial progress of the investigation, Matty

²⁶ See Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 211-13. "Revanchism" is a term derived from actions of the Revanchists, a group of bourgeois nationalist reactionaries opposed to the liberalism of the Second Republic in post-revolutionary France. For Smith, Mayor Giuliani's "zero tolerance" and "quality of life" policing policies, implemented as part of wider law and order reforms in the wake of his election in 1993, were indicative of the way that crime became "a central marker of [New York] as the revanchist city," an expression of the "race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites." Interestingly for the purposes of this chapter, Smith also identifies an "attempt to reclaim Washington D.C ... through white gentrification," a phenomenon he notes is referred to by the African-American majority in the city as "The Plan" (29).

and his detective partner, Yolonda Bello, consider directly the tribulations of police work in this particular neighbourhood. Price focalises the narrative through Matty who observes that his view of the crime scene is literally (and metaphorically) obscured by “a stack of add-on floors going up atop some tenement on Delancey that weren't there the last time he was on the roof” (85-6).

But if the novel suggests that the gentrifying Lower East Side is very far from being an environment that is sanitised and monitored by law enforcers operating in the interests of the affluent, it also asserts that neither is it a landscape that is conducive to, or forgiving of, criminality. After Tristan and his accomplice, Little Dap, hastily retreat to the projects in the aftermath of the shooting, they make for the fifteenth floor of one of the buildings in order to lose any police that might be tailing them. Given the language he uses to describe their flight from the crime scene, Price is clear that Tristan and Little Dap are scared and uncertain: they stare straight ahead “as if blind to each other's existence”; they remain in a “frozen crouch” (152, 153). And, when they do establish the courage to look back across the city to where they've come from, just like Matty and Yolonda, “They couldn't see through the snaggle of walk-ups, new green-glass high-rises, and towers of add-ons” and they are similarly confounded by the way that the neighbourhood refuses to comply with their wishes: “the body was out there, it was out there” (153).

Where, as we have seen, much of the social science given over to the study of gentrification emphasises the way in which the displacement of lower-class communities is fundamental to the process, Price maps his

Lower East Side as a neighbourhood that is constituted by a variety of communities living contiguously. For those who live and work there, the reaction to the contradictions inherent in the kaleidoscopic nature of the area's material and social reality is not that of righteous anger, but that of bemusement and indifference. So, an eighth squad policeman can remark of city planning practices, "Who the fuck puts a Howard Johnson's down here?' ... gestur[ing] to the seedy-looking chain hotel, its neighbors an ancient knishery and a Seventh-Day Adventist church whose aluminium cross is superimposed over a stone-carved Star of David" (5), just as the "barely curious locals coming out of the Banco de Ponce ATM center and the Dunkin' Donuts" (10) can ignore an arrest being made on an adjacent street.

In *Lush Life*, then, gentrification in the Lower East Side seems to be characterised by wary indifference, rather than organised antagonism. Throughout the narrative Price constructs the area as comprised of different "worlds": "Chinese"; "Latino"; "Young, Gifted, and White"; and "Geezer/Crackpot/Hippie" (182), to name but four. Seemingly, this is a social admixture that endures, even thrives; even in the small hours of the morning Price details how one single block is "alive with an intersection of two parties: the last of the young kids still on their way home from the lounges and music bars ... and the pre-land-rush old-timers, the Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Bangladeshis just starting their day" (40). This is a representation of gentrification that goes beyond the displacement narratives of some sociological and geographical analyses.

However, the novel is cognisant of the problems immanent in this

spatial configuration. Central to this idea is the recurrent motif of the ghost as a metaphor for individual – and collective – experience. As Price has said, *Lush Life* is a work that interrogates the ways in which the various constituent worlds of the Lower East Side are “literally inches away from each other and yet entirely separate.” Price describes the novel as an exploration of “how these different groups of people occupy the same physical space, but seem not to even see each other.”²⁷ Eric is writing a screenplay about historical ghosts; Ike's assailants are referred to as ghosts; and the various communities of the neighbourhood seem unaware of each other, as if they too are transparent.

Consequently, *Lush Life* is a crime novel whose crime serves the narrative purpose of jolting its characters into greater awareness of each other and their respective backgrounds. But there is one effect of the novel's structure that I want to foreground over the others here, and that is the extent to which the progress of the narrative towards the resolution of the crime is indicative of the change that Eric undergoes in his conception of himself. Eric is – at least until two thirds of the way into the novel – something of a ghost himself, and not only in the sense, previously noted, that he is Price's equivalent in the text-world.

Initially, Eric is scripted as a socially and materially reduced version of the stereotypically self-pitying white middle-class male. As Damaris Rose points out, many gentrifiers of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s – when compared to peers in the previous decades who would have been making

²⁷

Wroe, “Interview with Richard Price,” accessed online, 21/02/11.

their homes in suburbia – were “considerably proletarianised”²⁸ because of restructuring in white-collar labour processes. So, Eric, a college graduate, finds himself working, at age thirty-five, in a relatively low-status, low-pay service job at Berkmann's, and his sense of entitlement means he feels the effrontery of this keenly. The “true engine of [Eric's] being” is a “craving for making it made many times worse by a complete ignorance as to how this 'it' would manifest itself” (16).

