Between the City and the Bush: Suburbia in the Contemporary Australian Novel

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BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE BUSH: SUBURBIA IN THE CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

by

Nathanael David O'Reilly

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Dr. Gwen Tarbox, Advisor

Western Michigan University
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2008
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CHAPTER ONE
AUSTRALIA, SUBURBIA AND LITERATURE

Australia's most important national narratives, such as the stories of Ned Kelly, Burke and Wills, and Gallipoli, take place in the bush, the outback, and overseas. Graeme Turner contends in *National Fictions* that the country, usually the bush or the outback, is preferred “as the authentic location for the distinctive Australian experience” (26). However, Australia has been one of the most suburban societies in the world, rather than a predominantly rural society, since the mid-nineteenth-century, decades before the six British colonies on the Australian continent and the adjacent island of Tasmania federated to become a nation in 1901 (Davison, “Australia” 60). In his classic study of Australian society, *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne claims that Australia “may have been the first suburban nation” (29). Likewise, Tim Rowse, author of the seminal article “Heaven and a Hill’s Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia,” claims that Australia “has been suburban since the 1870s and 1880s” (3). Despite the fact that the vast majority of Australians live in suburbia, Australian narratives are rarely suburban (Gilbert 37; Powell 127). Turner notes that after World War Two, Australian fiction writers gradually began to address urban and suburban society (31). Nevertheless, when post-war Australian writers set their novels in suburbia, the majority depicted the site negatively, “coloured by the tradition of anti-suburbanism amongst Australian intellectuals ... which sees suburbia as a cultural wasteland” (Powell 127). The literary critic Robin Gerster claims that most Australians have been “disenfranchised” by “the virtual restriction” of the representation of suburbia to “satire and ridicule” (574).
Literary novels dealing with suburbia make up a very small proportion of Australian literature. Research conducted using the AustLit database, the most comprehensive source for bibliographic information on Australian literature, reveals that on those rare occasions when suburbia is the subject for works of Australian literature, those works take the form of poetry and short stories much more often than novels.\(^1\) Of the “Top Forty Australian Books” selected by the Australian Society of Authors in 2003, just four of the thirty-two novels on the list have suburban settings. While historians, sociologists, comedians, filmmakers, television scriptwriters, poets and writers of short fiction have devoted significant attention to Australian suburban life, the nation’s novelists and literary critics have given suburbia scant serious attention, largely due to the dominance of the anti-suburban tradition amongst Australian novelists and critics. For most of Australian history, novelists and literary critics have deemed suburban life beneath them and unworthy as a subject for literature.

**Suburbia in British and American Literature**

In his influential essay, Rowse notes that the term “suburbia” is “part of a wider intellectual culture common to Britain and North America. Among social critics of these countries, ‘suburbia,’ ‘suburban’ and ‘suburb’ have been used to describe a certain form of social life which emerged in the metropolises of Europe” (3). Rowse states that

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\(^1\) Search conducted on January 16, 2007 at http://www.austlit.edu.au/. In fact, Austlit lists 1116 poems and 449 short stories about the “suburbs,” while there are only 231 novels categorized as dealing with “suburbs,” of which some are extracts rather than complete works, and genre fiction is included, such as romance, mystery, crime, young adult, humor, and science fiction. A narrower search for novels about “suburban life” returns just twenty-one entries, of which three are young adult novels and three are classified as “humour.” A wider search for all works regarding “suburban life” generates 251 entries, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, columns, autobiographies, criticism and screenplays. Likewise, searches for “suburban” novels and novels about “suburbia” both returned just twenty-four results, as opposed to 1606 “bush” novels, 273 “outback” novels, 589 “country” novels, 106 “rural” novels, 781 “urban” novels and 431 “city” novels. (Of course, there is some overlap between the novels listed under the “city” and “suburban” categories).
suburbs "became the typical mode of domestic living for the majority of people in ... [developed] countries" (3). Although the representation of suburbia in Australian literature has not yet been the subject of much critical debate, suburbia is the subject for considerable scholarly activity in other developed nations, especially Britain and the United States. According to the WorldCat database, between 1999 and 2006 there were 261 non-fiction books on suburbia published in English worldwide.\(^2\) Thus, while there has been little criticism written on suburbia in Australian literature since the publication in 1998 of a special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* entitled *Writing the Everyday: Australian Literature and the Limits of Suburbia*, edited by Andrew McCann, the broader topic of suburbia has generated a great deal of scholarship and interest from publishers and readers worldwide. The 261 aforementioned books include works on contemporary British and American fiction, television, film, urban planning, race, class, education and architecture. The MLA International Bibliography lists sixty peer-reviewed journal articles published in English on suburbia since 1998, plus twenty-five book chapters or essays in edited collections, two books, and fourteen dissertations. Even though just a handful of scholars have examined suburbia in Australian literature to date, the topic of suburbia is clearly important globally, within both literary studies and wider academic circles.

In Dominic Head's recent survey, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, he acknowledges "the dramatic spread of suburbia" (209) and its influence on fiction, noting that British cultural connotations of the term are mostly negative:

\[\ldots\text{ for many people, the adjective 'suburban' defines a state of mind characterized}\]

\(^2\) WorldCat and MLA searches conducted on July 19, 2007.
by narrow middle class aspirations … Perceived as embodying a world-view, the
‘suburban state of mind’ can be ridiculed, consigned to the intellectual margins,
just as its actual physical space notionally occupies the urban margins. In the
popular imagination, then, suburbia is Middle England; it is preoccupied with
shopping and cars; it breeds narrow attitudes, and wears naff styles; and it is
mystified by artistic endeavour. (213)

Head goes on to argue that British novelists “have played their part in establishing
suburbia as an object of ridicule” (213). However, Head concludes that negative fictional
representations of suburbia signal a failure on behalf of novelists “to recognize the
sociological importance of suburbia” (214). Head finds the negative depiction of suburbia
by British novelists problematic, since suburbia has rapidly become “a constant fact of
recent human geography” and commentators tend to accord it “a central place in the
explanation of twentieth-century experience” (214). Likewise, Roger Silverstone, the
editor of the collection *Visions of Suburbia*, argues that suburbia is central to
contemporary culture and that understanding suburbia is an integral part of the project of
understanding everyday life in contemporary industrialized and industrializing societies
(“Introduction” 3; “Preface” ix).

Head describes post-war British fictional engagement with suburbia as consisting
of stereotypical representations of suburban life that depict it as “deadening,
unimaginative, [and] representative of a low or restricted common denominator” (218).
Head questions whether suburban life can really be as homogenous as British fiction has
depicted it to be, suggesting that “a more diverse culture” actually exists “beneath the
surface uniformity” (218). Moreover, Head argues that “the centrality of suburbia hinges
on the paradoxes and contradictions it generates and sustains. There are many fissures that make suburban life exemplary of contemporary experience, and make it more surprising than it appears" (218). Head’s analysis of the treatment of suburbia by British authors and critics demonstrates that suburbia occupies the same space in British literature that it does in Australian literature. Moreover, Head’s recognition of the rarely acknowledged importance of suburbia in contemporary British life and the rich potential it holds as a setting for fiction mirrors the position I take regarding suburbia in Australian society and literature.

In her chapter-length analysis of Hanif Kureishi’s seminal novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Susan Brook notes, like Head, that the stereotype of suburbia “as homogenous and conformist is pervasive, not only in popular culture but also in contemporary literary and cultural criticism, where the suburb tends to feature negatively, if it features at all” (209). Brook notes that in both Britain and the United States, the suburb is represented as “the (often demonized) other of city life: safe where the city is dangerous; conformist where the city is heterogeneous; monotonous and enervating where the city is diverse and stimulating; the site of heterosexual family life where the city opens up the potential for sexual experimentation and possibility” (209). Brook argues that if critics want to understand cities they need to examine the complexity of suburban life (210). Emphasizing the often-shallow engagement with suburbia by British critics, Brook argues that critics of suburbia falsely act as if “there were no distinctions between different kinds of suburbs. The binary opposition between the city and suburbs persists because of the vagueness of the idea of ‘the suburbs,’ which enables it to function as the other of a range of urban experience” (212). Like Head, Brook posits that false
representations of suburbia as a homogeneous zone serve to conceal difference (212). Furthermore, Brook argues that negative judgments of suburbia “are often judgements aimed at the lower middle class” and that anti-suburban criticism says little about suburban life, but reveals much about the prejudices of “those who make such judgements, often intellectuals or the socially mobile” (212). Moreover, Brook claims that anti-suburban criticism is the product of both class anxieties and sexism: “Women are frequently the targets in satirical portraits of the suburb, where they are shown to be obsessed with conspicuous consumption and display” (212-13).

Negative stereotypes of suburbia are by no means confined to British and Australian culture and literature; they are also pervasive in American culture and literature. Although widespread suburbanization began later in the United States than in Britain and Australia (the American population was still predominantly urban in 1920), the movement of population from American cities and rural areas to suburbia and the subsequent growth of the suburbs was so substantial that by the 1970 census more Americans dwelt in suburbia than in cities or rural areas, and by the 1990 census the number of suburbanites was greater than the combined number of rural and city residents (Jurca 160). In response to the suburbanization of American society, scholarly work on suburbia has proliferated in the United States in fields such as geography, urban planning, architecture, sociology and history. Robert M. Fogelson, author of Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930, published in 2005, claims, “The literature [of the history of suburbia] is so vast that it is easy to forget that almost all of it has appeared in the past forty-five years. Indeed, it is so vast that historians have already begun writing articles about the historiography of suburbia, the history of its history” (3). Fogelson
argues that the suburbanization of America was driven largely by fear: “fears of disease, crime, immorality, poverty, immigration, and public disorder drove many Americans from the center of the city to the periphery” (4). Furthermore, the actual physical development of the suburbs and the widespread use of legislation such as restrictive covenants to exclude specific races and classes from the suburbs and prevent certain behaviors, such as hanging one’s laundry outside to dry, were indicative of “a host of deep-seated fears that permeated much of American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Fogelson 24).3 Lynn Spigel argues that planning and building policies have constructed American suburbia as a “hostile and alienating terrain” (237).

Although developers intended the American suburbs to be sites of escape, security and exclusion, American literature dealing with suburbia criticizes the locale for possessing the very features that attract tens of millions of Americans to make it their home. In Edith Wharton’s essay entitled “The Great American Novel,” published in 1925 in the Yale Review, she launches a typical anti-suburban attack, claiming that “modern America” has

reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence, and the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one’s neighbor’s. Great as may be the material advantages of these diffused conveniences, the safe and uniform life resulting from them offers to the artist’s imagination a surface as flat and monotonous as our own prairies. (Qtd. in Jurca 3)

3 According to Lynn Spigel, in 1993, 86% of white residents of suburbia lived in areas with a black population below 1% (236).
Despite Wharton’s exhortations, numerous American writers set their novels in suburbia in the decades after her essay appeared. Wharton’s “failure to dislodge ‘the little suburban house’ from the twentieth-century American novel” is readily apparent in the works of writers such as Frederick Barthelme, James M. Cain, Richard Ford, Sinclair Lewis, John Updike, Sloan Wilson and Richard Yates (Jurca 4).

In Catherine Jurca’s recent study of American literary engagement with suburbia, White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel, she argues that suburban narratives “have become a national literary specialty” (160). Jurca claims that, as in Australia and Britain, suburbanization “has been one of the most significant social and political facts of modern American life” (5). Jurca demonstrates that anti-suburban attitudes dominate American suburban novels, following much the same pattern as Australian and British suburban novels. Jurca notes that twentieth-century American novelists writing about suburbia “present their work as a critique of its culture” (6) and that the novels are even marketed as anti-suburban, based “on the assumption that although millions of people choose to live there [in suburbia], it is the environment that we love to hate” (161). American suburban novels contain “ubiquitous complaints about mass production, standardization, dullness, and conformity, which novelists have developed and refined in the context of a broad-based intellectual resistance to the suburb” (Jurca 6). The anti-suburban intellectual tradition that Jurca identifies in American literature is also prevalent in British and Australian literature (a detailed discussion of the anti-suburban tradition in Australia follows later in this chapter).
Definitions of Terms

In this project I use the terms “suburbia,” “suburb,” and “suburban” frequently. Because the term “suburbia” frequently carries negative connotations, it is imperative that I explain my use of the term and related terms. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “suburbia” as “A quasi-proper name” for the suburbs that is frequently disparaging. I use the term “suburbia” to refer to the suburbs as a whole, and do not intend the word to carry a negative connotation. The OED defines a suburb as “The country lying immediately outside a town or city; more particularly, those residential parts belonging to a town or city that lie immediately outside and adjacent to its walls or boundaries” and as “Any of such residential parts, having a definite designation, boundary, or organization.” John Archer notes that the term “suburb” originally “connoted an area in which noxious, dangerous, and illicit activities occurred” (29). I use the term “suburb,” in the Australian context, to refer to a specific, named, defined, primarily residential area outside of the city’s central business district (CBD), and do not intend any negative connotation. In cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, which have literally hundreds of suburbs, there is a great deal of variation from suburb to suburb with regard to factors including population size, geographical size, age, distance from the CBD, population density, property size and value, and ethnic and demographic composition. Therefore, the typical Australian suburb does not exist, although it can be useful to employ terms such as “inner,” “outer,” “middle-class,” “working-class,” “established,” “newly-developed,” “exclusive,” “affordable” and “expensive” to refer to individual suburbs or groups of suburbs.

The OED defines “suburban” as “Of or belonging to a suburb or the suburbs of a town; living, situated, operating, or carried on in the suburbs” and as “Having
characteristics that are regarded as belonging especially to life in the suburbs of a city; having the inferior manners, the narrowness of view, etc., attributed to residents in suburbs.” I use the term “suburban” to refer to characteristics associated with a suburb or group of suburbs, or to literature that deals with the suburbs, but again do not intend any negative connotation. For example, when I write that a character “resides in suburban Melbourne,” I merely wish to convey that the character is a resident of a Melbourne suburb, as opposed to the inner city, not to imply that the character possesses any negative characteristics that may be associated with Melbourne suburbs or suburbs in general. I also use the phrase “built environment” to refer to both the city and the suburbs in order to avoid using gender-biased language, such as “man-made.”

**The Development of Australian Suburbia**

Before proceeding to discuss the anti-suburban tradition in Australian society and present my argument regarding suburbia in the contemporary Australian novel, it is necessary to provide a brief history of the development of Australia’s suburbs. The historian Graeme Davison notes the discrepancy between the reality and mythology of Australian society, arguing that Australia “liked to present itself to the world as a frontier society … inhabited by a hardy breed of bushmen,” even though “the frontier that most Australians were busy pioneering was not a land of sweeping plains, but a land of sprawling suburbs” ("Australia" 1). The suburbanization of Australia began almost eighty years before the six Australian colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901; the process was underway by the late 1820s in Sydney and by the 1850s in Melbourne, when “Australia” still consisted of six English colonies (Gilbert 33). Thus, in Sydney’s case, suburbanization began about forty years after initial English
settlement, and in the case of Melbourne, less than twenty years after John Batman established the village that would go on to become one of the richest cities in the world with the advent of the goldrush in the 1850s.

Davison also highlights the deep connections between colonialism and suburbanization, pointing out that suburban development “was consciously promoted by the country’s founders and expressed the social aspirations of immigrants drawn largely from the cities of the United Kingdom where the suburban idea had first taken root” (“Australia” 2). In another sense, the English colonies in Australia functioned as the farthest suburbs of urban Britain, with “the suburban imperative” in Australian society being “intimately bound up with the essentially British caste of colonial society” (Davison, “Australia” 7). As John Hartley argues, suburbia is “an imperial invention” (184). By the late 1820s, wealthy businessmen and government officials in Sydney began a movement to create English-style villa suburbs, and in 1828, Governor Ralph Darling “authorized the subdivision of Woolloomooloo Hill ... overlooking the harbor about a mile east” of Sydney (Davison, “Australia” 4). In the same year, in Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania), Lieutenant Governor George Arthur issued regulations for suburban development in Hobart (Davison, “Australia” 6).

Within less than a decade of the first government-authorized subdivision of land, Sydney’s commercial elite began moving to the new suburbs, where they imitated and adapted English architectural fashions, especially “the romantic Gothic or Italianate villa popularised by John Claudius Loudon” (Davison, “Australia” 4; “Colonial” 7). Davison argues that the development of suburbia in Australia differed from British and American suburban development in “the swiftness with which the ideal was diffused and the low
barriers that colonial society presented to its attainment” (“Australia” 5). An increase of assisted immigration in the 1830s also increased the need for suburban development (Davison, “Australia” 5). Emigrants to Australia in the nineteenth century were predominantly from England, Scotland and Ireland, where home and land ownership were usually unattainable for the lower classes (Davison, “Colonial” 8).

Although suburban development began early in Sydney and Hobart, it was not until the 1850s that living in suburbia became an attainable reality “for the majority of Australian town dwellers”; previously, most residents of suburbia were wealthy businessmen, lawyers, and government officials. However, the introduction of the horse-drawn omnibus and the development of railway networks in the 1850s enabled the “suburban idea [to] become a democratic reality” (Davison, “Australia” 7). The ideal of a home and garden in the suburbs was promoted by immigration agents for more than a century, “from the gold rushes of the 1850s to the Second World War and beyond” (Davison, “Australia” 8). Thus, the promise of a new life in the constantly expanding suburbs of Australia’s capital cities was a major motivation for new immigrants, who were rarely property owners in their homelands and often wrote letters to relatives and friends at home describing their dreams of acquiring a suburban home and subsequent success in doing so (Davison, “Australia” 9). The history of suburbia in Australia is an integral part of both the history of Australia’s relationship with Britain and the history of immigration in Australia. Indeed, many of the works studied in this project address the role of immigrants in suburbia, whether they hail from Britain or other sites of origin, such as Germany, Armenia, Greece, Italy and Lebanon.
The immigrants of the 1850s affected the physical development of the suburbs immensely, making them substantially different from "the bourgeois utopias" of London and the early villa suburbs of Sydney and Hobart (Davison, "Australia" 9). In Melbourne, the one-hundred-foot frontages created by government surveyors were "divided, subdivided, sold, and resold" into allotments with frontages as narrow as twelve-and-a-half feet, so that instead of picturesque English-style suburbs, Melbourne's inner suburbs became "a messy jigsaw of villas, truncated terraces, cottages, corner shops, pubs, workshops, stables, and vacant lots" (Davison, "Australia" 9). Davison argues that the "free, skilled immigrants of the 1850s" modified "the once-aristocratic suburban idea," giving it a "radical democratic twist" ("Australia" 9). The names of Australian suburbs also reflect the role working-class immigrants played in suburban development. Australian suburbs were often named after "leafy satellite" suburbs of London, such as Richmond, Paddington, Kensington and Camberwell, rather than the "densely settled neighbourhoods from which the immigrants had probably come - Stepney, Whitechapel, Clerkenwell and Bethnall Green," since the immigrants were aspiring to a better life and chose names that reflected their aspirations (Davison, "Colonial" 9).

The arrival of immigrants and their settlement in new suburbs caused Australia to possess "one of the highest proportions of city dwellers in the world" "by the second half of the nineteenth century" (Horne 29); the development of suburbia continued steadily as the century progressed. Melbourne's population increased from 268,000 to 473,000 in the 1880s, with 70% of the growth occurring in the suburbs (Gilbert 33). Similarly, by 1891, Sydney had 107,652 residents in the inner city, while 275,631 resided in the suburbs (Rowse 4). Gilbert argues that "The lure of the suburbs was a persistent social force" due
to the rapid expansion of transport networks after 1875 and “an abundance of suitable land” on the edge of the cities, which made suburbia a “marvelous compromise” between the city and the bush (33, 35; Rowse 4).

In an article entitled “The Rise of the Suburbs,” published in 1891 in *The Contemporary Review,* the English journalist Sidney Low demonstrated remarkable insight, noting that “The suburban type is just as pronounced in some of our colonies [as it is in England],” arguing that instead of a “dashing pastoralist,” the average Australian “lives in his own house, provided with a verandah and a piano” and reads the newspaper as he commutes to work “by the train or tramcar” (Qtd. in Kuchta 179). By the end of the nineteenth century all of Australia’s capital cities were “predominantly suburban in character,” while Melbourne, with a population approximately one-eighth of London’s, already covered an area twice as large as the Empire’s capital (Davison, “Australia” 10).

At the start of the twentieth century, “the dominance of the capital cities, combined with their marked low-density character, combined to make Australia the most suburbanized nation on earth” (Davison, “Australia” 11).

The most prevalent form of housing in Australian suburbs has always been the detached, single-family home, often located on a quarter-acre block. Sophie Watson states,

The single detached home on the quarter-acre block is one of the most striking visual symbols of urban Australia. Roughly three-quarters of dwellings are of this kind. Flats, terraces, [and] low-and high-rise apartment blocks characteristic of European cities are relatively rare even in the more dense urban areas. In outer
Brisbane and Melbourne over nine in ten households live in separate houses. (Qtd. in Kapferer 111).

Davison states that “the bungalow, with its shuttered windows and wide verandas standing in a shady garden … originated in India, but made its way to Australia during the earliest years of New South Wales where it became the prototype of the Australian house in both city and country” (“Australia” 11). Anthony D. King argues that the suburb “was instrumental in producing the architectural form of the bungalow, just as the bungalow was instrumental in producing the spatial form of the suburb” and that the process was repeated “in Anglophone colonial and post-colonial countries worldwide” (56). The detached suburban house represents “economic and political independence,” both much sought after by immigrants and native-born Australians (Davison, “Colonial” 10).

Although many families aspired to live in single-family homes, local, state and federal governments also played a significant role in making the detached single-family home the dominant mode of living in Australia, through both the promotion of home-ownership and the construction of public housing. State governments created housing commissions or departments to construct and administer public housing, usually in the form of estates comprised of detached single-family dwellings. In 1909, the Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney and its Suburbs concluded that “the tenement or flat system of housing [prevalent in Europe and America] would not meet the requirements of Australian workmen,” and recommended “that on social and on hygienic grounds, workmen … be encouraged to live in separate houses in the suburbs” (Qtd. in Hoskins 4). In 1912, J.R. Dacey, the Colonial Secretary for New South Wales, sought to
alleviate urban congestion and promote “peace, order and good government” by drafting a proposal for the construction of a model suburb (Hoskins 6-7). In the same year, the establishment of the NSW Housing Board and “The passage of the 1912 Housing Act … cleared the way for the erection of a government-funded model suburb,” named Daceyville in honor of Dacey who died that year (Hoskins 7).

However, it was not until the late 1930s that state governments began large-scale construction of public housing (Hayward, “Anything” 1). The Second World War greatly exacerbated the housing shortage in Australia and led to a housing boom after the war (Powell 47, 52; Hoskins 2); government estimates “put the housing shortfall at about 300,000 dwellings in the mid-1940s” (Badcock 257). On November 19, 1945, the State and Commonwealth governments signed an agreement under which the Commonwealth government agreed to provide low-cost loans to fund the construction of public housing (Hayward, “Introduction” 1).

Home ownership is a central facet of the Australian dream, just as it is central to the American dream. For over 150 years, Australians have sought to own their own homes, usually in suburbia. In Sydney, rates of home ownership increased from 40% in 1947 to 60% in 1954, and then to 71% in 1961 (R. White 49). A survey conducted in 1959 of British immigrants to Australia revealed that 90% of couples sought to buy a home, despite the fact that “less than one-third had been owners in their homeland” (Davison, “Colonial” 12). Gilbert notes that “there seems to be much less emphasis on the social importance of home-ownership in continental Europe than there is in Australia … In suburban Sydney in the mid-1970s, over 80% of all private houses were owner-occupied” (36). The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s have been described as the “Golden Age” of
home ownership in Australia; during this period almost 90% of households owned a home “at some stage of their lives” and almost half of the construction in Australian cities took place (Badcock 254). Thus, the bulk of the suburbanization of Australia’s cities was driven by the desire of working and middle-class Australians to own a detached single-family home.

Blair Badcock observes that the construction of “equally modest homes on similarly sized building blocks in the suburbs” led to “the suburban bungalow, with its generous backyard” occupying a central position in popular notions of a prosperous, egalitarian society (254). A home in the suburbs became physical evidence of both individual and community success, a symbol of an industrialized democratic nation in which individuals had the freedom and opportunity to prosper and live comfortably. Home-ownership rates approached 72% in the mid-1960s and have remained relatively static since then (Badcock 263). However, Badcock questions the ability of Australian society to continue to provide access to home-ownership to the vast majority of citizens, noting decreasing access to home-ownership in the 1990s, especially among lower-income households, citizens under thirty years of age, persons living alone, and single-parent households (260, 261, 263). Badcock concludes that “the illusion that [home-ownership] … is accessible to all ‘ordinary’ Australians” is sustained by the middle-classes, who have reaped the financial benefits of home ownership (266). Australian novels set in suburbia tackle issues such as home ownership, egalitarianism, democracy, freedom, and prosperity and question the reality behind the suburban mythology.

Despite the fact that the dream of home ownership in the suburbs may be less attainable for Australians now than in past decades, due to factors such as sharply rising
property values in the early years of the twenty-first century, life in the suburbs is still the “preferred mode of existence for millions of ordinary Australians” (Kapferer 125). Sociologist Judith Kapferer argues that “the suburbs present a vision of a liberal democratic workers’ paradise to the world outside” and that “the suburban home is still conceptualized as enshrining egalitarianism, individualism and that freedom of choice which is believed … to lie at the very heart of a liberal capitalist democracy” (116). As Gilbert notes, “there has been surprising continuity since the 1850s in the attitudes, values and motives underlying suburbanization” (original emphasis) (36).

The development of suburbia in Australia’s five largest cities (which are also state capitals), namely Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth, has occurred in a similar manner. As Diane Powell states in Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs,

All Australian cities have similar cartographies: older inner areas gentrified since the 1970s; prestigious suburbs in geographically attractive locations; older, established middle-class areas; and, usually in the outer circle, the newer dormitory suburbs, the mass-planned housing estates, where services are minimal, the populations younger and more culturally diverse, the families newer and their incomes lower than those in the rest of the city. (xiv)

Like Powell, Kapferer points out that the outer suburbs are home to the marginalized and disadvantaged: “blue-collar workers are exiled to the outer suburbs as are the ‘non-

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4 Australia now has the least affordable housing of all developed, English-speaking nations. Prices in Melbourne have doubled in the past decade and mortgage interest rates are higher than in the U.S., Britain and most of the EU. Australians pay “6.6 times the median household income for a median-priced home,” while “in New Zealand, Ireland and Britain a median-priced home cost[s] between 5.5 and six times the median yearly household income” and in the US and Canada buyers pay between three and four times the median household income (Schneiders).
productive’ – single-parent households, the unemployed and pensioners” (120). In Australia, property values, prestige and access to services usually decrease the further a suburb is from the city centre, which is the opposite of the typical American pattern, in which inner urban areas are usually low-income, and affluent, exclusive suburbs are often located on the outer fringe of cities, often as much as twenty or thirty miles from the city centre.

The Anti-Suburban Tradition in Australian Culture

In his introduction to the essay collection *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, Chris Healy notes that in Australian culture “there is a relatively long history of intellectuals and others seeking to delineate the suburb. The positions and orientations of these commentaries range from pure hatred to mad love” (xv); however, the negative commentaries far outweigh the positive. Likewise, Andrew McCann states that a dominant anti-suburban ethos has existed within Australian intellectual life since the late nineteenth century (“Introduction” vii), while Garry Kinnane notes that anti-suburbanism “has long been a deep current in the Australian artistic and intellectual mainstream” (“Shopping” 41). In addition to influencing Australian culture as a whole, the anti-suburban intellectual tradition has heavily influenced both the literature dealing with suburbia and the criticism of that literature.

One of the earliest and most striking examples of the anti-suburban tradition is Louis Esson’s essay entitled “Our Institutions,” which was published in 1912 along with his play *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*. Kinnane argues that Esson’s “notorious diatribe” reflects “the sentiments of nearly every artist and poet of his era” (“Shopping” 41). Esson declares: “The suburban home must be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and
depressing in modern life. It endeavours to eliminate the element of danger in human affairs. But without dangers there can be no joy, no ecstasy, no spiritual adventures. The suburban home is a blasphemy. It denies life” (73). Esson goes on to claim that “it would be better to live in a slum area than in a bourgeois suburb,” arguing that “slums have more character … and more potentialities. Life is more vivid and picturesque there. People dance, and have passions, and live … dangerously. In the suburbs all is repression, stagnation, a moral morgue” (73). Esson’s equation of suburbia with domesticity, boredom, depression, conservatism, repression, safety and predictability has been echoed and repeated by numerous Australian intellectuals for almost a century. As Gerster notes, “Esson’s wildly romantic rhetoric … supplies a representative attitude” (567-68). Gilbert also identifies Esson’s rhetoric as romantic, arguing that “Anti-suburbanism is heir to the recurrent anathema that Romanticism has pronounced for more than a quarter of a millennium against the rationalism, meliorism and materialism of the modern world. Suburbanites are criticized because they feel safe, and because their lives are comfortable” (40).

Rowse argues that Australian intellectuals, including Vance and Nettie Palmer, Esson, W.K. Hancock and Frederic Eggleston, “all equated ‘suburbia’ with a stifling materialism of outlook” and that “The generation of intellectuals who came to maturity just before, during or just after the First World War inaugurated a use of the term ‘suburbia’ in an overwhelmingly pejorative sense” (7). Kinnane claims that anti-suburbanism was “adopted in succession” by individual intellectuals and groups including the Heidelberg school of painters, the Lindsays, “Hugh McCrae, Kenneth Slessor, the Palmers, the Meldrumites, the Montsalvat lifestylers, the Boyds, the ‘Heide’
modernists ... Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, George Johnston, Patrick White ... and the Meanjin ‘school’ of the 1960s” (“Shopping” 41-42).\(^5\) Rowse identifies the anti-suburban tradition in Australian intellectual life as a conflict between “the cosmopolitan and the suburban,” arguing that the conflict was “not one that existed between nations, say Britain and Australia,” but one that “took place in every country. It was a contest between two attitudes to life: one whose intellectual horizons were broad ... and one that was [allegedly] narrow, self-satisfied, materialistic and parochial” (5).

Gilbert argues that when intellectuals criticize suburbia for being an environment that promotes “mindless conformism,” they are critiquing “values and attitudes shared across the entire suburban culture” (original emphasis) (37). Therefore, since the vast majority of Australians live in the suburbs, the anti-suburban tradition is in effect an anti-Australian tradition, a manifestation of the cultural cringe and an expression of dissatisfaction with the nation as a whole. Since Australian intellectuals have been made to feel inferior by their former colonial masters, they resort to an attack on members of their own society whom they see as inferior, namely the lower-middle and working classes. In cases where intellectuals are themselves suburbanites, their attacks on suburbia are an expression of self-loathing. Furthermore, as Gilbert notes, “anti-suburbanism, as a specific, systematic cultural critique, may be more powerful in Australian life than elsewhere” (37). Hence, in Australia one finds the seemingly paradoxical situation of the most suburban society on earth also possessing the strongest expressions of anti-suburbanism.

Just as Rowse notes that a generation of intellectuals in the period surrounding the First World War disparaged suburbia, Robert Dixon states that in the period from “the

\(^5\) In my second and third chapters, I argue against the claim that Patrick White is anti-suburban.
late 1940s to the mid 1960s" another generation of intellectuals “mounted a sustained
critique of suburbia,” attacking “commodification, industrialisation, standardisation,
secularisation, [and] the ‘levelling down’ effect of mass culture” (“James McAuley’s”
20). Although the anti-suburban position has dominated Australian intellectuals’
engagement with suburbia, Rowse argues that by the early 1950s some critics came to
view suburbia “in a more positive light – as an innocent utopia” (7). Furthermore, Rowse
claims that in the 1950s, suburbia

... was coming to be seen not so much as an aberration of the Australian spirit,
but as its abiding manifestation ... as “suburbia” became accepted as an authentic
image of the way ordinary Australians lived, the critical connotations of the term
began to lose their force, giving way to a gentle irony and even to an aloof
benediction. No-one did more to facilitate this shift than Barry Humphries. (8)
The comedian Barry Humphries’ characters, especially Dame Edna Everage and Sandy
Stone, are “truly ‘suburban,’” according to Rowse. He argues that Everage “apes but
violates the conventions of taste, status and worldliness” while “Stone’s life is a pathetic
shell of would-be gentility and conformity” (8). Delys Bird argues that Humphries’
“attack on the assumed conservative mediocrity of suburban Australia is itself ultimately
conservative” (189). Moreover, Rowse notes, as time has passed, the “authenticity and
familiarity” of Everage and Stone has “come to undercut the critical edge of Humphries’
satire” and “an undeniable element of sentimental patriotism in the appreciation of
Humphries’ work” has developed (8). Rowse’s last point is even more pertinent thirty
years after the publication of his article, since Dame Edna Everage is now indisputably an
iconic figure in Australian culture.
Hugh Stretton, author of *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970), has been described by Kapferer as “the high priest of suburbia in Australia” (111), while Rowse claims that Stretton presented “an articulate and philosophic case” for suburban life (10-11). Likewise, Kinnane identifies Stretton as one of the first to question the anti-suburban tradition (“Shopping” 43), while Gerster describes Stretton as a champion of suburbia (573). Stretton countered some of the standard criticisms of suburbia while simultaneously emphasizing its advantages:

> You don’t have to be a mindless conformist to choose suburban life. Most of the best poets and painters and inventors and protestors choose it too. It reconciles access to work and city with private, adaptable, self-expressive living space at home ... For children it really has no rivals. At home it can allow them space, freedom and community with their elders; they can still reach bush and beach in one direction and in the other, schools to educate them and cities to sophisticate them. (Qtd. in Rowse 11)

Despite Stretton’s obvious championing of suburbia, the final phrase of the above passage reveals a common anti-suburban idea, namely the belief that sophistication cannot be obtained within suburbia, that one must spend time in the city in order to attain cultural knowledge and cosmopolitan manners.