Price consolidates this categorisation of Eric as a downwardly mobile gentrifier by drawing unflattering comparisons with the owner of Berkmann's, Harry Steele, who is also his old college roommate. Harry has had to bail Eric out on numerous occasions down the years by offering him employment, financial assistance, and legal contacts. Price details the uncanny way in which, “after fourteen years of on-and-off working for Harry Steele,” Eric has “come to look like him ... the difference being that with Harry Steele, this lack of physical allure just added to the mystique of his golden touch [as a businessman]” (19).

This scripting of Harry as the person Eric could have been takes on a central importance in the operation of the narrative when Eric decides to stop helping the police with their investigation into Ike's death following their questioning him as a suspect. Just as Eric descends into a mire of self-pity, Price gives Harry a speech in which he roundly denounces the solipsism and self-regard of white middle-class “pioneer” gentrifiers for having a warped view on what the return to the city is all about. Steele excoriates the “middle-aged, talentless artistes ... [who complain] about

²⁸ Rose, “Rethinking Gentrification,” 59.

the very people who made them rich.” For Harry, people “Sitting there saying they have a right to perfect peace and quiet in their own neighborhood” (124) are deluded. Implicitly, this is the lesson that Eric – as a sort of psychologically compromised version of Harry – learns as he extricates himself from the feelings of victimisation he experiences following Ike's death. Returning home after an attempt to score some drugs in the projects, Eric realises the extent to which he has lost his self-awareness, and resolves to see himself “not as some witless shade following a preordained script but as an individual who was in the process of taking control, of turning things around for himself” (384). This is couched as an epiphany which results in Eric agreeing to assist the police with their inquiries at a time when progress towards an arrest seems to have stalled.

Eric is not so much a victim as a character struggling with very human failings. Indeed, and in particular, both Eric and Matty battle to come to terms with their own stations in life with regard to the generation of twenty-somethings following behind them: Eric's depression is deepened by the comparisons he draws between himself as a service industry worker and aspiring writer, and the members of Ike's generation who seem energised by their similar dreams, even if they are temporarily stalled due to the need to earn a living. Matty, meanwhile, is confounded by the behaviour of his two sons, one a teenager, the other a young adult, with whom he has a strained relationship. Eric, at least initially, laments the ability of his juniors simply to get on with their lives in an unselfconscious fashion: his “unsatisfied yearning for validation was

starting to make it near impossible for him to sit through a movie or read a book or even case out a new restaurant, all pulled off increasingly by those his age or younger, without wanting to run face-first into a wall” (16). Matty, as a father who is effectively estranged from his sons, likewise fails to understand the needs and motivations of this younger generation that is so central to the ongoing gentrification of the Lower East Side. Considering the renovation of an apartment adjacent to the crime scene, Matty notes disparagingly how the developers “must have gutted the whole thing and rebuilt it for the newbies, kids used to dorms” (284).

This confluence in the outlooks of Eric and Matty is sustained across the duration of the novel to the extent that it features as one of its defining dramatic concerns. Eric only realises the extent to which he has become introverted when he attends Ike's memorial service and is confronted with the reality that “Ike dead had more of a connection to this world [of the Lower East Side] than himself alive” (306). Similarly, Matty, following the arrest of his elder son on drugs charges and the involvement of his younger son in lying to cover for his brother, resolves to take a more active interest in their lives, and the novel concludes, poignantly, with Matty vowing to “lay down the law” to his errant second son who is soon to arrive in New York to stay with him. Briefly, Matty considers doing this over the phone but decides he will do it “face-to-face” when the boy's coach has arrived (455). Price's decision to close the narrative with this scene reveals the extent to which the investigation into Ike's murder and Tristan's eventual arrest is subordinate to his desire to explore the existential and moral crises with which his characters are confronted.

Lush Life complicates the orthodoxy of regarding gentrification as a process with the white middle classes at its centre in other ways too. In the novel's ironic representation of this demographic it is rendered no more or less affected by the socio-spatial changes in the Lower East Side than any other group. Price explores Matty's and Eric's inability to relate to the younger generation as a significant personal failing for which they both have to account, but he nonetheless shows how the “hipsters” and the youths from the projects share a vanity that operates outside of class distinctions. As Eric remarks to one of his co-workers at Berkmann's on his return from Ike's memorial service, “there's one thing, for all their differences, that the [youthful] audience [at the service], and the guys who did the killing, have in common ... And it's narcissism” (329). This is an insight that again runs counter to the conclusions of those who maintain that gentrification promotes, and is maintained by, a vengeful sense of entitlement that is directed by the white middle classes at the lower classes, with the effect that the latter group's presence in a neighbourhood is made untenable.