Another prominent Australian intellectual who bucked the anti-suburban tradition was Donald Horne, whose highly influential study *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, was published in 1964. Rowse credits Horne with rejecting “the interwar snobbery about suburbia” because “it effectively dismissed the whole nation. Instead, he defended the vitality of the Australian lifestyle” (8). Horne claims that “‘suburbanism,'
one way or the other, is likely to be the target of practically all intellectuals. And since
most Australians live in the suburbs of cities this means that intellectuals hate almost the
whole community” (28). Horne claims that “recognition of the essentially suburban
ccharacte of Australia has been slow, partly because old myths have remained virulent”
(29). Countering ideas about suburbia espoused by intellectuals such as Esson, Horne
contends,

The profusion of life doesn’t wither because people live in small brick houses
with red tile roofs. It is the almost universal failure of Australian writers to realize
this that causes them to either caricature Australian life, or to ignore it ... almost
all Australian writers – whatever their politics – are reactionaries whose attitude
to the massive diversities of suburban life is to ignore it or condemn it rather than
discover what it is. (30)

Despite the defense of suburbia by Stretton and Horne, the majority of the
Australian intelligentsia “hated suburbia. They despised it” (Gilbert 38). For intellectuals,
the suburbs represented the “epitome of all the worse characteristics of the city – a
distillation of pure mediocrity, alienation and false consciousness” (Gilbert 39).
Discussing false consciousness, Gilbert points out that the anti-suburban tradition is
essentially elitist and arrogant, since “the notion of suburban consciousness as false
consciousness lies at the heart of Australian anti-suburbanism” (40). However, anti-
suburbanism is not only elitist and arrogant, it is founded partly upon what Gilbert terms
“ignorance or misconception” (47), since it ignores or fails to recognize the diversity,
complexity and benefits of suburban life. As Rowse notes, the use of the term “suburbia”
often “suggests a homogeneity in Australian society” that does not exist (4). Because
critics are “preoccupied by a search for the ‘average’ Australian home and its life-style,” they fail to see “important ethnic and class differences” (Rowse 4). The novels studied in this project reveal that suburbia is not homogenous; in fact, suburbia contains a great deal of ethnic, class, sexual, religious and economic diversity.

Suburbia has long been associated with feminine domesticity, usually in a negative manner (Gilbert 35). As Silverstone puts it, “suburban culture is a gendered culture” (“Introduction” 7). The negative depiction of domesticity also usually entails a negative depiction of women, and sometimes outright misogyny. As Rowse notes, “A rough equation that seems to be employed is: women + domesticity = spiritual starvation. (Men + wide open spaces + achievement = heroism of the Australian spirit.) The female influence in the ‘culture’ is often taken to amount to an obsession with status and difference” (13). Or, as Gerster puts it, “The unspoken assumption … is that suburbia is an essentially female domain. It’s no place for a man” (original emphasis) (567). Thus, not only is the anti-suburban tradition in Australian culture elitist and arrogant, it is also often misogynistic.

In his article “Godzone 3: Myth and Reality,” published in Meanjin in 1966, Allan Ashbolt launched an attack on suburbia that highlights the alleged domesticity, conformity, consumerism and repetitive nature of suburban life and mocks the suburban male:

Behold the man – the Australian man of today – on Sunday mornings in the suburbs, when the high-decibel drone of the motor-mower is calling the faithful to worship. A block of land, a brick veneer, and the motor-mower beside him in the wilderness – what more does he want to sustain him, except a Holden to polish, a
beer with the boys, marital sex on Saturday nights, a few furtive adulteries, an occasional gamble on the horses or the lottery, the tribal rituals of football, the flickering shadows in the lounge-room of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies, guys and dolls? (373)

Ashbolt goes on to deride the suburban Australian male as "hardly rational or purposeful," claiming that "things merely happen to him or around him" in a world that is "mass-produced and mass-manipulated" (374). Ashbolt's caricature of the suburban male retires at age sixty-five and "imagines that he is about to begin living, not knowing that he died many years before" (374). Ashbolt concludes that the suburban male's "most enduring mark on life will be his gravestone" (374). Many of the standard criticisms that have been part of the anti-suburban tradition for almost a century appear in Ashbolt's caricature of suburbia, and although Ashbolt's piece was published more than forty years ago, it could easily pass for a critique of Australian suburban life in 2008.

In Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs, published in 1993, Diane Powell writes, "today's cultural elite still tends to see suburbia as a place where nothing worthwhile ever happens and nothing worth writing about ever occurs" (127). In 1995, the Melbourne architect Epaminondas Katsilidis gave a perfect example of the attitude of the cultural elite that Powell refers to when he dismissed suburbia as "neither city nor country. It's terrible, vacuous, isolated, [with an] awful lack of information and interaction" (Qtd. in Kapferer 128). In an issue of the Griffith Review published in 2005, Julianne Schultz notes that "suburban life has been a lightening rod for intellectual

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6 Architects have long been opposed to suburbia. The architect and critic Deyan Sudjic notes that in the early twentieth century architects were "horrified" by the "monotony" of New York and London's suburbs, and later by the suburbs of Los Angeles. Le Corbusier argued that suburbia created an "enslaved individualism," while Lewis Mumford attacked suburbia for being what he termed "a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly at uniform distances" (Sudjic 197).
criticism in Australia for generations,” noting that the stereotype of suburbia as “dull, ordinary, [and] predictable has been an article of faith, even as its accuracy diminished” (8). Interestingly, Schultz suggests that the stereotypes regarding suburbia were once accurate and perhaps are still accurate to an extent; she certainly does not declare the stereotypes to be false. In the same issue, Margaret Simons’ fascinating essay “Ties That Bind” examines the differences between Melbourne’s inner and outer suburbs and their residents. Simons states that the suburbs are viewed by intellectuals “as boring at best, vacuous, mean and racist at worst” (28). Clearly, the anti-suburban tradition is still pervasive and influential in Australian culture.

The Anti-Suburban Tradition in Australian Literature and Literary Criticism

Given the cultural history of Australian suburbia, one may ask how widely held anti-suburban attitudes are manifested in Australian literature and literary criticism. Australian literature is one of the many components that make up Australian culture, and as such, it is inevitably subject to the prevailing attitudes within that culture. Anti-suburbanism has both influenced Australian literature and been perpetuated by it. Kinnane describes anti-suburbanism in Australian culture as “almost exclusively” privileging “the city and the bush as the two poles of experience that matter,” arguing that the privileging of the city and the bush “is clearly reflected in our fiction writers, who from Lawson through Vance Palmer to Prichard, White, Johnston, Hal Porter, Keneally, Moorhouse, Garner [and others] … have idealised or found heroic suffering in the bush and the outback, or else have explored the fascinations of city waste” (“Shopping” 42). Perhaps the single most significant effect of the anti-suburban tradition on Australian fiction is that it has led Australian writers to set the vast majority of their works outside
suburbia, hence the small body of work that may be deemed “Australian suburban fiction.”

McCann argues that “post-war Australian writing … concerned with suburbia” reflects “anxieties about the suburbs [that] are not just anxieties about the everyday experience of life in Australian cities, its social and political effects and cultural possibilities … [but] are also anxieties about the ‘everyday’ itself as an experiential category referring to the mundane cycle of work, consumerism and domesticity” (“Introduction” vii). The concerns McCann identifies as present within fiction about suburbia mirror those espoused by the intellectuals who created and perpetuated the anti-suburban tradition. McCann also notes that fiction about suburbia “solicits fantasies of escape or flight” (“Introduction” viii). Indeed, the protagonist of McCann’s novel Subtopia flees suburbia, and characters in Johnston’s My Brother Jack, Malouf’s Johnno, Winton’s Cloudstreet and Lucashenko’s Steam Pigs all flee suburbia or fantasize about doing so.

In 1990, Robin Gerster published “Gerrymander: The Place of Suburbia in Australian Fiction”; his article is the most useful of the few works of criticism on suburbia in Australian fiction published to date. Gerster argues,

The denigration of the suburbs by Australian writers … is inveterate … suburbia is not only attacked by the pedlars of the bush mythology, but it is habitually dismissed with cosmopolitan contempt by urban-oriented writers as a place fit solely for satire, if indeed it is worth writing about at all. Whereas the intellectual enclaves and working-class slums of the inner city are celebrated for their ideological attraction and aesthetic potential, for their cultural energy and
diversity, for their LIFE, suburbia is used as a metonym for living death. (original emphasis) (565-566)

Gerster goes on to describe the attitude of Australian novelists to suburbia as a “combination of fear and contempt,” arguing that they “are unwilling to explore beyond the ‘surface’” and that they “shrink from close encounters with the suburbanites, perhaps because they are afraid to see an image of themselves” (566). Gerster posits that Australian artists cultivate a “sense of difference from the mainstream culture” that “prohibits close communication” and “empathy” with suburbanites, thus “satire and blank neglect become convenient refuges” (566). Furthermore, Gerster claims that the difference between satire and “gratuitous insult” is often impossible to discern (567).

Kinnane argues that it is not the suburbs that are “refuges of conformity” as anti-suburban intellectuals have contended, but “the clichés about suburbia” themselves, which he describes as “the sanctuaries of attitudinal smugness” and “substitutes for critical thinking” (“Shopping” 54). As a result, Kinnane claims, “The anti-suburban tradition in Australia has largely outlived its relevance, and writers of fiction who remain under its spell are in danger of blinding themselves to some of the more interesting, significant and dramatic material available to them ... suburbia is not a desert but a rich field of opportunities for narrative, character, drama and action” (“Shopping” 54).

Despite the decision by the majority of Australian writers of fiction to ignore suburbia and the tendency of most writers who address suburbia to disparage it, a few authors have taken suburbia seriously and engaged with it in a detailed, nuanced and unbiased manner. Gerster identifies Marion Halligan, Peter Goldsworthy and Gerald Murnane as members of a group of writers who treat suburbia seriously, without contempt (573); I add Peter
Carey, Jonathan Bennett, Liam Davison, Neil Boyack, Judy Pascoe, Lillian Ng, Amanda Lohrey, Murray Bail, Tim Winton (in his short fiction) and Patrick White to the list (in the next chapter, I argue that White has unfairly and simplistically been characterized as anti-suburban). About half of the works under discussion in this project were published after Gerster’s article, and I suspect that if he were writing today he would include the authors I mention alongside Halligan, Goldsworthy and Murnane.

In addition to the neglect of suburbia by Australian fiction writers, critics have largely ignored the importance of suburbia in Australian fiction, even those works that obviously address suburbia; this critical neglect is evidenced by the dearth of criticism on the subject. As McCann noted in 1998, comparing criticism of recent fiction to that of works by Patrick White, “the persistence of an anti-suburban strain in more recent Australian fiction has attracted less criticism and comment” (“Introduction” vii). For example, a search for criticism on the subject of “suburbia” in the AustLit database returns just forty-seven results, the vast majority of which deals with Patrick White’s plays. A search for criticism on the subject of “suburbs” returns seventy-eight results, while a search for criticism using the keyword “suburban” delivers just twenty-nine results. Alternatively, a search for criticism on the subject of “the bush” returns 973 results, “city” returns 274 results, and “urban” garners 543 results. Other topics deliver even larger numbers, such as 1100 for “women,” 1285 for “aboriginal” and 3785 for “identity.” The bulk of the small body of criticism that addresses Australian fiction set in the suburbs deals with Patrick White’s novels Riders in the Chariot and The Solid Mandala, and George Johnston’s My Brother Jack, although the overwhelming majority of the criticism on these three novels deals with issues other than suburbia. For example,

7 Searches conducted on July 18, 2007.
none of the twenty-four works of criticism on *Riders in the Chariot* listed in AustLit focus on the suburban setting, nor do any of the twenty-one works on *The Solid Mandala*, despite the fact that White is often described as an anti-suburban writer. Therefore, although it is rare for critics to write about Australian fiction set in suburbia, it is *even rarer* for critics to address the manner in which the authors engage with suburbia.

The body of criticism on many of the writers I address in this project is quite small. The scholarship on Gerald Murnane and the two of his novels that I examine consists of two monographs and nine chapters and journal articles. Despite Tim Winton’s tremendous popularity and numerous awards, there is only one collection of essays on his work, one monograph, and eighteen articles and book chapters dealing with *Cloudstreet*, arguably the most popular Australian novel ever written. Although Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* was published ten years ago, it is the subject of just one academic article. In contrast, A.L. McCann’s *Subtopia*, published in 2005, is already the subject of two journal articles. The literature on David Malouf’s work is extensive, including five monographs, and twenty-six articles dealing in whole or in part with *Johnno*. Likewise, Peter Carey’s popularity with both audiences and critics is matched by the extent of the literature on his work, which consists of seven monographs, one essay collection, and thirty articles and chapters dealing with *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector*.

While there is a substantial amount of criticism regarding the novels by Malouf, Carey, Winton, and to a lesser extent, Murnane, the majority of the criticism focuses on aspects of the novels *other* than the suburban setting and the impact of the suburban environment on the characters. Andrew McCann, the literary critic and author of the novel *Subtopia*, is the leading voice on suburbia in Australian fiction. In 1998, he edited a
special issue of Australian Literary Studies entitled Writing the Everyday: Australian Literature and the Limits of Suburbia, which contained an introductory essay and an essay on Patrick White by McCann, plus eight essays by other scholars on suburbia in Australian novels, poetry and non-fiction prose.

Apart from three essays on White, between the special issue of Australian Literary Studies in 1998 and Rodney Wetherell’s essay on McCann’s Subtopia in Meanjin in 2006, there was an eight-year critical silence on the topic of suburbia in Australian novels. Additionally, suburbia is often neglected in histories, introductions and companions to Australian literature. Even though it contains 760 pages, The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature does not include a single entry on “suburbia,” “suburbs,” or “suburban,” despite claiming to be a comprehensive account of Australian literature. Likewise, The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature contains references to suburbia in Australian fiction on just six of 326 pages; these six references to suburbia are brief and usually made in passing. However, Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer’s collection, A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900, published late in 2007, lists “suburbs” in the index and contains references to them on twenty-nine different pages, which is a welcome departure from past neglect of the topic in such works.

Thesis, Scope and Significance

As I have shown above, the anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature stems from both a western worldview that equates suburban life with anti-intellectualism, and a postcolonial obsession with national self-image. I am interested in examining the effects of the anti-suburban tradition on contemporary Australian fiction; therefore, this project
focuses on novels set in Australian suburbs from the 1960s (when Patrick White and George Johnston published their canonical suburban novels) to the present and explores how contemporary novelists have dealt with and moved beyond the anti-suburban tradition, using suburbia as a site in which to address many of the central social issues in Australian culture.

As I aim to demonstrate a progression over more than four decades within the body of work that could be called “the Australian suburban novel,” rather than focusing on just a few authors, novels or a narrow time-period, I examine eleven novels published between 1961 and 2005 written by eight novelists, (including four of Australia’s most acclaimed authors: Patrick White, David Malouf, Peter Carey and Tim Winton). The novels are Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala*; George Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*; David Malouf’s *Johnno*; Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*; Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs*; A.L. McCann’s *Subtopia*; Gerald Murnane’s *A Lifetime on Clouds* and *Landscape with Landscape*; and Peter Carey’s *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector*.

I selected the aforementioned novels for a variety of reasons: first, so that my project covers a time-frame of almost fifty years and reveals a progression within the fiction of suburbia; second, to provide a mixture of canonical, little-known and recent works; third, to include works by both well-known, internationally-recognized authors and little-known, obscure, neglected or emerging writers; fourth, to include works by writers of both genders, a variety of ages, and more than one ethnic background; fifth, to include works set in suburbs around the nation, such as the suburbs of Perth, Brisbane,
Sydney and Melbourne; and sixth, to include works set in a variety of types of suburbs, such as inner, outer, working-class, middle-class, established and newly-developed.

By examining eleven novels, I show that despite its numerically marginal place within Australian literature, suburban fiction includes some of the most widely read and critically-acclaimed novels; encompasses a range of styles, from journalistic realism to experimental post-modernism; spans numerous locations within suburbia, including inner and outer suburbs, working class, middle class and upper class suburbs; that much suburban fiction does not fit into the anti-suburban/pro-suburban binary; and, most importantly, that utilizing the suburban setting allows fiction writers to engage with the most important issues in contemporary Australian society, such as immigration, environmental degradation, racial and class conflict, consumerism, religion and spirituality, and domestic violence. Moreover, I demonstrate that suburbia is a central concern of Australia’s leading novelists.

This project is the first book-length study of suburbia in Australian literature; it addresses a long-neglected and under-examined area within Australian literature and analyzes novels by some of Australia’s most important writers from a new perspective, in addition to examining novels previously neglected by critics. My dissertation provides new insights and perspectives on eleven Australian novels, several of which are canonical works that have been analyzed extensively by other scholars. My work should lead to a reassessment of the novels and authors under discussion and inspire further research into suburbia in Australian literature. There are a number of novels that I could not include in this dissertation due to space limitations that other scholars may choose to examine or re-examine after reading my work. I wish to reinvigorate the debate regarding suburbia in
Australian literature and move it beyond Gerster, Kinnane and Wetherell’s calls for Australian authors to engage more closely with suburbia. While I agree with their position and share their belief that Australian novelists are neglecting a great deal of interesting material, I show that the authors who have explored suburbia since 1961 have already moved Australian literature in a new direction, away from the traditional focus on the bush and the city, demonstrating that the literal and theoretical space between the city and the bush contains the most interesting and important engagements with contemporary Australian culture.
CHAPTER TWO

PATRICK WHITE’S *RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT* (1961): AN ANTI-SUBURBAN NOVEL?

A detailed examination of suburbia in Australian fiction must address the work of Patrick White, Australia’s only winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who published two novels in the 1960s that are widely considered classic examples of anti-suburbanism in Australian literature: *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *The Solid Mandala* (1966). Both novels have achieved canonical status, as have several of White’s other novels. The body of work that I term “Australian suburban fiction” begins with the novels by White, who was the first prominent Australian novelist to use a suburban setting. White has often been labeled “anti-suburban,” and *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala,* both set in fictional western suburbs of Sydney, have been considered evidence of White’s alleged disdain for suburbia and its inhabitants. To cite a number of examples, Joseph Dewey argues that White “caustically satirized ... [Australia’s] suburban culture” (752); the authors of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* claim White “deplores” “suburban ugliness” and that White’s fictional suburb Sarsaparilla “represents the materialism, ugliness and ‘exaltation of the average’ that he deplores” (Wilde et al 72; 608); Andrew McCann argues that White demonstrates a “paranoid fear of suburbia” at times and is “often vehemently anti-suburban” (“Ethics” 145; “Decomposing” 59); Dianne Powell concludes that White’s suburban novels “confirm rather than question the images of the suburbs as places of boredom, prejudice and vulgarity” (127-28); Elizabeth

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8 My next chapter addresses *The Solid Mandala.*
Webby argues that *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* "are particularly critical of the closed minds and averted eyes of those living respectably in suburbia" (11-12); Robin Gerster insists that White displays "sniggering contempt for suburban (usually female) philistinism" in *Riders in the Chariot* (567); Garry Kinnane labels White "anti-suburban" and groups him with other anti-suburban writers and artists ("Shopping" 41-42); and Simon During states unequivocally, "White hated the suburbs" (16).

Moreover, critics often repeat claims that White is anti-suburban, seemingly without questioning their accuracy. As McCann notes, "It is now customary to place White’s fiction in a modernist literary culture that spurned the vapidity of suburbia" ("Decomposing" 70). For example, Veronica Brady begins her recent essay "God, History, and Patrick White" by stating, "White has usually been seen as a ferocious critic of Australian suburban life" (172). She provides a footnote citing "two excellent articles by Andrew McCann ... [that] point to White’s reputation as a hater of suburbia" and notes that McCann’s articles “proceed to question this interpretation” (176), but she does not provide any other evidence to support her opening claim, nor does she engage with McCann’s questioning of White’s anti-suburban reputation.9 Towards the conclusion of her article, Brady claims the novel “directs” “disgust ... against the citizens of Sarsaparilla” (176); however, she does not provide examples of the alleged “disgust” and overlooks the fact that indisputably “good” characters are also citizens of Sarsaparilla.

Critics have erroneously labeled both White and his work “anti-suburban.” In the following discussion I provide a new interpretation of White’s relationship with suburbia

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9 Nicholas Birns, the editor of *Antipodes*, informed me via email correspondence that Brady added the footnoted reference to McCann due to suggestions by himself and the anonymous referees of the article. Thus, to be fair, it was not Brady’s purpose or original intention to engage with McCann in her article.
and show that *Riders in the Chariot* presents a much more ambivalent and nuanced representation of suburbia than critics have previously acknowledged.

**White’s Reputation and Critical Reception**

The mass of published criticism on White’s work clearly demonstrates his central importance within Australian literary studies.\(^{10}\) According to the AustLit database, more criticism has been published on White’s work than on that of any other Australian writer.\(^{11}\) Although almost two decades have passed since White’s death, his work continues to inspire critical debates and new interpretations. Kerryn Goldsworthy argues that White’s reputation “was made by, and rests on, his novels,” claiming that his work “dominated Australian literature for three decades” and that “his influence continues to go wide and deep in the work of contemporary Australian writers” (126). Similarly, Michael Ackland argues that White’s novels “continue to haunt Australian intellectual life, to shock, inspire and tantalize” (415). White’s immense influence on Australian authors was demonstrated clearly in 2003 when the nearly three thousand members of the Australian Society of Author’s voted for their Top Forty Australian Books; their list included five novels by White (including two in the top ten) and David Marr’s biography of White. White was the only author with more than three books on the list (“Top Forty”).

Analysts of White’s work place him among the great twentieth-century writers, elevating him to the status of a global figure. In a review of *Voss* published in 1958 in *Australian Letters*, Robert Fry notes that reviewers had already compared White to D.H.

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\(^{10}\) AustLit searches conducted on July 25, 2007. AustLit lists 1274 works about White, including 883 works of criticism and 544 reviews. It is important to note that AustLit is not comprehensive and may fail to index some works published outside of Australia.

\(^{11}\) Likewise, the MLA Bibliography lists 450 works of criticism on White, far more than for any other Australian writer.
Lawrence, Faulkner, Tolstoy, Hardy, Conrad and Jane Austen (40). Although White’s central place in Australian literature is unquestionable, his critical reception has engendered much debate. Alan Lawson and Wenzhong Hu debate the extent to which White has allegedly been lauded overseas while disparaged in Australia. In 1973, Lawson countered those who claimed Australian critics had treated White harshly. In a detailed analysis of reviews and criticism of White’s work, Lawson argued that John Thompson, in his 1958 article “Australia’s White Policy,” presents

[a] bleak review of the treatment accorded Patrick White by Australian critics … [that] has been simplified and exaggerated many times … and the ‘anti-White-ism’ of Australian reviewers seems to have become one of the unexamined truisms of our literary culture … it needs to be insisted that White’s Australian reception has been very much better, the overseas reviews often less favourable, and the general critical standard of the response higher, than the accepted account would suggest. (“Unmerciful” 379)

In 1994, Wenzhong Hu revisited the debate over White’s critical reception. Like Lawson, Hu notes Thompson’s 1958 argument and shows that in 1961 Geoffrey Dutton essentially repeated Thompson’s claim when he wrote, “Australian critics had never approved of White, and their reactions were mostly hostile” (Qtd. in Hu 8). Dutton, an editor of Australian Letters, which published “The Prodigal Son” and other works by White, was White’s close friend for twenty years; the men often talked on the telephone, corresponded, and stayed at each other’s homes: Marr claims Dutton “became like a son to White” (Marr 303, 327, 348, 371-373, 640). Thus, Dutton’s repetition of Thompson’s
claim and his championing of White should be unsurprising.\textsuperscript{12} Hu claims no one openly disputed Thompson or Dutton, but when Maurice Dunlevy repeated their claims in the \textit{Canberra Times} after White won the Nobel Prize, Lawson responded with two articles and six letters in the \textit{Canberra Times}, plus the aforementioned essay in \textit{Meanjin}. Hu argues, however, that the debate over White’s critical reception in Australia is “far from over” (333). Indeed, as recently as 2004, Dewey repeated the claims of Thompson, Dutton and Dunlevy (752).

After White won the Nobel Prize, his novels were canonized and White himself “was almost transformed into a kind of literary icon” (Hu 338). Hu points out that upon White’s death, Prime Minister Bob Hawke “paid tribute to him and obituaries all praised him highly,” and argues, “There is not a single Australian writer, except for Christina Stead perhaps, who enjoyed a reputation anywhere near White’s during his lifetime” (338). Hu claims that although White “was heralded [in America] as a significant writer in the early years, his prestige did not last,” and notes that upon his death \textit{The Guardian} newspaper in Britain declared, “‘He was almost a forgotten writer as far as most Western critics were concerned’” (339). In Simon During’s controversial monograph \textit{Patrick White} (1996), he acknowledges White’s “extraordinary status in the national culture,” which he argues would only be preserved “so long as the country needs critiques of ordinariness and his readers can overlook how, in his novels, the primary figure of that ordinariness and the object of his exorcisms is, again and again, the middle-aged, middle-class, not highly educated, suburban woman” (100). During went so far as to claim that White is “doomed to be increasingly neglected, or, at any rate, celebrated only in lip-service” (100).

\textsuperscript{12} White and Dutton had a famous falling-out in 1982 (see Marr 612-15).
In 2001, Charles Lock described White’s reputation as being “in that mysterious slump to which most writers are, for a while, posthumously consigned” (72). Lock’s claim certainly applies to the American commercial market; apart from *Riders in the Chariot*, White’s works are only available in the United States second-hand. In a work published in 2007, Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer describe White as “the stranded behemoth of Australian literature,” noting that he is “always a point of reference,” but “curiously external to contemporary literary discourse and to the shelves of contemporary bookstores, inside or outside of Australia” (“Introduction” 11). However, new critical work on White continues to appear and he remains a prominent figure in the global literary studies community. During’s prediction that White’s reputation in Australia is doomed to demise has so far proved empty.

Within Australia, studies of White’s work have undergone a resurgence recently due to a hoax perpetrated in 2006 by *The Australian* newspaper, which sent a chapter of White’s novel *The Eye of the Storm* to twelve of Australia’s leading publishers and agents under the name Wraith Picket (an anagram of Patrick White); ten rejected the manuscript, deeming it unpublishable, while two did not respond (Malouf, “Patrick White Reappraised”). In response, White fans established websites and reading groups; prominent writers, critics and academics, including David Malouf, Peter Craven and Elizabeth Webby, responded with articles in the mainstream media; and academics

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13 Searches conducted on July 30, 2007 at amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and borders.com reveal that only *Riders in the Chariot* is currently in print. Used copies of White’s other novels are available from individual sellers through the aforementioned websites.

14 According to the MLA Bibliography, sixty-three peer-reviewed journal articles, eighteen chapters and essays in edited collections, and four monographs were published on White’s work between 1990 and 2007; the criticism was published in Australia, the United States, Britain, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, India, Singapore, Poland, South Africa and New Zealand, demonstrating the global nature of White studies. Interestingly, the number of works published on White since his death is more than triple the total number that the MLA database lists for Tim Winton, arguably Australia’s most popular living writer. Search conducted on July 30, 2007.
organized a symposium entitled Remembering Patrick White, which was held in Sydney in May 2007 and featured some of Australia’s most prominent literary scholars. Many of the twenty-three papers delivered at the symposium will appear as articles and chapters in the next few years, adding to the already vast amount of published criticism on White.

**“The Prodigal Son” and White’s Life in Suburbia**

In 1958, White published an essay entitled “The Prodigal Son” that became his most famous work of non-fiction prose. Marr claims the essay contains White’s “most devastating attack ... against Australia. He wrote nothing like it again, and nothing he has written is so often quoted” (328). In the essay, White explains his reasons for returning to Australia and provides criticisms of Australian society that have been used as evidence by critics who argue White is elitist, anti-suburban and anti-Australian. As Bernadette Brennan notes, critics have dismissed “White’s ongoing relevance ... by labelling him and his writing ‘elitist’” (34). The oft-quoted passage from “The Prodigal Son” follows:

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves. (White 38-39)

White does not mention suburbia at all, and the phrase “in all directions” implies that the “Great Australian Emptiness” exists in all parts of Australian society, whether urban, rural or suburban. Moreover, White specifically refers to a mindset rather than a physical
location. While White sees architecture that he does not find aesthetically pleasing and consumer goods (such as cars and food) as symptoms of widespread anti-intellectualism, it takes a leap of logic to read the passage as proof of the author’s anti-suburbanism.

Moreover, White refers to the state of Australian society as he perceived it upon his return, not at the time he wrote the article, more than a decade later. Interestingly, in 1947, White presented a contrary perspective while corresponding with Ben Huebsch, his American publisher: “The people are beginning to develop, and take an interest in books, and painting, and music, to an extent that surprises me, knowing them fourteen years ago. One gets the impression that a great deal is about to happen” (Qtd. in Ackland 405). In the same year, White wrote to another friend, “Even the uglier aspects of the place have their significance and rightness, to me” (Qtd. in Marr 245). And in 1956, two years before the publication of “The Prodigal Son,” White wrote to Huebsch claiming, “Quite a lot of them [Australians] are beginning to look for works of art, and will accept Voss, and even exalt it” (Qtd. in Marr 320). These brief examples reveal that White’s attitudes towards Australian culture were more complex than “The Prodigal Son” suggests. The frequent quotation of the above passage from “The Prodigal Son” has created a distorted view of White’s attitudes towards Australian society.

In “The Prodigal Son,” White points out that in the ten years between his purchase of “Dogwoods” at Castle Hill, and the time of writing the essay, he had “hardly stirred” from his outer-suburban home (37). White lived at Castle Hill for another eight years after composing “The Prodigal Son,” bringing his residence in the suburb to a total of eighteen years (White, Flaws 138). If White really hated suburbia, he would not have voluntarily dwelt there for almost two decades. Moreover, White based his fictional
suburbs of Sarsaparilla, Barranugli and Paradise East on Castle Hill and used them as the settings for two novels, a novella, two plays and several short stories, indicating a fascination with suburban life and a desire to explore it thoroughly. Elizabeth Salter argues that White's return to Australia after the Second World War "gave him the stimulus needed for the full development of his talent" (232). In addition to providing the inspiration, setting and background material for many of his works, Marr argues that suburban life provided White and his homosexual partner Manoly Lascaris with a degree of freedom to live together (246). Although White's sexual orientation was well known among his friends and the literary community, he was not publicly "out" and suburbia afforded him and Lascaris more privacy than they would have had if they lived in the city.

In "The Prodigal Son," White declares that what he perceived to be "the exaltation of the 'average'" in Australian society was what made him "panic most" upon his return to Australia (39). However, rather than find other subject matter, White chose to focus on the average, writing *The Tree of Man*, in which he sought "to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of ... [average] people" (39). In another frequently quoted passage from "The Prodigal Son," White declares, "Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism" (39). Thus, not only did White seek to push the Australian novel in new directions through Modernist experimentation, he chose to do so using suburbia as his setting. White admits that after several years at Castle Hill he "began to see things for the first time. Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration;
even the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life, acquired a meaning” (“The Prodigal Son” 39). Hence, rather than being a site unworthy of the artist’s attention, suburbia is for White a locale in which experimentation, insight and discovery are both a possibility and a reality.

Although White’s home at Castle Hill was not typically suburban, being a six-acre farm on which dogs, goats and poultry were raised, rather than a quarter-acre block, it was not completely rural either, and became increasingly more suburban as Sydney spread. A map in Marr’s biography shows Dogwoods close to a police station, banks, a cinema, and the post office. Marr describes Dogwoods as “not really a country house but a bungalow,” while White described it as “‘a bit of Strathfield in a paddock,’” referring to a more central Sydney suburb (Marr 262). In Flaws in the Glass, White describes Dogwoods as “a suburban villa” (137). In 1955, White planned to move to a more typically suburban setting. Due to ill health, he decided to sell Dogwoods and find “a modern house in an acre of garden bush”; however, he received no offers (Marr 302-303). In 1959, White wrote, “My so-called farm has now been swallowed up by suburbia,” and Marr states that by that time Castle Hill “had grown into a suburban shopping centre” and “houses had begun to edge down the hill” (Marr 350).

Writing to James Stern regarding rumors that the Housing Commission had purchased land adjacent to Dogwoods, White stated, “we don’t know how much of their horrible boxes will be visible through the trees … I should hate to leave here, and wouldn’t know where to go next” (Qtd. in Marr 350). In a letter composed in 1963, White indicates that he viewed Dogwoods as located in suburbia. Stating that he had written to the Sunday Telegraph in response to a piece on his play The Season at
Sarsaparilla in which the author asked how “a rich bachelor [could] know anything about suburbia,” White noted that he had “spent the last seventeen years in Sarsaparilla” (Qtd. in Marr 420). When White won the Nobel Prize in 1973, the subdivision of Dogwoods had just begun; two of the streets were named Patrick White Place and Nobel Avenue.

At one point in Flaws in the Glass, White writes, “I hated the years spent at Castle Hill”; however, his hatred was not caused by Castle Hill’s suburban location or neighbors, but was due to White being “constantly ill with asthma” due to negative reactions to the vegetation (139). Writing of his decision to leave Castle Hill after his mother died in 1963 and he inherited half of his father’s substantial wealth, White states, “it was impossible to continue living in what had become a suburb, when our interests – music, theatre, film, friends – were concentrated in the city. But to make the break was hard” (Flaws 146). White and Lascaris moved to Centennial Park in inner Sydney in October 1963, an area which White described as “a middle-class suburban precinct” (Flaws 147, 149). At no point in his autobiography does White express explicitly negative sentiments about suburbia.

**Riders in the Chariot**

The majority of Riders in the Chariot is set in Sarsaparilla, the fictional suburb White based on Castle Hill; portions of the novel are also set in England and Germany. Like H.G. Wells and George Orwell before him, White proved with Riders in the Chariot that a serious work of art can draw on suburbia and its inhabitants for both its subject matter and inspiration. White uses the suburban setting to explore a multiplicity of themes, including immigration, the legacy of colonialism, spirituality, religion, the role of the artist in society, the relationship between humans and nature, family relationships,
class, consumerism, racism, intolerance, bigotry, suffering and redemption. Ackland describes *Riders in the Chariot* as “immensely ambitious” (403), while Jacqueline Banerjee deems the novel “hugely successful” (112) and “the most impressive, coherent and inspiring expression of White’s unique qualities as a novelist” (92). Webby argues that White’s choice of “a Jewish refugee, an Aboriginal artist and two women” as his four riders anticipated “three of the major future challenges to old ideas of Australian literature and the ‘Australian tradition’: from multiculturalism, the women’s movement and Aboriginal activism” (“Introduction” 12). Likewise, Goldsworthy reads the novel as “an early model for the ideals of multiculturalism” that was “extraordinary” for its time and claims that upon its publication, “White began to be seen as one of the country’s great artists, constructing a nation and its social history in his writing” (127).