The picture of reality that *Lush Life* represents is more nuanced. For instance, at the outset, Price entertains the idea that the forces of capital – in the formulations of the supply school, forces that are arrayed entirely at the disposal of the incomers – might actually be dependent on the criminal economy and not inevitably deployed against it. Thus, a new hotel on Rivington Street has a “goodwill arrangement” with Matty's precinct offering the force “a cheap rate for drug-sting suites, and economy singles for out-of-town testifiers, victims, and on occasion family members

waiting for the release of a body,” an understanding that, most significantly, has not prevented the place from being “a hit from the door on in” (105).

The sense in which the novel offers an ironic commentary on reductively ideological perspectives on gentrification is furthered through the observations of Yolonda, herself a product of the projects. As she explains to her partner, Matty, the Lower East Side “isn't too bad a place ... The kids are so close to all walks of life around here ... you go two blocks in any direction from here, you got Wall Street, Chinatown ... they're like release valves ... They give you the confidence to mix it up in the world” (219). In Yolonda's view, the gentrification of the neighbourhood has certainly not resulted in the wholesale ghettoisation of the constituent communities. Moreover, she believes that the regeneration of the area's infrastructure and built environment has the concomitant effect of revitalising the lives of all the residents, not just the wealthy. In fact, her pronouncements on the operations of the gentrifying process are somewhat Lefebvrian as she explains that it can only happen with the input of the indigenous community who, in turn, will benefit. Talking to a delinquent suspect she advocates the pursuit of a trade over a life of pushing drugs: “Something like electrician, sheetrocking, plumbing. This whole area's blowing up. Your own neighborhood. Construction, rehabbing, demolition. You can't even sleep anymore down here. So you master a building trade in there? A year or two from now, when you come out [from prison] ... you can walk to work” (256). The final, and perhaps most playful, of Price's ironic interventions is the fact that he has the

patrolling officers introduced at the beginning of the novel make the arrest of Matty's sons for drug possession. In *Lush Life* the police are not the agents of an affluent, embattled enclave.

Finally, Price's novel is unequivocal in its assertion that the Lower East Side is not simply transforming into a white middle-class playground of the sort that critics such as Michael Sorkin identify as preeminent in contemporary American cities such as New York.²⁹ In fact, *Lush Life* concludes with Eric being tasked with the job of establishing a Berkmann's spin-off in a still-under-construction "indoor New York theme park" (452) in Atlantic City, New Jersey; seemingly, the Lower East Side is destined to remain a more authentic environment. To this effect, Price has commented that, unlike the sort of corporatised, commercialised spaces that are to be found in some postsuburban landscapes, and which seem to affect a perpetual, depthless present, the Lower East Side is a spatiality "like Byzantium. It's tomorrow, yesterday – anyplace but today."³⁰ Thus, *Lush Life* is a fiction that considers gentrification as part of the social production of space, refusing the more ideological readings of some social science studies by stressing the processual nature of urban complexity. As Walter Kirn has stated, "Price [as a novelist] is a builder ... he doesn't just present a slice of life, he piles life high and deep. Time too."³¹

²⁹ See, Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992). In his introduction to this edited collection, Sorkin advances a view of the city as a place that has lost its "historic role as the integrator of communities in favor of managing selective development and enforcing distinction" (xiv).

³⁰ Charles McGrath, "Interview with Richard Price," *New York Times*, March 2, 2008. Accessed online, 22/02/11: (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/books/02mcgr.html?_r=1&ref=richardprice).

³¹ Walter Kirn, "Review of *Lush Life*," *New York Times*, March 16, 2008. Accessed

Dinaw Mengestu's 2007 novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is also a fiction that questions the majority of received ideas about the gentrification of contemporary American city space. Fundamentally, the narrative is centred on the fortunes of two unconventional types of gentrifier, at least in terms of their difference from a stereotypical white middle-class norm. Mengestu's protagonists are representations of what Damaris Rose, in her work on refining the understanding of gentrification, terms "marginal gentrifiers."³²

The two characters in question, the narrator Sepha Stephanos, and Judith, are not only different from the usual image of gentrifiers, they are also different from each other: Sepha is an Ethiopian immigrant, and a bachelor, who runs a small convenience store in Logan Circle, Washington D.C., whilst Judith is a white single mum, with a biracial daughter called Naomi, who moves into Logan Circle in the wake of a divorce and during a sabbatical from her work as an academic. This set-up resonates further with Rose's motif of the "marginal" gentrifier in the sense that both Sepha and Judith have chosen the inner-city for reasons of relative cheapness and for reasons of changed family circumstances.³³

Both Sepha and Judith are indicative of the fact that gentrification

online, 22/02/11: (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/books/review/Kirn-t.html>).

³² Rose, "Rethinking Gentrification," 63.

³³ Rose, 60. Very often, Rose notes, female single parents have to make what she terms "induced moves" back to the urban environment, a change in circumstances that should be seen as separate to the "adjustment moves" made out of a desire for a lifestyle change.

as a process occurs in stages. Mengestu's novel is set in the late 1990s with the Logan Circle neighbourhood on the cusp of major change. Sepha notes, for example, the beginning of construction work on “a two-story organic grocery store,”³⁴ a reference to the arrival of the Whole Foods Market that opened in the area in 2000. But Sepha has been a Logan Circle resident since the early eighties when “finding an apartment was easy enough” (143). As Rose points out, thinking about gentrification in this way necessitates asking the following important question: “What conceptual grounds exist for assuming that ... 'first stagers' and the 'end-stage' affluent residents have anything in common other than the fact that their household incomes are higher than those of the original residents?”³⁵ In this gentrification genealogy we might see Sepha as a “first stager” and Judith as being somewhere in between Sepha and the “end-stage” incomers who by the time Sepha begins his narration are his main customers, well-off families with “stay-at-home moms or dads who've moved into one of the newly refurbished houses” (4).