Marr views *Riders in the Chariot* as essentially “a study of ... good people pitted against evil” (361). Likewise, Salter sums up the novel’s theme as “redemption through suffering” (236). However, critics arguing that the novel is primarily concerned with a single theme tend to ignore the complexity of the work and many of the issues White tackles. To date, no critic has undertaken a thorough study of White’s engagement with suburbia in the novel. However, suburbia is not the only aspect of the novel critics neglect. Webby recently noted that White’s representation of Australian society in his fiction “has not been much studied”: she argues that Patricia Morley’s *The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in Patrick White’s Fiction* (1972), “The first intensive critical study of themes and preoccupations in White’s fiction,” inspired the approach of much of the subsequent criticism, so that Morley’s “emphasis on the metaphysical, the mystical, the spiritual and the symbolic aspects of White’s work became the critical
orthodoxy” (“Our Invisible”). Moreover, she suggests that even though White’s work has been the subject of more scholarship than “any other Australian author, it is clear that many aspects of his work remain largely unexplored, including the political, the comedic, the ways he represented Australian society and the relationship of his works to Australian and international literary traditions” (Webby, “Our Invisible”).

However, the critical tide may have begun to turn. In 2007, Bernadette Brennan published an excellent article entitled “Riders in the Chariot: A Tale for Our Times,” in which she argues that the novel and White’s “message of the need for loving-kindness in the face of difference, and fear of that difference” is as relevant today as it was when the novel was first published in 1961 (32). Brennan argues that White’s engagement with Australian society in Riders in the Chariot can guide readers toward strategies for countering the prevalent “climate of fear being fuelled by false assertions about the threat difference poses to ‘ordinary Australians’ and their way of life” (40). Brennan concludes that White’s writing helps readers “understand the absolutely ordinary fears and insecurities of the suburban Australian consciousness” (43-44).

Riders in the Chariot focuses on the spiritual journeys of four characters: Miss Hare, an elderly spinster and only child of wealthy parents; Mrs. Godbold, a poor English immigrant who survives by taking in laundry; Mordecai Himmelfarb, a Jewish Holocaust-survivor refugee immigrant; and Alf Dubbo, a diseased Aboriginal artist. Other characters who play important roles are Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, both representatives of middle-class suburban values. Edgar L. Chapman argues that White attempts to make his four central characters “represent a unity of diverse types and conditions of humanity” (188). It is apparent from just a brief description of White’s cast
of characters, even before engaging closely with the novel’s themes, that *Riders in the Chariot* reveals the richness, complexity and variety of life in suburbia.

**Miss Hare, Nature and the Legacy of Colonialism**

Miss Mary Hare, the first character White introduces, is an elderly spinster living in a decaying colonial mansion named Xanadu, surrounded by suburban development. Mary Hare’s father, Norbert, used his inherited wealth to live a life devoted to pleasure on an estate containing “exotic, deciduous trees, the rose garden which his senses craved, [and] pasture for the pedigree Jersey cows which would fill his silver jugs with cream” (24). Norbert is a descendant of the class of English gentry whose experiences replicate those of White’s own family, especially their efforts to recreate England in Australia, both culturally and physically, by planting English vegetation, importing English livestock, and replicating English architecture. McCann notes that White’s portrayal of suburbia is also a portrayal “of a settler society actively engaged in the colonisation of territory and the appropriation of apparently untamed space” and argues that White situates “the genesis of the Australian suburb in an unmistakable colonial context” (“Ethics” 146, 147). White presents the conflict between the natural environment and Norbert’s attempts to impose English ideals upon it as one the colonizers must lose. After Norbert’s workers attempt to clear and “tame” the landscape, the native vegetation, “which had been pushed back, immediately began to tangle with Norbert Hare’s willfully created park” and began the process of reclamation (17). McCann argues that White depicts Xanadu “as an ultimately grotesque attempt to consolidate an image of European

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15 White’s description of Xanadu and its owner contains a number of allusions to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan.”
civility and gentility in the alien and subtly resistant landscape of the Australian bush”
(“Ethics” 147).

Rather than perpetuating her father’s imposition of English vegetation and landscaping, Miss Hare allows the indigenous vegetation to defeat the colonizing species and attempts to commune with nature, rather than control it. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe argues, “There is no discrimination in Miss Hare, no fixities of hierarchy and order that might otherwise invite her to exalt European trees above Australian scrub. She has thrown off the arrogant heritage of the gentry” (“Weeds” 26). Her land is described as belonging to her “over and above actual rights,” indicating an unusual intimacy with the natural environment (13). Miss Hare’s relationship with nature is emphasized through her refusal to enter her property through the front gates, choosing instead to enter on her hands and knees through a tunnel in the vegetation (14). Edgecombe describes Miss Hare’s relationship with nature as an “intimate symbiosis … a mode of perfect receptivity and quietude” (Vision 36). Chapman claims Miss Hare “has come as close to identify with nature … as White can imagine is humanly possible” (92).

Mary Hare begins communing with nature as a child. In an incident clearly indicating her intent, Mary throws herself on the ground and hollows “out a nest in the grass, with little feverish jerks of her body, and foolish grunts, curling round in the shape of a bean, or position of a foetus”; when her father demands an explanation, she declares, “‘Now I know what it feels like to be a dog’” (28). As an elderly woman, Miss Hare retreats into the bush, “always listening and expecting until receiving” (46). Conversing with Himmelfarb, Miss Hare declares, “‘the earth is wonderful. It is all we have. It has bought me back when, otherwise, I should have died’” (199) and goes on to claim that
when she dies, she “shall sink into it ... and the grass will grow out of me” (200). Silvia Gzell argues that Miss Hare “scorns behaviour which is merely conventional and meaningless,” living alone by choice, “aware of her difference from other people” (183). Likewise, Chapman posits that Miss Hare’s “indifference to ordinary standards of comfort makes her the target of sneers from commonplace minds like Mrs. Jolley” (198).

Miss Hare’s rejection of conventional behavior can be interpreted as a criticism of suburban values; conversely, she can be viewed as evidence that suburbia contains a variety of people following diverse lifestyles, and that suburbia is not homogenous, nor is it necessarily “plastic” and in conflict with nature.

Miss Hare and her housekeeper Mrs. Jolley clash repeatedly during the latter’s tenure at Xanadu. The conflicts climax when Mrs. Jolley kills a snake Miss Hare has been feeding with a saucer of milk. Mrs. Jolley declares, “‘That is not killing ... That is ridding the world of something bad,’” to which Miss Hare replies, “‘Who is to decide what is bad?’” (105). After each of her conflicts with Mrs. Jolley, Miss Hare escapes into the bush “to revive” (77). Werner Arens argues that Miss Hare’s excursions into the bush are attempts to restore “her faith in the goodness of the earth” (134). Miss Hare’s retreats into the bush also serve to emphasize the difference between her spirituality, which focuses on nature, and Mrs. Jolley’s, which is confined to the built environment, namely the church and home. On one of her bushwalks, Miss Hare encounters the Indigenous artist Alf Dubbo. Although she has seen Dubbo before “on the roads round Sarsaparilla,” on this occasion Dubbo speaks to her, in a voice “agreeable, direct and unexpected” (78, 79). It is significant that the two riders first meet in the bush, the environment in which they are both at home.

16 This image recalls Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass.*
Edgecombe argues that Miss Hare’s love for the natural environment “is above all disinterested – it expects no return” (Vision 41). Iris Ralph dubs Mary Hare an “ecological avatar,” arguing that she is “a green interloper in the ‘glass house’ of Xanadu” (original emphasis) (32). Ralph notes that “The ecocritical content of Riders in the Chariot ... hardly has been spoken to by scholars” and claims the ecocritical content of White’s writing “is central to any discussion of White and, further, that this content is central to White’s metaphysical themes” (32). Edgecombe views Miss Hare as possessing a “complete” sympathy with “the natural world” (“No Gift” 53); this characteristic prompts Ralph to claim Miss Hare as “a model for ecocentric as opposed to anthropocentric values” (36). Despite Miss Hare’s oneness with the natural environment, when she leaves Xanadu near the end of the novel “she does not make any environmental provisions for the land or the flora and fauna that have been slowly reclaiming the estate. Instead, some years before her disappearance she bequeaths Xanadu to a cousin she hardly knows” (Ralph 36). At the end of the novel, Miss Hare’s cousin sells the estate, Xanadu is bulldozed, the land subdivided, and houses erected.

Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack: “Evil” Guardians of Suburban Values

Although Miss Hare prefers to be alone, her “increasing infirmity” requires her to employ a housekeeper, Mrs. Jolley, a widow from suburban Melbourne (22). When Mrs. Jolley arrives in Sarsaparilla and Miss Hare meets her at the bus stop, Mrs. Jolley asks, “‘You haven’t a car, then?’”, signaling the importance of modern consumer goods in her life and contrasting her to the nature-loving Miss Hare. Mrs. Jolley reacts with despair upon learning that Miss Hare does not own a vehicle: “Mrs Jolley could not believe any

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17 The natural environment was undoubtedly important to White personally; he overcame his distaste for public speaking to serve as “an important spokesman for the anti-nuclear and environmental movements” (During 14).
of this. Remembering the trams, she could have cried” (51). Mrs. Jolley declares that in her family, “everybody has their own car” (52). Thus, White establishes the women as opposites from the outset and sets up the conflict that inevitably ensues. Upon entering Xanadu, Mrs. Jolley comments, “it is easy to see that it is a long time since you had a lady here,” indicating the mansion’s neglected state and her own prejudices regarding how “ladies” should live (53). When Miss Hare later expresses her fear that Mrs. Jolley is unhappy at Xanadu, Mrs. Jolley replies, “a lady does expect something different,” specifying “a home, and a Hoover, and kiddies’ voices” (67). Here White aligns Mrs. Jolley with stereotypical suburban values, such as domesticity, cleanliness, motherhood and consumerism. Salter argues that Mrs. Jolley’s values represent those of her community (236).

White uses the contentious relationship between Miss Hare and Mrs. Jolley to explore spirituality and religion, subjects rarely associated with Australian suburbia. When Mrs. Jolley inquires if Miss Hare is a Christian, Miss Hare replies, “It would not be for me to say, even if I understood exactly what that means” (73-74). Mrs. Jolley, in contrast, boldly declares, “I am ... I attended the C. of E. [Church of England] ever since I was a kiddy” (74). Mrs. Jolley’s certainty and adherence to mainstream Christian views is juxtaposed to Miss Hare, who admits, upon being pressed, “I believe. I cannot tell you what I believe in, any more than what I am ... Oh, yes, I believe! I believe in what I see, and what I cannot see. I believe in a thunderstorm, and wet grass, and patches of light, and stillness” (74). Unable to understand Miss Hare’s transcendentalism, Mrs. Jolley asks, “But what is over it?”, a question Miss Hare refuses to answer (74). Mrs. Jolley is both unable to understand or accept a spiritual position different from her own, so much
so that she is enraged. The narrator notes that Mrs. Jolley “hated” Miss Hare’s face, and when Miss Hare leaves the room, Mrs. Jolley hopes “she might hear a body fall. She hoped Miss Hare might die, even” (74). Mrs. Jolley bakes a cake, her way of restoring order to the household, on which she writes in icing, “FOR A BAD GIRL” (76). She sings as she bakes, in her mind celebrating and populating “square brick homes” with “ladies and the kiddies” (75). Thus, while Miss Hare represents a spirituality and communion with nature unbound by either religion or structures built by humans, Mrs. Jolley takes refuge in a religion with clear boundaries and a suburban ethos that is similarly defined and solid.

Miss Hare dreads conversations with Mrs. Jolley, which the narrator describes as “the piles of brick that Mrs Jolley built to house her family in, the red brick boxes increasing and encroaching” (77). Although White’s narrator employs images of suburbia in a negative manner in this passage, it would be a mistake to read it as an attack on suburbia by White or evidence of his alleged anti-suburbanism, as such a reading relies on a conflation of White and his narrator. Even if White conveys some of his own attitudes and prejudices, either through his narrator or his characters, his narrative technique employs numerous points of view and his characters present a variety of attitudes, making it impossible to identify any one position as White’s. Thus, while White’s work contains sentiments that are hallmarks of the anti-suburban tradition, it is impossible to prove that White shares those sentiments. In an essay on recurring problems in White criticism, Lawson notes that White is “often said to be a dogmatic, intrusive, too-knowing author,” but argues that “there are grounds … for affirming the opposite or at least insisting that the effect is the opposite to authorial certitude and
interpretive limitation” (“Meaning” 286). Lawson goes so far as to claim that “White’s sympathies are widely engaged but always qualified: he endorses none, is totally detached from none” and concludes, “White is clearly less interested in absolutes than many of his critics have been” (“Meaning” 286, 287).

Upon Miss Hare’s return to Xanadu after her encounter with Dubbo, Mrs. Jolley expresses shock that her employer has been in the bush “‘on a Sunday!’” before launching into a diatribe revealing her racism and fear of nature, “‘Pooh! Some dirty abo18 bloke! I would not have an abo come near me. And in the bush! They are all undesirable persons. And in the bush! You will run into trouble, my lady’” (80, 81). Edgecombe argues that for Mrs. Jolley the bush is “a place of evil, contradistinguished from the brick boxes of suburbia of which she is the celebrant” (“No Gift” 60). For Mrs. Jolley, the bush is evil because it represents the unknown and the uncontained, and because it is the native abode of Indigenous Australians.

Although Mrs. Jolley is not one of the riders of the novel’s title, she is the subject of much discussion in the criticism, along with her friend Mrs. Flack, because they are vivid, memorable characters often read as representing suburban values. Both women are widows whose husbands died in suspicious circumstances. As During notes, “in White’s novels the truly typical suburban middle-class person is the wife rather than the husband” (48). Indeed, the minor characters Harry Rosetree and Tom Godbold are the only suburban husbands in the novel. Miss Hare refers to Mrs. Jolley as “‘one of the evil ones! … [who has] has entered into a conspiracy with another devil, and will bring suffering to many before it destroys them both’” (201). Marr claims Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack are

18 The frequent use of “abo” by the narrator and characters in the novel is jarring to the contemporary reader, for whom “abo” is highly pejorative.
“creations of pure hate” (370). White described the women as “devils” when writing to his publisher; they are based on a pair of widows in the United States who poisoned their husbands in an attempt to collect life insurance (Marr 370). Like White and his characters, critics often describe Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack as evil. White’s narrator describes Mrs. Jolley as a person who “liked a good yarn ... with another lady, at the bus stop, or over the fence. She liked a drive in the family car” (56). Mrs. Jolley is characterized repeatedly by her fondness for material possessions, machines, and the built environment, such as cars, trams and houses. Mrs. Jolley declares she misses trams and White’s narrator describes her as having “The clang of them ... in her voice, and in her eye” (56). Mrs. Jolley is described from Miss Hare’s point of view as “The woman whose three daughters’ husbands had built with bricks, boxes in which to live” (58). Later in the novel, Miss Hare concludes, “I do not think Mrs. Jolley sees beyond texture-brick and plastic” (392). She likes to gossip, holds fixed standards for human behavior, and is intolerant of those who do not share her opinions and beliefs.

Some critics argue that Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack are merely caricatures, rather than developed characters. For example, Salter claims, “White’s ferocity sacrifices characterization for caricature, as exampled by those two harpies Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack” (238), while Sylvia Gzell claims White satirically distorts “most members of society” in order to make his riders heroic and exaggerate “their separation from other people” (181). Gerster argues that “Most of White’s suburbanites are caricatures, or to be
more precise grotesques, rather than fully realized characters. His particular fondness is for creating inane, spiritually shriveled suburban women” (567). However, Brennan argues that “to label Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley as simply caricatures is to dismiss their potent power” (37). During goes so far as to claim that White is “under-read” because “he simplified and scapegoated ordinary life and people,” especially “heterosexual, middle-class women” (57). However, Webby argues that White did not attack the “ordinariness” of Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, as During claims, “but their materialism and their black-and-white view of the world, especially their lack of tolerance for anything or anyone perceived as different. What he was attacking was their assumption of the high moral ground, their belief in themselves as ‘good Australians’” (“Our Invisible”). Likewise, Brennan posits that White rails against “the suburban mindset,” rather than suburbia as a whole, critiquing the “fear of stepping outside prescribed boundaries, of appearing to be ... anything other than ‘ordinary’ Australians,” and the unquestioning acceptance of “labels or codes of appropriate conduct” (38).

Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack meet on the bus and soon the former is in the habit of visiting the latter’s home in Sarsaparilla, which she greatly admires: “Mrs Jolley loved the latch at Mrs Flack’s. She loved the rustic picket gate. She loved the hedge of Orange Triumph. To run her glove along the surface of Mrs Flack’s brick home gave her shivers. The sound of its convenience swept her head over heels into the caverns of envy” (92). Describing the women sitting and gossiping in Mrs. Flack’s lounge room, the narrator states, “the two women would drench the room with the moth-colours of their own mind” (94). As their relationship develops, the women “produce their knives and try them for
sharpness on weaker mortals” (95). Later in the novel, Mrs. Flack instigates the events that lead to the death of Himmelfarb and the disappearance of Miss Hare.

White’s narrator introduces a passage in which Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley espouse racist anti-immigrant sentiments by declaring, “The voice of Sarsaparilla … took for granted its right to pass judgement on the human soul” (273). Mrs. Flack bemoans the recent arrival of refugees from Europe and positions them as displacing Australian soldiers serving overseas: “I would not of thought it would come to this … a stream of foreign migrants pouring into the country, and our Boys many of them not yet returned … Who will feed us, when we are so many mouths over, and foreign mouths” (273). Mrs. Flack soon directs the conversation from the general to the specific, focusing on Himmelfarb: “‘They say,’ she said, ‘there is a foreign Jew, living … below the post-office, in Montebello Avenue, in a weatherboard home’” (274). Not content to discuss Himmelfarb from afar, the women walk to his home, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, gossiping cruelly about their neighbors along the way.