Like *Lush Life*, Mengestu's novel raises the possibility of gentrification as an expression of downward mobility. As Lance Freeman and Frank Braconi assert, “trade-down options exist even within gentrifying neighborhoods”³⁶ and Sepha, despite being someone whose family was part of the ruling elite in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, consciously decides against pursuing the same path as his fellow African

³⁴ Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008 [2007]), 75. The novel was published in the United Kingdom under the different title of *Children of the Revolution*. However, all future references to the novel will be to this Riverhead edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

³⁵ Rose, 58.

³⁶ Freeman and Braconi, “Gentrification and Displacement,” 48.

immigrants, Kenneth and Joseph, by refusing to pursue a corporate job and a life in the suburbs and moving to Logan Circle to open his store a couple of years after his arrival in America.

For Sepha, this move is not about making a better life; it is about escaping an old one, specifically the memory of the murder of his father in the Ethiopian revolution. Sepha's goal in moving to the inner-city has been to “persist unnoticed through the days” (41) and in this desire he is similar to Judith. Sepha observes of his new neighbour when she first moves in, that she looks “indifferent to her surroundings ... confident and oblivious to the world” (20-1). Furthermore, both characters seem indifferent to socio-cultural fashions or trends: undertaking an inventory of his store, Sepha remarks that he is the only retailer in the neighbourhood still stocking some perfectly useful but now less-favoured products, but that this is simply because he loves things that are “timeless ... things that endure and survive” (71). Likewise, Judith confides in Sepha during a conversation about her work as a historian that she abhors the way Americans

always want to believe that we're the first to do anything ... We're always racing something or someone, even if it's all just in our head. We raced across America to get to the Pacific, and then we raced to build a railroad to connect it all. We raced to the moon. We raced to build as many bombs as was humanly possible. I wonder now if we haven't run out of things to race against (56).

Mengestu constructs Judith, then, as a character that is very far from being a “pioneer” gentrifier, rolling back a new urban frontier for her own satisfaction. Her burgeoning relationship with Sepha – who after all has experienced at first-hand the violence and sorrows of societal upheaval in the name of supposed progress – has as one of its foundations a shared

sense of history as cyclical, not an ineluctable march towards a notionally better or improved state. Indeed, the affection they reserve for Logan Circle is based entirely upon the fact that it is conspicuously a spatiality that has repeatedly been transformed over the years. Previously a place where members of a powerful elite – such as the Union general who gives the area its name – made their homes, Sepha, contrarily, loves the circle “for what it ha[s] become: proof that wealth and power were not immutable, and America was not always so great after all. The neighborhood, and by extension the city, had fallen, and every night I could see and hear that out of my living-room window” (16). In this way Mengestu suggests that Judith is an immigrant of sorts: if not actually to America, like Sepha, then in her sensibilities and her attitude towards Logan Circle as her home. Sepha is fascinated by the way that Judith's purse is

stuffed with utility bills, checks, credit cards, passport, keys to her old houses in Chicago and Virginia, a copy of Naomi's birth certificate and Social Security card along with her daughter's most recent report cards and immunization forms, everything one could ever need to assert her identity and place in the world. There was something sinister and romantic to it. Part fugitive, part adventurer, she was always ready to drop everything and run on a dime (81).

Mengestu's narrative is constructed around Sepha's story of his attraction to Judith. It explains the fact that Judith is no longer resident in Logan Circle even though she moved in only half a year or so prior to the point at which Sepha begins his narration. In alternate chapters Mengestu fills in both the back-story and the unfolding of present events with the effect that our discovery of what lies behind Judith's enforced departure from the area – seemingly a series of race-related acts of vandalism against

her property – becomes indistinguishable from Sepha's musings on whether to remain in Logan Circle in the light of an eviction order. And yet, the novel ends with Sepha returning to his store after a walk around the neighbourhood, seemingly content that

There are moments like this ... when we are neither coming nor going, and all we have to do is sit and look back on the life we have made. Right now, I'm convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own (228).

The question left hanging is “But for how much longer?” However, Mengestu's careful construction of Sepha's and Judith's characters leaves the reader enough clues as to how to read this closing statement of Sepha's as something more than just a supreme act of self-denial. When Judith returns to her former home to tie up the last of her business having left Logan Circle, Sepha admires the “almost casual pragmatism that govern[s] her actions” remarking that “It was as if she had known all along that her time in Logan Circle was only temporary” (223).

This sense that Judith and Sepha understand the fluctuating nature of socio-spatial relations under gentrification is underlined in the novel by Sepha's outlook on America's capitalist system of wealth accumulation. In his essay on *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Dayo Olopade posits that Sepha is a character who engages in the deformation of capital and the commodification of space by, for example, refusing to open his store, or, as he does in his final climactic walk around the area, leaving it open and unattended. Considering Mengestu's novel in comparison to V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), Olopade concludes that *The*

Beautiful Things rejects capitalist norms by offering a “stirring argument for value over cost – for subversion of the forces of capital” even suggesting that the immigrant, in tracing his “wild steps across the planet,” has “no greater tool at hand” in the search for empowerment.³⁷

The novel does offer a way of inserting the unheralded figure of the immigrant gentrifier into larger debates about gentrification as a phenomenon. Sepha explicitly seeks to devalue both the power of capital and labour. He is happy to let customers have goods for free and to ignore his friend Kenneth's suggestions that he transform the store into a deli or restaurant. Mengestu creates a fictional example of the sort of gentrifier for whom, Damaris Rose suggests, “making-do” is a conscious material choice. As such, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* considers a demographic that is overlooked in gentrification literature which generally only considers impoverishment as an alternative lifestyle choice pursued by educated young people.³⁸

Judith and Sepha accept socio-spatial change as a natural, and by no means inevitably damaging, condition, and in many ways they are the very opposite of urban pioneers. Whilst Sepha confounds the expected trajectory of an established gentrifier in failing at running his store, Judith is keen to support the indigenous, primarily African-American, community in its efforts to halt the runaway eviction rate and, accordingly, signs a petition organised by another Logan Circle resident, Mrs. Davis, calling on

³⁷ Dayo Olopade, “Go West, Young Men: Conspicuous Consumption in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, as Prefigured by V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*,” *Transition* 100 (2009): 151.

³⁸ Rose, 63.

the local council to resist further development. One of the ironies of the novel is that Judith's solidarity with the other members of the community actually provokes the hostile reaction that forces her to leave, and Mengestu's novel advances an attendant critique whereby gentrification is an overwhelmingly deterministic operation in that, as Sepha observes, Judith's arrival in the area actually portends something "miraculous" (209) in the promise of eventual – and given the sensitivity of Judith's outlook – sympathetic regeneration. He also notes dolorously, however, in a reference to the residents who succeed in driving Judith away, that "We expect the things that are dead or dying to remain so" (209) and that, very often, the changes attendant upon gentrification are determined to be undesirable before the full facts of the matter can be established. Sepha's sadness that his affection for Judith will never amount to anything because of her forced exile from Logan Circle is mirrored by his sadness at the way that entrenched racial antagonisms cast the potential for socio-spatial regeneration in an unfavourable light. Sepha notes that, in the course of his time in the neighbourhood the number of affluent black residents has dwindled as they have left for "homes in the suburbs or in less run-down parts of the city" (196), and he disdains the bitterness of the remaining black population for displacing their frustrations onto Judith because she is white and despite the fact that she chooses to live where the departed black middle classes will not. That Judith is wrongly identified by the local population as a pernicious intruder in Logan Circle is highlighted in the scene in which Sepha follows a "husband and wife, white, thin, and well-dressed" as they navigate the area on a "self-guided walking tour of D.C."

(71). Sepha observes them from a distance as they wander westwards towards Dupont and Georgetown and imagines them as visitors to the capital, “their home ... a split-level ranch in the suburbs of some midsize city” (78). In this passage, Mengestu caricatures the suburban and white middle classes in order to represent them as tourists. The comparison with Judith, who actively wants to establish herself as a community-minded resident in Logan Circle, could not be more stark.

For Sepha, as an immigrant gentrifier, the promise of the American master narrative of assimilation is an empty one. Late in the novel Sepha asks of himself, “How did I end up here?” In almost two decades in America, Sepha's adopted country has not bestowed on him any ideological comforts and he continues in his doubtful vein: “Where is the grand narrative of my life? ... perhaps it had never been there at all” (147). Mengestu suggests that the answer to Sepha's question – posed in a rhetorical fashion for the reader's consideration – lies in the realisation that America's national credo, symbolised in the novel by the reference to the monuments that proliferate throughout Washington D.C., has no existential currency. Sepha opines, “There is no mystery left in any of those buildings for us, and at times I wonder how there ever could have been” (46). As a child of the various insurrections to have shaken the African continent, Sepha has learned that existence is in a permanent state of revolution. In a telling scene at the outset of the novel, Kenneth and Joseph, who both subscribe to the myth of America to a greater extent than Sepha, are determinedly explaining to him the essential nature of their adopted homeland. Sepha interrupts by shouting out the name of an

African dictator. This is all part of an ongoing game between the three in which they have to identify the country in which the named dictator led a revolution. But, more broadly, the playing of this game is a trope that punctuates the whole of Mengestu's narrative, for the players never run out of revolutions or revolutionaries. Such a characterisation of the three friends' continent of origin is Mengestu's way of foregrounding a crucial contrast between the divergent experiences of Africans and Americans. Although a revolutionary nation in its founding, America's sense of itself has ossified over the course of its subsequent rise to superpower status, a status vouchsafed by the stability of its polity.