The women hide behind a bush while watching Himmelfarb’s house, which the narrator describes as “suitably, obscenely poor” (276). White’s narrator reveals that Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley longed “for something that would rend their souls – a foetus say, or a mutilated corpse” (277). Rather than evidence of evil or violence, the women are stunned to see Mrs. Godbold emerge from Himmelfarb’s door, followed by the Jew himself: “They had never seen anything so yellow or so strange. Strange? Why, dreadful, dreadful!” (277). Rather than something disgraceful or evil, Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley witness an act of kindness and friendship. Mrs. Godbold has bandaged Himmelfarb’s hand, which he injured at work: “How private, and mysterious, and beautiful it was, even
the intruders suspected, and were deterred momentarily from hating” (279). The actions of Mrs. Godbold, herself a suburban housewife, demonstrate that Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack are not necessarily representative of suburban women. In fact, they may well be anomalies. However, the hatred of those different from themselves soon returns, and as Mrs. Jolley walks back to Xanadu, she fantasizes about killing an animal and “drifted dreamily through the series of possible ways in which she might continue to harry the human soul” (279-80).

During her final confrontation with Miss Hare, Mrs. Jolley quits her job (381). Miss Hare reveals she is aware of much more than she is usually given credit for, commenting, “‘You will go, I suppose, to Mrs Flack ... For life, I expect’” (382). Miss Hare proceeds to declare, “‘The two of you will sit in Mrs Flack’s lounge, watching us behave. Even directing us’” (382). When Mrs. Jolley refers to Himmelfarb as “‘a dirty Jew,’” Miss Hare is enraged, “‘My what Jew?’ The words were choking. ‘Dirty? What is true, then? My kind man! My good! Then I am offal, offal! Green, putrefying, out of old, starved sheep. Worse, worse! Though not as bad as some. Offal is cleaner than dishonest women. What is lowest of all? You could tell me! Some women! Lower, even. Some women’s shit!’” (384). Mrs. Jolley retorts with a standard anti-Semitic line, “‘Who did the Jews crucify?’” to which Miss Hare responds, “‘The Jew! ... It was horrible ... I have never allowed myself to think about it’” (385). Mrs. Jolley departs, and the two do not see each other again, “except from a distance” (386).

Mrs. Godbold: The Immigrant Saint

Ruth Joyner decides to emigrate from England to Australia after the accidental death of her brother and her widowed father’s decision to remarry (312). Upon arriving in
Sydney, she goes into domestic service, working in a number of houses before taking a position with Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson, where she meets Tom Godbold, who delivers ice to the household, and soon marries him (314, 330). The couple move to Sarsaparilla, “to live in a shed, temporary like” where Mrs. Godbold “began to bear children, and take in washing” (351). However, the shed which “started temporary … ended up permanent” (351). Mrs. Godbold endears herself to her neighbors through her kindness and generosity. She nurses Miss Hare through an illness, prompting Miss Hare to declare “she is the best of women,” bandages Himmelfarb’s injured hand, offers to do his laundry, and bakes bread for him (81, 279, 283, 285). Mrs. Godbold is a cheerful character who sings as she irons and smells of “scones and clean laundry” (299, 302). Moreover, Mrs. Godbold is a devout Christian who believes in service, sacrifice, suffering and humility.

However, Mr. Godbold does not share her religious convictions: “What he had time for could be very quickly specified. It was beer, sex, and the trots, in that order” (300). Mr. Godbold flies into a rage when one of his daughters declares, “I am saved for Jesus!” He exclaims, “You are saved for Crap!” before beating his wife repeatedly with a newspaper. As his rage escalates, he shouts, “This is what I think of all caterwaulin’ Christians!” backhanding his wife across her ear. He punches his wife in the stomach and kicks her while she crumples to the floor, announcing he is going out to get drunk: “It had all happened before, of course” (303). The narrator states that Mrs. Godbold’s nature “denied her the opportunity of flight. She had to suffer” (301).

When Alf Dubbo collapses at Mrs. Khalil’s brothel, where Mrs. Godbold has gone in search of Tom, she ministers to him and treats him “as if he was a human being,”
even while the other people present utter racist epithets (367). After finding Tom at Mrs. Khalil’s, Mrs. Godbold declares, “‘I will follow you to hell if need be’” (372). However, he leaves permanently, and she realizes that she “must accept to be reduced by half” (372). Tom dies alone in poverty several years later (372). Walking away from the hospital after viewing Tom’s body, Mrs. Godbold weeps, not for herself, but “for the condition of men, for all those she had loved … for her fellow initiates, the madwoman and the Jew of Sarsaparilla, even for the blackfellow she had met at Mrs. Khalil’s” (374).

Edgecombe argues that even though Mrs. Godbold’s religion “bears some superficial resemblance to Mrs Jolley’s in its naïve Evangelical cast,” it is “a creed of extraordinary dignity and finds embodiment in ideals of humility and service” (Vision 47). Mrs. Godbold’s former employer, Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson, describes her as “‘a kind of saint,’” “‘a rock to which we clung,’” and “‘the rock of love’” (635). Carolyn Bliss argues that Mrs. Godbold is “undeniably good and a force for good in the novel. Hers, in fact, is the most unalloyed good the novel offers” (Patrick White’s Fiction 92).

White’s creation of the Mrs. Godbold character allows him to deal with issues common in suburban fiction, such as domestic violence and immigration. While the domestic violence can be read as a negative depiction of suburbia (or simply a realistic, neutral depiction), Mrs. Godbold is unlike the other immigrants in the novel in that she is not discriminated against or pressured to assimilate, undoubtedly because she is English. White thus demonstrates that immigrants are ill-treated due to racism and xenophobia, rather than because they are not Australian-born. Mrs. Godbold also serves as evidence that suburbia is not solely populated by evil suburban housewives like Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Khalil’s refers to Dubbo as “‘that bloody abo’” and a “‘dirty, drunken bastard’” (361).
Mrs. Flack, but also by morally upright women who are more concerned with helping others than acquiring the latest consumer products and gossiping about their neighbors.

**Mordecai Himmelfarb: The Immigrant in Suburbia**

During a dispute White experienced with a Sydney taxi driver over a fare, the driver repeatedly screamed, “Go back to Germany!” (Marr 248). The incident inspired White to write *Riders in the Chariot*, as it gave him a sense of what it was like to be an immigrant in Australia (Marr 248). White also perceived his sexuality as helping him to understand the immigrant’s life: “As a homosexual I have always known what it is to be an outsider. It has given me added insight into the plight of the immigrant – the hate and contempt with which he is often received” (Qtd. in Marr 248). Of course, White’s partner, Manoly Lascaris, was both an immigrant and a homosexual. When Lascaris obtained Australian citizenship in a ceremony amongst a crowd of Greeks and Italians, the magistrate “warned them not to speak foreign languages in public and urged them to read the poetry of Henry Lawson” (Marr 269). When constructing the character of Mordecai Himmelfarb, White drew upon his own experiences and Lascaris’s in Australia, his time in Germany before the Second World War, and the lives of a number of Jewish immigrant friends in Sydney.

Himmelfarb is born and raised in the fictional German town Holunderthal, \(^{22}\) “to a family of well-to-do merchants, some time during the eighteen-eighties” (123). A brilliant young scholar, he embarks on a career as an English Professor, receiving a doctorate before continuing his studies at Oxford (142). Himmelfarb returns to Germany shortly before the First World War. Being “a good German,” he volunteers for the infantry, is wounded twice, and wins a medal (153). After the war, Himmelfarb is

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\(^{22}\) Holunderthal translates into English as “Valley of the Elderberries.”
appointed to the University of Bienenstadt and marries Reha Liebmann (155). Himmelfarb’s publications lead to his appointment as the Chair of English at his hometown university in Holunderthal (178). When the Nazis gain power, Himmelfarb loses his job (186). Soon after, Reha is captured by the Nazis while he is away (196). Himmelfarb’s friends hide him in a rural mansion, but he surrenders during a British bombing raid (221). He is transported to a concentration camp, escapes during an uprising, and makes his way to Palestine. However, disenchanted with the Zionists, Himmelfarb immigrates to Australia (249).

Once in Sydney, Himmelfarb does not attempt to re-enter academia, claiming, “The intellect has failed us” (257). Gzell argues that Himmelfarb “rejects the shelter of academic life in favour of the unprotected life at Sarsaparilla. In his desire for atonement for his sins he denies himself any course which is familiar or easy, preferring to submit himself to the strains which will tax his resources of integrity and survival” (184). Himmelfarb works a series of menial jobs: at a piggery, as a janitor in a hospital, and as a dishwasher (258). After the war ends, Himmelfarb moves to Sarsaparilla in search of seclusion (258). He buys a derelict house, which he is able to afford due to “dry rot, inadequate plumbing and a leaky roof” (258). Himmelfarb takes the bus to his factory job in Barranugli, living in many respects a typical working-class suburban existence (266). However, in contrast to representative suburbanites such as Mrs. Flack and the Rosetrees, the family of Jewish immigrants who attempt total assimilation, Himmelfarb lives in an “almost empty house” that is poorly maintained and lacks a carefully tended garden (283).
When Himmelfarb is offered a job at Brighta Bicycle Lamps, his new employer, Mr. Rosetree, declares, "But it will be monotonous. I warn you. Bloody monotonous. It will kill you," to which Himmelfarb replies, "I have been killed several times already" (265). Himmelfarb’s workmates do not joke with him as they do with other coworkers, since they perceive “something strange” and “Nothing like his face had ever been seen by any of them” (267). His difference ensures continual rejection: “If sometimes the foreigner found it necessary to speak, it was as though something preposterous had taken place” (267). Despite numerous attempts, Himmelfarb does not make any male friends in Australia, a fact he is reminded of by his foreman, Ernie Theobalds, who declares, “a man stands a better chance of a fair go if he’s got a mate” (401). Reflecting on his lack of a mate, Himmelfarb “remembered the blackfellow with whom he had not yet spoken” (402). Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo have exchanged glances and reached a kind of understanding: “with this fellow flotsam, the Jew had formed ... an extraordinary non-relationship ... he would sense the abo’s approach. How he went to meet his silence. How they would lay balm on wounds every time they passed each other” (403). Dubbo and Himmelfarb finally converse after Himmelfarb discovers a Bible that Dubbo had been reading in the washroom and left behind (405).

As Himmelfarb prepares for Passover and sets the Seder table, he yearns for Jewish companionship and travels uninvited to Paradise East to visit the Rosetrees. However, the Rosetrees are unwilling to acknowledge their Jewish heritage and refuse to show hospitality; Himmelfarb soon gets the message and leaves. When Himmelfarb arrives home, he is met by Mrs. Godbold, who brings him some leftover lamb (513). When he takes the leg of lamb to his table, he finds that it is “almost the twin of the one
he had laid that afternoon on his own Seder table” (515). Thus, Himmelfarb finds acceptance and love from a woman who is both a Christian and an outcast, rather than amongst his fellow Jews, or the average suburbanites. Salter claims, “no Australian who lived an urban life after the war could pretend that the ‘reffo,’ the New Australian, was other than an outsider in the community” (236). The mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb at the factory is the climax of the novel and I devote a later section of this chapter to it.

The Rosetrees: Victims of Assimilation?

White deals with issues of immigration, assimilation, religion, racism and consumerism in suburbia through the Rosetree family, Jewish immigrants who have changed their names from Shulamith and Haim Rosenbaum to Shirl and Harry Rosetree, abandoned Judaism, and adopted Catholicism. White introduces Harry Rosetree into the narrative when Himmelfarb applies for a job in his factory. During the interview, Himmelfarb asks Rosetree, “‘You are not from here?’” to which Rosetree replies, “‘I am an Australian’” (262). However, Rosetree soon admits to being from Vienna, but declares that speaking German is verboten on the premises, “‘Not on no account … We are Australians now’” (262). When Himmelfarb indirectly asks Rosetree if he is Jewish, Rosetree replies, “‘If it is religion you mean, after so much beating in the bush – and religion in these countries, Mr Himmelfarb, is not an issue of first importance – I can plainly tell you I attend the Catholic Church of Saint Aloysius ’” (263). In addition to changing their names and religion and refraining from using their first language, the Rosetrees adopt a thoroughly suburban lifestyle in Paradise East, dwelling in a “texture-

23 Aloysius was James Joyce’s middle name and the name of his patron saint (Ellmann 30). Riders in the Chariot contains a number of allusions to Joyce and his work. In fact, White was heavily influenced by Joyce and took the title of his second novel, The Living and The Dead, from Joyce’s story “The Dead”: “the living and the dead” is the final phrase of the story.
brick home” at “quite a good address” (268). The suburb is still growing, and the sound of falling trees and construction is heard from the Rosetree’s home (268-69). Edgecombe notes that White presents “suburbia in process of asserting itself against the scrub, scrub that, unclaimed by the ‘rational’ grid of streets, and the quadrature of its accompanying gardens, has no market value to speak of” (“Weeds” 30).

Harry Rosetree takes pride in his suburban home and material success. On Sundays, he stands “outside his apricot, texture-brick home, amongst all the advanced shrubs he had planted … Who wouldn’t feel satisfied?” (269) Edgecombe posits that “the paraphernalia of a suburban garden serves to advertise the completeness of his assimilation” (“Weeds” 30). Harry is also proud of his children, who are models of assimilation: “they had learnt to speak worse Australian than any of the Australian kids, they had learnt to crave for ice cream, and potato chips and could shoot tomato sauce out of the bottle even when the old black sauce was blocking the hole” (269). The Rosetree children are so thoroughly assimilated that Steve refers to traditional Jewish meals as “‘bloody foreign food’” (271). Harry Rosetree hates Himmelfarb because he is a constant reminder of his religion and ancestors, and his betrayal of them; “How repellent he found all miserable reffo Jews” (494). When Himmelfarb travels uninvited to Paradise East to visit the Rosetrees on Passover, Harry brushes him off with the excuse that he must “water a few shrubs before it is dark”; the narrator comments, “Mr Rosetree had learnt what was done in the suburb in which he happened to be living” (505). Harry has come to believe that watering one’s garden is one of the most important activities in suburbia and a convenient excuse with which to dismiss unwanted guests.
Shirl has assimilated more than any other member of the family and possesses the authority to declare “What is not Australian” (269). She is described as having a “gift for assimilation,” speaking the language “better than anyone” (269). Even though Shirl is more thoroughly assimilated than Harry, she compromises “her quest for Australian conformity by extrapolating from her Central European experience” in her eagerness to assimilate, as is evidenced by the Rosetrees’ mistaken choice of Catholicism for their new religion (Edgecombe, “Weeds” 30). In their ignorance, the Rosetrees choose the wrong denomination of Christianity for their class and suburb. One of Shirl’s friends, Marge Pendlebury, states, “I would never ever of suspected you of being tykes. Only the civil servants are Roman Catholics here, and the politicians, if they are anything at all … Arch and me are Methoes, except we don’t go; life is too short” (270). White presents Shirl as the real owner of the home, the car, the shrubs, the grandfather clock, the radio, “the washing-machine, and the Mixmaster … because when she asked the neighbours in to morning tea and scones, she would refer to: my home, my children, my Ford Customline. There was a fur coat, too, still only one, but she was out to get a second while the going was good” (269). Shirl’s materialism is emphasized again two hundred pages later in the novel when the narrator states: “Sometimes she thought she was happiest with her own furniture. So now she began to run the shammy leather over the rosewood and maple veneer, until wood was exalted to a state of almost pure reflection” (577).

Obviously, Shirl’s materialism can be read as a criticism of suburban values. Malouf adopts a typical anti-suburban position, arguing that the “Rosetrees and others, out of terminal anxiety at their own emptiness and inauthenticity, fill the void of their
days” with material possessions (“Introduction” vii). Gzell argues that the Rosetrees “live a lie, concealing their Jewish origin by change of name, religion, speech and diet in order to escape the strain and probable loss of status which a true living out of their identity would entail” (185). Similarly, McCann argues that the Rosetrees “experience their own Jewish-European past as contamination, and accordingly need to banish it from their own ‘Home Beautiful’ … Yet the Rosetrees cannot completely repress their past, and as a result their domestic space is continually threatened by the traces of their contaminating history” (“Ethics” 151). Brady goes further, claiming that the Rosetrees “are seen as figures of evil” (174). However, when Himmelfarb dies, Harry expresses extreme remorse and attempts to arrange a traditional Jewish burial for Himmelfarb, but arrives at Mrs. Godbold’s too late, finding that Himmelfarb has already been buried (580). Devastated, Harry returns home and commits suicide in his bathroom (584, 586). Harry’s suicide indicates both his inability to connect with his fellow Jews and to assimilate fully into Australian society. He is trapped in an interstitial space from which he sees death as the only escape.