In this context, then, we can see that part of the novel's project, is to script a sceptical take on the way in which a range of socio-cultural, socio-historical, socio-political and socio-economic phenomena, such as gentrification, become circumscribed discourses that are hard to query. In much the same way that Price's Lower East Side imaginary proposes a spatiality that is complex and variegated, Mengestu's fictional inquiry into the gentrification of Logan Circle asserts a spatiality that Sepha appreciates for its mutability and idiosyncrasy. His traumatic experiences in Ethiopia mean that Sepha struggles "to find the guiding principle that relegate[s] the past to its proper place" (127); but, actually, the acuity of this historical sense, the inability to forget, makes Sepha perfectly disposed to finding in the metaphorical "strange half-darkness" and "long shadows" (36) of his Washington D.C. environment a paradoxical refuge and contentment.

What I have endeavoured to show through my analyses of *Lush Life*

and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is that, if we are to attempt to understand gentrification as part of a postsuburban socio-spatial configuration, then it is vital that such novels that help to complicate social science models of the gentrification process are read as expressions of the variety of experiences in the ongoing transformation of the city. Such readings can only, in turn, benefit the way in which American literary culture seeks to position itself as having a unique insight into the state of the nation.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan Franzen has made the idea that the suburbs render white middle-class life almost unbearable a cornerstone of his work. As both a critic and a novelist, both aspects of Franzen's output are mutually supportive and reinforce a stereotypical understanding of the suburban experience. The previous chapter argued that the process of gentrification in the contemporary American city is part of the broader restructuring of metropolitan form and the emergence of a postsuburban landscape. Moreover, I suggested fictions are a creative exploration of the fallacy of associating gentrification solely with the white middle classes, and thereby re-instituting clichéd ideas of suburbia in the new habitus of the inner-city. Yet, this is what Franzen's most recent novel, *Freedom* (2010), does. As David Brooks points out in his review of the novel, the way it excoriates its characters as shallow and self-regarding is wearily familiar:

Sometime long ago, a writer by the side of Walden Pond decided that middle-class Americans may seem happy and successful on the outside, but deep down they are leading lives of quiet desperation. This message caught on ... and it became the basis of nearly every depiction of small-town and suburban America since. If you judged by American literature, there are no happy people in the suburbs, and certainly no fulfilled ones.¹

Brooks' own conservative agenda in trying to present the middle classes as a largely contented demographic² means that he overlooks what is perhaps

¹ David Brooks, "The Freedom Agenda," *New York Times*, September 20, 2010. Accessed online, 25/02/2011: (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/21/opinion/21brooks.html?_r=1).

² This is a recurrent theme in Brooks' writing. See David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2000), and *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always*

most interesting about *Freedom*: the fact that the entirety of the opening chapter, in which Franzen's condemnatory tone is established, is set, not in the suburbs, but in a gentrifying neighbourhood of St. Paul. The novel begins, in effect, with a prologue bringing events up to the early 2000s and the time of the rest of the novel's unfolding. The prologue indelibly marks the central objects of Franzen's dissection, the Berglund family, as "super-guilty" white middle-class types who "need ... to forgive everybody so their own good fortune c[an] be forgiven" and "who lack ... the courage of their privilege."³ Buying into the area of Ramsey Hill in the 1970s when it was just a "slum" (6), the Berglunds' abandon the area thirty years later having failed to "figure out yet how to live" (26). This indictment is prefigured in the way that their younger selves' virtues seem to contain within them the seeds of their own vice: Patty Berglund, wife, mother, and most enthusiastic gentrifier, is cast as "helplessly conspicuous ... She was already fully the thing that was just starting to happen to the rest of the street" (4). Whilst, following Brooks, we can agree that not all middle-class lives are those of "quiet desperation," not all spatialities are remarkable for the presence of this demographic, unhappy or otherwise; this is an oversight that this thesis has sought to address and correct.

Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) is a forensic examination of a white middle-class family not dissimilar to the Berglunds set against the backdrop of the financialisation of traditional labour markets and the

Have) in the Future Tense (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

³ Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 4. All future references to this novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

bursting of the technology-driven bubble in the economy.⁴ It anticipates aspects of the global financial crisis that hit western capitalist economies in 2007-8, and the recession that ensued. Consequently, *The Corrections* is a novel that has been influential in the way that American fiction writers have responded to the profound shock of the recent downturn in fictions that explore super-rich elites, a section of society at the centre of the economic storm due to its close association with the banking industry. Jonathan Dee's *The Privileges* and Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic*, for example, both published in 2010, scrutinise the actions of Manhattan bankers and consider the degree to which they are complicit in the instability of the capitalist system.⁵

So far no one has published a fiction about the profound effects on the postsuburban landscape of the financial crisis. As the architectural critic Allison Arieff noted in 2009, the rising number of abandoned lots, vacated due to evictions, or due to constructors calling time on projects because of a lack of capital, poses a number of questions regarding how such spaces will be renewed and transformed. For Arieff, the regeneration of forgotten peripheral landscapes is dependent both on innovative community-based projects designed to re-use and re-cycle, and on federal public works programmes. She dreams “that some major overhaul can occur: that a self-sufficient mixed-use neighborhood can emerge ... that creative ways are found not just to rehabilitate these homes and

⁴ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001).

⁵ Jonathan Dee, *The Privileges* (London: Corsair, 2010); Adam Haslett, *Union Atlantic* (London: Tuskar Rock, 2010).

communities, but to keep people in them.”⁶ What's interesting to note here is that, whilst we await a novel that explores the specific post-crisis context, the postsuburban fictions I have analysed in the course of this thesis, written and published before the worst impacts of the banking crisis became apparent, do seem to represent the postsuburban environment as a spatiality in which the fulfillment of Arieff's vision is a distinct possibility. I detailed the ways in which the material realities of the postsuburban environment differ from those of the suburban one. The literary construction of a postsuburban habitat is notable for its contemplation of the possible, as opposed to the continuation of an older suburban imaginary marked by ideas of restriction, but I also want to underscore what I see as the essential difference between the cultural conceptions of the two landscapes.

The recent postsuburban narratives that have been the basis of this study all privilege notions of change over stasis. In analysing the aspects of the novels and short-stories that reveal such a perspective on the way their characters interact with their surroundings, my argument has drawn on Henri Lefebvre's theories about the production of space as the material embodiment of social relations. So, T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* notes the potential for the emergence of open, vernacular communities in place of exclusive and insular spatialities; the stories in Junot Díaz's *Drown* reveal the extent to which the surviving postwar suburban landscape is re-made according to different demographic shifts;

⁶ Allison Arieff, “What Will Save the Suburbs?”, *New York Times*, January 11, 2009. Accessed online, 07/07/2011: (<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/what-will-save-the-suburbs/>).

Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* allows for its central character, Sepha, to overlook the typical link between status and the gentrifying inner-city that comprises part of the contemporary postsuburban moment in favour of a recognition that the evolution of a spatiality is as inevitable as the political revolutions of his home continent. Lefebvre's formulation does not deny the symbiotic relationship between individual agency and the spatial structuring of society. If this thesis has seemed to privilege agency as a conceptual category, this is because postsuburban fictions accentuate it, in stark contrast to earlier accounts of suburban life in which the self is reduced by an oppressively planned spatiality.

Whilst my focus has been on the production of space through the actions of the self, implicit in my analyses has been the other side to this dialectical process: the production of the self through the spatial consequences of what people do. As James Donald reminds us, key to understanding this Lefebvorean dynamic between social space and mental space is the way that it is mediated by the imagination, sustaining a “fourth dimension of 'space-time,' which is where the dynamic between unconscious and corporeality, between desire and the social, between pleasure and Law, is played out.” Imagination, that of the authors whose works I have examined, and the characters who populate the pages of their fictions, is concerned with the exploration of possibilities, and, as Donald argues, “Imagination is inherently ethical insofar as it always operates in

the register of *as if*: as if I were another, as if things could be otherwise.”⁷ In each of the preceding chapters I have made implicit reference to the different subjectivities and selfhoods that the narratives represent, just as I have, on a more explicit level, drawn attention to the representation of the postsuburban spatialities they advance. Without doubt, there are recent fictions that reinscribe familiar tropes into their contemporary metropolitan settings: David Gates' *Jernigan* (1991) and Rick Moody's *Garden State* (2002) relate the stories of typically dysfunctional characters against the backdrop of a consistently uninspiring New Jersey landscape, for instance.⁸ However, as I have shown, Richard Ford's Bascombe trilogy charts the evolution of its central protagonist's sense of self, from chronic solipsism through to self-awareness and an acknowledgement that he is a better man for seeking ties to other people rather than severing them. In the postsuburban third spaces represented in *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Drown*, the various selfhoods depicted are all developed through an incorporation of the 'other', in the process moving the postsuburban habitat beyond the stereotype of a defensive, exclusionary and ethnically standardised spatiality. Similarly, Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* suggests that the dispersal of the self across the spaces of the Internet and the low-density environment of the metropolitan periphery is far from incompatible with the intimacy of supportive relations with family and friends. Finally, my chapter on gentrification fiction reads Richard

⁷ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 13, 19.

⁸ David Gates, *Jernigan* (London: Picador, 1991); Rick Moody, *Garden State* (London: Faber, 2002).

Price's *Lush Life* and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as novels that posit a view of the self that resists sociological categorisation, and that is constantly evolving as it is productive of, and is produced by, the spaces in which it is situated.