The Role of the (Indigenous) Artist in Society

Through the figure of Alf Dubbo, White simultaneously addresses two major issues: the status of Indigenous Australians and the role of the artist in Australian society. White perceived artists, himself included, to be marginal figures in Australian culture. In Flaws in the Glass, White argues that until “the beginning of the Whitlam era [in the early 1970s]… artists … [were] a downtrodden minority” (226). Indigenous Australians were also a “downtrodden minority,” to say the least, and thus Dubbo is doubly marginalized. White’s Indigenous character is born “on a reserve, to an old gin named
Maggie, by which one of the whites she had never been able to decide. There he would have remained probably, until work or cunning rescued him. That he was removed earlier, while he was ... a leggy, awkward little boy, was thanks to the Reverend Timothy Calderon, at that time Anglican rector of Numburra” (408). Calderon and Mrs Pask, his widowed sister, take Dubbo in and treat him as “their Great Experiment” (408). Dubbo’s adoption by Reverend Calderon, “a cultured man, of birth even, whose ideals had brought him from the Old Country” (409), allows White to engage with religion and colonialism, in addition to indigeneity and the role of the artist in society. Like Norbert Hare and Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson, Reverend Calderon represents the legacy and demise of British colonialism in Australia.

From an early age, Dubbo shows talent and intellect: “Those who were interested in him were soon convinced that he might grasp almost anything, provided he wanted to” (409). White wastes no time broaching the issue of racism, his narrator noting that “the most skeptical of the rector’s parishioners” view Dubbo as lazy and conclude that only “the rector would not have expected laziness from the bastard of an old black gin” (409). However, while highlighting the racism of the townspeople, White’s narrator simultaneously makes a racist remark about another marginalized group within Australian society and perpetuates a stereotype, stating, “It did not occur to the critics, of course, that the boy might have inherited his vice from some Irish ancestor” (409). Despite being a half-caste, born of a white father and an Indigenous mother, Dubbo is treated as if he is entirely black and referred to as “the blackfellow” or “the abo”;

“Officially, of course, he was not a man, but a blackfellow” (533).
Mrs. Pask teaches Dubbo to paint in watercolors, declaring, "art is first and foremost a moral force" and claiming, "there is something miraculous in the creative act" (411). She tries to prevent Alf from using oil paints, her reason being "Oil paints lead to so much that is sensual, so much that is undesirable in art" (420). Mrs. Pask's fear of Alf discovering sensuality through art is a manifestation of her fear and loathing of homosexuality. Alf is forced to leave Reverend Calderon and Mrs. Pask after the latter discovers her brother engaging in consensual homosexual sex with Alf (432). After weeks of travel on foot, Alf ends up at the Mungindribble town rubbish dump, where he enters into a sexual relationship with a woman named Mrs. Spice who lives at the dump and survives by prostitution and selling used bottles. After living with Mrs. Spice and contracting a venereal disease, Alf wanders from town to town in the outback doing odd-jobs, but never staying anywhere long, because "there was always the possibility that he might be collected for some crime he began to suspect he had committed, or confined to a reserve, or shut up at a mission, to satisfy the social conscience, or to ensure the salvation of souls that were in the running for it" (443).

Dubbo's artistic talent is described by the narrator as "his secret gift" and compared to his disease. Together, his talent and his disease are "the two poles, the negative and positive of his being; the furtive, destroying sickness, and the almost as furtive, but regenerating, creative act" (444). Once Dubbo has physically matured, he develops "the courage and curiosity to make for Sydney," where he sleeps in parks before discovering "a house sufficiently dilapidated, a landlady sufficiently low, and hopeful, and predatory, to accept an abo" (445). White presents Dubbo as constantly disparaged and discriminated against in matters of employment and housing, and existing on the
margins of society. After his arrival in Sydney, Dubbo meets a prostitute named Hannah who recognizes that he has syphilis and offers to let him rent a spare room in her suburban home (450-51). Dubbo accepts her offer and moves into the house at 27 Abercrombie Crescent, in an unnamed suburb, with a view of wires and aerials above slate roofs (452). Through a contact of Hannah’s, Dubbo receives treatment for his venereal disease and is eventually cured (454). Dubbo continues to paint after arriving in Sydney, but possesses little desire to learn from the achievements of other artists ... But once he came across the painting by a Frenchman of the Apollonian chariot on its trajectory across the sky ... He realized how differently he saw this painting since his first acquaintance with it, and how he would transcribe the Frenchman’s limited composition into his own terms of motion, and forms partly transcendental, partly evolved from his struggle with daily becoming, and experience of suffering. (445-46)

Art becomes Dubbo’s vocation to such an extent that he is “sufficiently sustained both physically and mentally” and is able “to ignore for the most part what people called life” (448). While living at Abercrombie Crescent, Dubbo creates “the skeletons of several works which he did not have the strength or knowledge to paint. ‘The Chariot,’ for instance. Ezekiel’s vision superimposed upon that of the French painter in the art book, was not yet his own ... The picture he did paint now was ‘The Fiery Furnace,’ almost the whole of it one Friday” (460).

During a party at Hannah’s, Dubbo is persuaded to show his paintings to a guest, Humphrey Mortimer, who offers to buy several of them for a large sum, an offer Dubbo
declines (465-69). Weeks later, Dubbo discovers that several of his paintings are missing, including "The Fiery Furnace" and the work-in-progress of the Chariot (476). After Dubbo attempts to choke Hannah in his rage, she admits selling the paintings to Mortimer (479). Mourning his loss, Dubbo destroys his remaining paintings and leaves Abercrombie Crescent, taking a room at Mrs. Noonan's house in Barranugli (481-82). At Barranugli, Dubbo takes to reading the Bible, and although he "could accept God because of the spirit that would work in him at times," he is unable to accept Christ as anything more than "an ambitious abstraction, or realistically, as a man," due to "the duplicity of the white men" (482-83). When Mrs. Godbold asks Dubbo if he is a Christian, he replies, "No ... I was educated up to it. But gave it away. Pretty early on, in fact. When I found I could do better ... There is no point putting on a pair of boots to walk to town, if you can do it better in your bare feet" (370). Edgecombe argues that Dubbo's spiritual quest "finds consummation in his handling of paint, in the incarnation of aesthetic rather than overtly religious truths" (Vision 59).

Dubbo takes a job at Harry Rosetree's factory, where he meets Himmelfarb. At the factory, Dubbo's coworkers do not associate with him due to his race. However, he prefers to be left alone, as it allows him to "travel quicker, deeper, into the hunting grounds of his imagination" (483). Watching the events leading up to Himmelfarb's crucifixion unfold, "Dubbo was stationed as if upon an eminence, watching what he alone was gifted or fated enough to see. Neither the actor nor the spectator, he was that most miserable of human beings, the artist" (531). Dubbo does not try to save Himmelfarb: "Now Dubbo knew that he would never, ever act, that he would dream, and suffer, and express some of that suffering in paint – but was, in the end, powerless" (536).
However, the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb has a profound effect on Dubbo:

“Because he was as solitary in the crowd as the man they had crucified, it was again the abo who saw most. All that he had ever suffered, all that he had ever failed to understand, rose to the surface in Dubbo” (538). Dubbo does not return to work at the factory after Himmelfarb’s death, but immerses himself in painting to the extent that he is “unaware how many days he had been at work. The act itself destroyed the artificial divisions created both by time and habit” (592). As he paints, Dubbo’s tuberculosis worsens, and the blood he coughs up mingles with the paint on the canvas: “the wounds in the canvas were shining and palpitating with his own conviction” (592). After finishing “The Deposition,” Dubbo sets to work on his Chariot painting: “The next two days his movements took control of his body, although his mind hovered above, as it were” (597). Dubbo dies of a tubercular hemorrhage after finishing “The Chariot” and his paintings are sold cheaply at auction by his landlady (601-02).

Although White knew several painters well, was an avid art collector, and frequented exhibitions in Sydney, at the time of writing Riders in the Chariot he had never met an Indigenous Australian.24 As Marr puts it, “Dubbo the black painter is entirely White’s invention … For the portrait of Dubbo he drew on books, newspapers and the Withycombe’s grim stories of the blacks around Barwon Vale. In Australian fiction, the Aboriginal had been shown as artist/mystic or squalid fringe dweller. Dubbo was both” (360). Dewey argues that Dubbo is the “heroic center” of the novel (756), while Malouf claims Dubbo “is at this point embarrassing” (“Patrick White Reappraised”). Webby and Goldsworthy both argue that White was ahead of his time in

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24 White’s lack of contact with Aboriginals is not unusual for a person of his class, especially during his lifetime.
his inclusion of an Indigenous man as one of the four main characters ("Introduction" 12; 127). While Malouf's assessment may point to aspects of Dubbo's characterization such as his drunkenness and venereal disease, White's sympathetic depiction of Dubbo's marginalization, both from mainstream Australian society and his traditional culture, reveals important truths about Australia's treatment of its Indigenous peoples, and once again demonstrates that depictions of diversity are not the exclusive province of the urban landscape, and that suburbia is the location in which many of the most important issues in Australian society are situated.

The Mock-Crucifixion of Himmelfarb

The climax of the novel, the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb, is performed by Mrs. Flack's illegitimate son Blue, who works at Harry Rosetree's Brighta Bicycle Lamps with Himmelfarb and Dubbo. Mrs. Flack declares she is in control of Blue, and he will carry out her instructions: "'Blue will act upon an idea, if you know what I mean, Mrs Jolley, and no harm done, of course, if it is the right idea and the right person in control'" (294). On the morning of the day Himmelfarb is attacked, Blue calls his mother on the telephone from the pub near the factory to tell her of his lottery win. She informs him that Mrs. Godbold visited Himmelfarb the previous evening, "'Forgetting, it would seem, the time of year. It was them that crucified Our Saviour. Tomorrow. Think of it'" (518). Immediately before instigating the crucifixion, the drunken Blue remembers the conversation with his mother, especially her words, "'suffer every Easter to know the Jews have crucified Our Lord,'" and as his mood darkens, "'All the injustices to which he had ever been subjected grew appreciably sadder. But for all the injustices he had committed,
somebody had committed worse. Not to say the worst, so he had been told, the very worst. And must not go unpunished" (532).

Himmelfarb reports to work the day before Good Friday, even though Rosetree has excused him (523). Himmelfarb’s co-workers are not in a working mood due to the impending holiday and the lottery win by Blue and his mates, the Lucky Sevens: “In the circumstances, his concentration was distasteful, abominable to many, who could not prevent themselves glancing, however, at the bloody foreign Jew” (524). Foreshadowing the crucifixion, a circus passes in the street outside, with a clown acting out a public hanging on the back of a truck (527). The circus procession is followed by an actual funeral procession. Sensing the momentum and confluence of events, and fearing for Himmelfarb’s safety, Rosetree orders him home, but Himmelfarb refuses, declaring, “‘You will not be blamed’” (529). When the crucifixion begins, Blue approaches Himmelfarb “whimsically … Because Blue the vindicator was also Blue the mate. It was possible to practice all manner of cruelties provided the majority might laugh them off as practical jokes” (532). Himmelfarb does not resist; “His expression remained one almost of contentment” (533).

As the mob pushes Himmelfarb into the factory yard towards the tree, young girls chant, “‘Go home! Go Home!’” while older women sing “‘Go home to Germany!’” and men chant “‘Go home to hell!’” (534). Himmelfarb falls down and is kicked in the ribs (534). The narrator comments, “Some of the men would have taken a hammer, or plunged a knife, if either weapon had been at hand. Into the Jew, of course” (535). Blue obtains rope and hoists Himmelfarb into a tree, where he hangs bleeding: “… he had been grazed by nail or tin, so that blood, quite a lot of it, did flow. At least one of his hands
was pierced. Through the torn shirt, it could be seen that the disgraceful ribs were
gashed" (535). As Himmelfarb hangs, he appears dead, but his eyes are “visionary rather
than fixed” (538). The crowd of onlookers are frustrated and unnerved by Himmelfarb’s
refusal to speak or protest (539). Although Rosetree hides in his office during the
crucifixion, his secretaries eventually persuade him to act, so he orders his foreman Ernie
Theobalds to intervene (542). Theobalds takes Himmelfarb down from the tree and
advises him to go home (543-44). Himmelfarb quietly leaves “the factory in which it had
not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world” (545).

However, Himmelfarb’s suffering is not over, as he is a victim of arson later the
same day. As Mrs. Flack gleefully relates the tale to Mrs. Jolley, “It is a bunch of young
fellers … whose sense of decency was outraged by a certain person … Only to give
warning, they say. They was flicking little balls of paper, soaked in somethink, into the
Jew’s place, to put the wind up him like. When matters got out of hand. In a
weatherboard home” (547-48). Miss Hare sees the fire from Xanadu and runs to help.
Ignoring the protests of the onlookers, she rushes into the burning house, thinking
Himmelfarb is within (551). She emerges “a blackened thing … Her wicker hat … turned
to a fizzy Catherine wheel, wings of flame … sprouting from the shoulders of her
cardigan, her worsted heels … spurred with fire” (552). Thinking Himmelfarb is dead
and seeing Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack in the crowd, Miss Hare cries, “You … are the
devils!” (553). However, Mrs. Godbold and Bob Tanner, her eldest daughter’s suitor,
rescued Himmelfarb earlier and took him to the Godbolds’ shack (555, 559). Dubbo
watches through the window as Mrs. Godbold and Miss Hare tend to Himmelfarb (568).
As he observes, he mentally composes “The Deposition” (569). After midnight,
Himmelfarb dies, like Christ, on a Friday (572). As Brennan puts it, Himmelfarb is “destroyed for his failure to become an ordinary Aussie bloke” (32).

Critics disagree about whether or not the mock-crucifixion scene is realistic or plausible. During, characteristically, claims that the mock-crucifixion is “wildly improbable” (26). In contrast, arguing that the mock-crucifixion is plausible, Webby compares it to the 2005 Cronulla riots, arguing that both events, “are fuelled by alcohol, mateship, religious and racial intolerance and … [the] sense of being morally superior” (“Our Invisible”). Malouf argues that the mock-crucifixion is driven by “the same mob fury and resentment of what is different that is behind every pogrom or massacre or ritual killing” (“Introduction” viii). Brennan argues that recent events, including the firebombing of a mosque in Brisbane “in retaliation for the September 11 attacks in America”; incidents in which Muslim girls have had their headscarves torn off; the Cronulla riots, in which Anglo-Celtic gangs wrapped themselves in Australian flags, wore t-shirts proclaiming “wog free zone,” and chanted slogans including “Lebs go home” and “ethnic cleansing unit”; and an attack in 2007 in suburban Melbourne on orthodox Jews walking home from Synagogue by “a minibus full of drunken football fans,” all confirm that the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb is not “beyond the realm of possibility” (32, 40).

The examples Brennan provides strongly support Graeme Huggan’s claim that racism is deeply embedded within Australian society, despite Australia’s “official commitment to multiculturalism and social egalitarianism,” and the “public revulsion of the mob violence and ideological extremism” that periodically resurface (Australian Literature v). McCann argues that “the Australian racists,” including Blue, his mates,
Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, "are not so much representations of actual Australians ... as they are representations of the performativity of normality" ("Ethics" 146). McCann’s point is that White’s characters are performing the roles that they believe “normal” citizens of their community should play. In a text prepared for the Nobel Foundation, White argues that he “learned from personal experience” that acts like the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb occur in Australia “in all quarters, in many infinitely humiliating ways” (Qtd. in Bliss, Patrick White’s Fiction 86). White obviously believed that the crucifixion scene accurately depicts the racism, violence, intolerance and xenophobia present in Australian society.

The Destruction of Xanadu

Near the end of the novel, after the deaths of Himmelfarb and Dubbo and the disappearance of Miss Hare, Xanadu is demolished. The residents of Sarsaparilla, including Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, gather to watch the destruction, which they find entertaining (605; 611-13). Not only is the house razed, but the native bush that Miss Hare loved and fostered is also destroyed. In a passage similar to those found in many suburban novels, White describes the destruction of the natural environment by suburban development: “the bulldozers went into the scrub at Xanadu. The steel caterpillars mounted the rise, to say nothing of any sapling, or scrubby growth that stood in their way, and down went resistance” (624). After Xanadu is demolished, the site is “shaved right down to a bald, red, rudimentary hill” and the developers erect pre-fabricated homes (624). In the novel’s clearest anti-suburban passage, which Malouf describes as “one of ... [White’s] most savage sermons on the ugly, characterless fibro homes that have replaced the grand folly of Xanadu” (“Introduction” ix-x), White depicts the lives of the
residents of the new development as fragile, conformist, lacking in meaning and boring. The new homes cling to “bare earth,” where 

the wafer-walls of the new homes ... rub together at night, and sleepers might have been encouraged to enter into one another’s dreams, if these had not been similar. Some times the rats of anxiety could be heard gnawing already at Bakelite, or plastic ... So that, in the circumstances, it was not unusual for people to run outside and jump into their cars. All of Sunday they would visit, or be visited ... Then, on finding nothing at the end, they would drive around, or around. They would drive and look for something to look at. (636)

However, the unmistakably anti-suburban sentiments of the preceding passage are countered five pages later. Several years after the construction of the new homes, Mrs. Godbold visits the site where Xanadu once stood (636). Upon arriving at “the new settlement of Xanadu ... Mrs Godbold could not help admiring the houses for their signs of life: for the children coming home from school, for a row of young cauliflowers, for a convalescent woman, who had stepped outside in a dressing gown to gather a late rose” (640). Unlike White’s narrator, Mrs. Godbold sees the suburban development as full of vitality, rather than conformity, boredom and meaningless, empty lives. Mrs. Godbold begins visiting the new development frequently, “where the new homes rocked and shouted with life” (641).