The title of this thesis refers to the fact that, together, these recent postsuburban narratives discard the inherited tradition of an anti-suburban critique at the same time as they explore the emergence of a startlingly new landscape. I have been happy to invoke the metaphor of the typical suburban split-level house as a trap, and the concomitant figure of escaping from it, because I deem it to be a useful way of summarising the extent to which the characters in the fictions studied resist an adherence to the clichéd conception of suburbia, *and*, therefore, the extent to which the authors themselves write against this literary and sociological history. Throughout, I have alluded to the ways in which the authors have, quite deliberately and reflexively, integrated motifs common to anti-suburban writing, both fictional and non-fictional. There is a knowing, almost absurdist, strain of comedy in *The Tortilla Curtain*, the Bascombe novels, and *Microserfs*, for example, which seeks to undermine the perpetuation of stock characters and themes. We see it in the way Boyle includes excerpts from Delaney's nature writings in the narrative of *The Tortilla Curtain*, a strategy that satirises Delaney's self-righteousness. We see it in the way that Ford scripts Frank as an iconoclast, as happy, post-divorce, to take on as a boarder the amusingly incongruous figure of

Bosobolo, a forty-two year old “six-foot-five-inch Negro”⁹ originally from Gabon, who comes to study at the Haddam seminary. At this point in *The Sportswriter*, the breakdown of his family life does not cause Frank distress, although he regrets it; rather, he sees it as an opportunity to explore very different sorts of domestic relations despite the ingrained conservatism of Haddam in the 1980s. We see it, too, in Daniel Underwood's self-conscious admission early in the narrative of *Microserfs* that living in Redmond makes him feel “like [his] body is a station wagon in which [he] drives [his] brain around, like a suburban mother taking the kids to hockey practice.”¹⁰

The aim of this thesis has been to help generate a body of literary criticism that seeks to excavate new directions in fictional treatments of the contemporary American metropolitan reality. The fictions explored belong to a body of work that interrogates a new form of regionalism based not so much on the expression of local cultures, but on the interaction of individuals and communities with a late-capitalist metropolis that continues to evolve and expand, wherever those interactions may be found, and that assumes the variegated nature of such socio-spatial transformations. Perhaps one of the most telling commonalities that emerges from the study of these postsuburban narratives is the marked lack of reference to the binary opposition between city and suburb upon which so much that is integral to an anti-suburban discourse depends. We can think, then, of these fictions as interventions in an ongoing and

⁹ Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (Collins Harvill: London, 1996 [1986]), 36.

¹⁰ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004 [1995]), 4.

vexatious debate about the meaning of what has been termed urban 'sprawl'. As Robert Bruegmann points out, old notions of what a city is are now continually being defied, and this has led to fierce argument about the merits, or otherwise, of a landscape marked by sprawling development. Bruegmann concludes that sprawl's complexities might just be a good thing in that they are reflective of increased social mobility and choice for a majority of the population, and that, in exercising this choice, ordinary people can be seen to contribute to the changed landscape, rather than it being seen, as naysayers assert, as simply reflective of failed governmental policy, speculative property dealings, and the heedless imperatives of capital.¹¹

As a concluding thought, I want to suggest that recent postsuburban narratives directly address the socio-spatial complexities of sprawl by challenging the generalising tendencies of an anti-suburban critique. In the process they allow for a consideration of the contemporary metropolitan landscape that is free from the unduly negative associations that are sometimes imputed to it. That is to say sprawl should not be seen as the suburbs writ large, and this environment should not be described using language that is time-worn and inaccurate. Whilst some of the characters might occasionally refer in clichéd terms to the distinction between the city and the suburb, these fictions are fully conversant with the new idiom developed by urbanists and geographers to describe the

¹¹ Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005). For a perspective on sprawl that is more sceptical than Bruegmann's see: Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2004); Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000).

emergence of a postsuburban landscape. Even if these works do not always reference the variety of postsuburban micro-geographies by name (although in some, such as *The Tortilla Curtain* and Ford's Bascombe novels, there are such references), there is, in their descriptive and thematic content, a tacit recognition that a single demarcation between city and suburb is no longer useful. In *Microserfs*, for instance, if Silicon Valley is said to be in the orbit of any urban area, a case might be made for that city being Las Vegas where the future of Oop! is sealed; Las Vegas is approximately four hundred miles away. For Michael, the transformations wrought by Internet technology mean that the city of Waterloo, Ontario, in Canada takes on particular importance to him on a personal level as it is the University of Waterloo that his girlfriend attends. Yet they fall in love over the Internet and Michael never actually travels to Waterloo during the courtship. In this novel those cities that bear a relation to the postindustrial, postsuburban spatiality of Silicon Valley are shown to be numerous and geographically dispersed. In *The Tortilla Curtain* the Mexican city of Tepoztlán, from which Cándido and América both hail, is as important a determining factor in the efforts the two migrants make to establish themselves in Topanga Canyon as Los Angeles. The drama of *Lush Life* is predicated on the return to the city of a section of society that grew up in the postwar suburbs. But the novel insists that if the distinction between the suburb and the city is less clear in contemporary America, that is not to say that suburban lifestyles and aesthetics are inexorably taking over the city in a sort of inward sprawl that is the adjunct to outward metropolitan expansion. As in Bruegmann's

analysis of urban sprawl, then, these fictional texts delineate a shifting metropolitan landscape that cannot be encapsulated in reductive interpretive models; fundamental to each is the rejection of the suburbs both as a discrete socio-spatial category and as a subject of literary attention. I hope this thesis contributes to a re-framing of critical debates that will allow for a greater understanding of postsuburban fiction on its own terms.

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