In *Patrick White’s Fiction*, Bliss espouses a typically anti-suburban attitude when she claims, “the reader wonders how she [Mrs. Godbold] can condone and even celebrate the supplanting of magnificent Xanadu by a jerry-built suburb” (96). Malouf provides a less judgmental and more receptive reading, describing the passage as a “beautiful coda
to the book,” claiming, “Only the greatest masters can stand aside and allow themselves
to be admonished by one of their creations whose vision, by some miracle of autonomy,
is larger than their own” (“Introduction” ix-x). However, Malouf’s suggestion that White
is being admonished by Mrs. Godbold rests on the assumption that the anti-suburbanism
in the aforementioned passage represents White’s own attitude towards suburbia. In fact,
White’s inclusion of an opposing viewpoint (Mrs. Godbold’s) is evidence that he is not
necessarily anti-suburban. We must not assume that the narrator, or a certain character,
speaks for the author. White presents a number of conflicting attitudes towards suburbia
-all, some or none of which may represent the author’s personal views.

Is Riders in the Chariot Anti-Suburban?

Riders in the Chariot undoubtedly contains some anti-suburban material;
however, claims that the novel and its author are anti-suburban are suspect. Such claims
rely on a reductive interpretation of the novel that conflates White and his narrator and
ignores material that either celebrates suburbia or fails to fit into a pro-suburban/anti-
suburban binary. During argues that White was part of a modernist literary movement
“that can only be understood in terms of its critique of contemporary culture,” and claims
White made his reputation through novels “profoundly critical ... of contemporary
Australian ways of life, such as suburbia, middle-class affluence and love of sport” (36,
11). However, being critical of contemporary culture does not make one anti-suburban,
since, as the second quotation from During acknowledges, suburbia is only one facet of
Australian society. During offers no proof that either White or Riders in the Chariot are
anti-suburban.

25 See Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy.”
Gerster acknowledges that White depicts suburbia as a location in which artistic creation occurs, even while arguing that White hates the suburbs and views them as aesthetically barren and ugly (573); he claims White turns suburbia “into a geographic hell ruled by female demons” and argues that White displayed “sniggering contempt for suburban (usually female) philistinism” (567). Even if Gerster’s depiction of White’s characterization of Mrs. Jolley, Mrs. Flack and Shirl Rosetree as “sniggering contempt” were accurate, an author’s contempt for the behavior of a group of characters by no means equates to contempt or hatred for suburbia. Gerster goes on to accuse White of possessing a “waspish preoccupation” with “suburban materialism” and posits that he “employs the Shirl Rosetrees of this world as the most common denominators against which the few spiritually rich suburbanites are celebrated for their difference” (567). Again, even if one accepts Gerster’s assessment of White’s attitude towards suburbia and its residents, the fact remains that White celebrates residents of suburbia, and that, as Gerster himself phrases it, suburbanites can be “spiritually rich” (567).

Powell claims White is “a partial exception” to the anti-suburban tradition, arguing, “there is warmth in some of the characters and relationships,” yet suggests that his suburban novels “confirm rather than question the images of the suburbs as places of boredom, prejudice and vulgarity” (127-28). Likewise, Andrew Taylor provided what Lawson describes as “an unusually sympathetic description of White’s fundamental attitudes towards suburbia” (“Unmerciful” 388) when he argued, “For barren and ugly or sweet and sickly though it may be, it [suburbia] is still the breeding ground of human lives. And where human lives are being bred, there are always some who will, perhaps only part-consciously, grope towards the fullness of living”” (Qtd. in Lawson, 81
"Unmerciful" 388). Despite being sympathetic to suburban lives, Taylor's rhetoric, especially the use of "part-consciously" and "grope," suggests that suburban lives are less fully lived than those in other locales and that the inhabitants of suburbia are not intellectually aware.

Writing in 1979, Banerjee notes that critics view White as being "too concerned with the faults in contemporary Australian society" and argues that such a concern "does not need to be taken seriously" (110). However, Banerjee contends that White's criticisms of Australian society have "stuck in the throats of his Australian critics," citing R.F. Brissenden's claim that White "cannot convince us that the people who live in Sarsaparilla are so thoroughly and inhumanly evil as to deserve the unmitigated disgust with which he finally presents them" (Qtd. in Banerjee 110). When critics like Brissenden make such claims, they conflate White with his narrator and interpret the narrator's descriptions of suburban residents in an overly sensitive manner. Banerjee notes that after White's Nobel Prize triumph, there was "an inevitable increase in the amount of critical attention paid to him" and argues that some of the post-1973 scholarship "constitutes a critical back-lash against the earlier works, in particular, against Riders in the Chariot" (91). Banerjee claims Riders in the Chariot has received "more than its fair share of criticism" and that White "has been most consistently attacked" for his perceived "harsh treatment of Australian suburbia," for which "he has been accused of downright misanthropy" (91). Brady also argues that Riders in the Chariot "has been largely misunderstood as misanthropic" (172).

Regarding the riders, often viewed by critics as outsiders in suburbia, Banerjee argues, "Surely the point is that no society can admit such people. The herd instinct, the
instinct for survival – call it what you will – self-interest under some guise or another will close the ranks against those who are born or made too sensitive to life’s sufferings, too earnest in their search for truth through them” (original emphasis) (111). Thus, Banerjee views White’s depiction of the rejection of the riders by the citizens of Sarsaparilla as a criticism of the “herd instinct” or mob mentality, rather than a criticism of suburbia. Indeed, the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb could have occurred anywhere, not just in suburbia, as White has argued.26 Likewise, Goldsworthy argues that rather than criticizing a specific community, such as the suburban community of Sarsaparilla, the target of White’s critique is “an absence of any coherent sense of community in ordinary Australian life” (original emphasis) (128). Bliss acknowledges that Riders in the Chariot “ends by celebrating more than it questions or condemns. Even the virulent satire … is tempered by Mrs. Godbold’s final awareness that life in any form is precious” (Patrick White’s Fiction 98). Even if White does convey some of his own attitudes and prejudices through his narrator and characters, his narrative technique makes it impossible to identify any one position as White’s. Clearly, Riders in the Chariot presents an ambivalent attitude toward suburbia, containing both celebration and condemnation, thus previous assertions by critics that White and his fiction are anti-suburban have failed to take into account the nuances and complexity of White’s representations of suburbia. I continue my argument that White is not an anti-suburban writer in my next chapter, which examines White’s 1966 novel, The Solid Mandala.

26 See Bliss, Patrick White’s Fiction, 86.
CHAPTER THREE

PATRICK WHITE’S THE SOLID MANDALA (1966): SEVEN DECADES IN SUBURBIA

Despite the fact that Riders in the Chariot is over six hundred pages long and engages with a plethora of issues central to Australian suburban life, the novel did not satiate White’s desire to write about suburbia. His next novel, The Solid Mandala, published five years later, is also set in the fictional suburbs of Sarsaparilla and Barranugli. Moreover, in the interim between the novels, White published both short fiction and drama set in suburbia: the short fiction collection The Burnt Ones (1964) and the plays The Season at Sarsaparilla (1965) and A Cheery Soul (1965). Although The Solid Mandala is about half the length of Riders in the Chariot and focuses on fewer characters, White again uses the suburban setting to address important social issues, including the role of the artist in society, immigration, family relationships, religion, conformity, consumerism and class, revisiting many of the issues addressed in Riders in the Chariot. The novel establishes the suburban setting from the outset, opening with a section in which Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter ride the bus from Sarsaparilla to Barranugli on a shopping expedition. 27

The Solid Mandala focuses on the lives of twin brothers Arthur and Waldo Brown; the action spans approximately seventy years of their lives, from their birth in England until shortly after Waldo’s death at the family home in Sarsaparilla. Other

27 White based the episode on his own experiences. In order to reach Sydney’s CBD by public transport, White made an eight-mile bus journey from Castle Hill to Parramatta, where he boarded a train into the city (Marr 267).
important characters include Mrs. Poulter and Dulcie Feinstein, the daughter of Jewish immigrants, who becomes the love interest for both Waldo and Arthur. The other characters in the novel are all minor, including the twins' parents George and Anne Brown; Mrs. Poulter's husband Bill; Mrs. Dun; Dulcie Feinstein's parents, and the man who becomes her husband, Leonard Saporta; Mr. and Mrs. Allwright, Arthur's employers; Mrs. Musto, the wealthy socialite; and Waldo's library colleagues. Even though the cast of characters is small, half of them are immigrants and roughly a quarter are Jewish. Thus, just as he did in *Riders in the Chariot*, White creates characters that reveal the diversity within suburbia.

White divides *The Solid Mandala* into four sections, mirroring the marble of the novel's title. The first section, "In the Bus," presents Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun riding the bus from Sarsaparilla to Barranugli. In this short, eleven-page section, White's third-person narrator utilizes a great deal of dialogue in conjunction with short passages of description. The second section of the novel, "Waldo," is by far the longest at 190 pages; here White presents the lives of the Brown brothers from Waldo's perspective, relaying his thoughts to the reader through indirect discourse. The third section, "Arthur," covers seventy-nine pages and presents Arthur's perspective on the brothers' lives, often contradicting, correcting or adding depth to Waldo's accounts. The fourth and final section of the novel, "Mrs. Poulter and the Zeitgeist," spans twenty-two pages, adopting Mrs. Poulter's point of view and relating events in her life and the aftermath of Waldo's death. Carolyn Bliss notes that White's use of indirect discourse in the "Waldo" and "Arthur" sections is almost uninterrupted (*Patrick White's Fiction* 102).
White’s narrative technique in *The Solid Mandala*, namely his use of multiple points of view and the use of indirect discourse by the third person narrator, makes it impossible for readers to attribute any anti-suburban sentiments in the novel conclusively to White. Moreover, as Bliss points out, “the unmarked shift from authorially endorsed narrative to Woolfian indirect discourse sometimes causes confusion over whose point of view is in force” (*Patrick White’s Fiction* 102). Although *The Solid Mandala* has been labeled an anti-suburban novel and an example of White’s alleged hatred of suburbia, the novel, like its predecessor *Riders in the Chariot*, actually presents a nuanced, ambivalent and at times celebratory representation of suburbia. The characters, relationships and physical settings in the novel reveal White’s complex representation of suburban life and his close engagement with important social issues, demonstrating that anti-suburban readings of the novel fail to recognize White’s subtlety.

**Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun: Representative Suburban Housewives?**

From the first page of *The Solid Mandala*, White establishes Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun as suburban domestic consumers. While traveling from Sarsaparilla to Barranugli on the bus, Mrs. Poulter declares, “‘There’s more life up this end,’” referring to the shops, and goes on to claim, “‘It’s the shops that gives it life’” (3). However, Mrs. Poulter’s contention also serves as a counterpoint to the claims of vehement proponents of the anti-suburban intellectual tradition, such as Louis Esson, who contend that suburbia lacks vitality. Although Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun both live on Terminus Road in Sarsaparilla, they first meet on the bus (4). Their friendship is quite new when the action of the novel begins (3). White uses the dialogue between Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun...

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28 See Dewey (752), Wilde et al (72; 608), McCann (“Ethics” 145; “Decomposing” 59), Powell (127-28), Webby (11-12), Kinnane (“Shopping” 41-42), and During (16).
Dun to provide exposition, frame his narrative, and indicate their status as uneducated working-class characters through their use of informal vernacular language. Thelma Herring argues that White “exercises his mimetic skill” to expose “the speech and mores of Australian suburbia” (181).

Mrs. Dun is concerned about the threat of violence in suburbia and expresses her fear to Mrs. Poulter, declaring, “‘They could come and murder you in broad daylight’” (6) and “‘there are times when you’ll wanter be [seen by one’s neighbors]. When someone’s got you by the throat’” (7). At the end of the novel, when Mrs. Poulter discovers Waldo dead and runs to Mrs. Dun’s house for assistance, Mrs. Dun is so afraid that she refuses to let Mrs. Poulter inside and tells her to go away and call the police (299). On her way from the Browns to Mrs. Dun’s, shocked by her gruesome discovery, Mrs. Poulter recalls, “The flat faces of all those Chinese guerillas or Indonesians ... dragged out across the dreadful screen. All those Jews in ovens, that was long ago, but still burning, lying in heaps. Lone women bashed up in Mosman. Maroubra, Randwick, places you went only in your sleep” (298). Mrs. Poulter’s television viewing links genocide, domestic violence and suburbia in her mind, and Waldo’s death appears to be the realization of her fears.

While riding the bus in the opening section, Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter discuss the Browns and their custom-built verandah. Mrs. Dun expresses surprise that anyone would depart from suburban architectural norms, and when Mrs. Poulter describes the late Mr. Brown as a white-collar worker, Mrs. Dun does not know the meaning of the term; moreover, when Mrs. Poulter states that Mr. Brown worked in a bank and read in his spare time, Mrs. Dun shrivels (7). Hearing that the Browns are English immigrants,

29 Mosman, Maroubra and Randwick are suburbs of Sydney.
Mrs. Dun complains about the influx of foreigners, but admits, “‘the English is different’” (7). Mrs. Poulter attributes the Browns giving their son the strange name Waldo to Mr. and Mrs. Brown’s penchant for reading, a trait she also sees as causing Waldo to become a reader and work in libraries. In response, “Mrs. Dun hissed. She was terrified” (9). Robin Gerster describes this incident as “one of several moments of unintended comedy” in the novel (567); however, like many White critics, Gerster makes the mistake of thinking he can determine White’s intent and commits the intentional fallacy.\(^{30}\)

Nevertheless, White clearly presents Mrs. Dun as afraid of education and the educated. Pierre Francois argues that White uses the respectable suburban “bourgeoisie” to cloak “absolute evil” so frequently that it constitutes a “widespread motif in White’s fiction” (115). Furthermore, Francois notes that in White’s fiction old ladies “often harbour in their innermost hearts the most horrendous, lethal drives” and claims Mrs. Dun “is another suburban devil” (115). However, despite sharing qualities with Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack from *Riders in the Chariot*, such as narrow-mindedness, ignorance and fear of immigrants, Mrs. Dun is far from a “suburban devil” and lacks the malice necessary to instigate violence. Furthermore, Francois’ inclusion of Mrs. Dun amongst the bourgeoisie indicates a serious misreading of her class and social aspirations.

The reader’s first impression of the twin protagonists Waldo and Arthur is filtered through the perspective of Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun, who observe the brothers from the bus. From Mrs. Dun’s perspective, the old men are “stumping, trudging” along the footpath between Barranugli and Sarsaparilla, “blotting out the suburban landscape, filling the box of Mrs. Dun’s shuddering mind … she almost smelled those old men …

\(^{30}\) See Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy.”
they were holding each other by the hand” (10-11). Mrs. Dun is particularly shocked that the men hold hands, even though they are brothers: she “hated what she saw” (11). In the closing section of the novel, Mrs. Poulter reflects on Mrs. Dun and concludes that she is “cold” and “something of a disappointment” (291). Nevertheless, Mrs. Poulter continues to associate with her out of habit and enjoys having company on the bus and during visits to David Jones31 or the cinema, “but there was nothing intimate with Mrs. Dun” (292).

Although White’s technique of using a pair of suburban women as characters in *The Solid Mandala* mirrors *Riders in the Chariot*, the similarities are superficial. While Mrs. Dun shares some characteristics with Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, Mrs. Poulter is more akin to Mrs. Godbold, the suburban saint. White’s narrator initially presents both women negatively, declaring it is “perhaps doubtful whether anyone would notice Mrs. Poulter or Mrs. Dun unless life took its cleaver to them” (4); however, numerous positive descriptions of Mrs. Poulter appear as the novel progresses, so that the overall characterization is overwhelmingly positive. Herring argues that the character development of Mrs. Poulter throughout the novel “is one of its chief surprises and an essential part of its meaning” (181). Likewise, A.A. Phillips posits that Mrs. Poulter seems at first to be “one of those suburban Old Ducks whom White can pencil in with light mastery, but she becomes a more significant and a more deeply imagined personality. She is the hinge which connects the central figures” (33). Furthermore, John Beston claims that Mrs. Poulter is elevated in the novel’s final scenes “as a comforting madonna and a kind earth mother” and “endowed with a vibrant life spirit” (110).

Mrs. Poulter and her husband Bill move from the country to the developing suburb of Sarsaparilla seeking peace and quiet. Moreover, Bill considers land in the

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31 David Jones is an Australian department store chain.
suburb a good investment, since he expects the area to undergo further development (4-5). The “Waldo” section reveals that the Poulters settled in Terminus Road opposite the Browns around 1920 (133). When the Browns discuss the Poulters’ arrival, Arthur provides his family with information gleaned from talking with the new neighbors, revealing that in the country Mr. Poulter worked as a rouseabout and Mrs. Poulter worked in the homestead (134). Bill constructs the couple’s new suburban home with the help of a local lad while the couple lives in a shed on their block of land and Mrs. Poulter acquaints herself with the Browns by borrowing cups of sugar and rice (134). Soon after arriving in Sarsaparilla, Mrs. Poulter confides in Mrs. Brown regarding the reasons for their move to suburbia, including the fact that Bill’s nerves are damaged because of time he spent “in a camp” during the First World War (135). Before her death, Mrs. Brown often described Mrs. Poulter as “a thoroughly good-hearted, reliable young woman” (21).

Characteristically, Arthur and Waldo hold opposing views of Mrs. Poulter. Waldo views her as an “inalterably stupid creature” with a “too stupid” face and “stupid-looking calves” (54; 134); she is “one of the fifty-seven things and persons Waldo hated” (51). In contrast, Arthur views Mrs. Poulter as an excellent neighbor and an attractive woman (21; 251). Indeed, Arthur loves Mrs. Poulter and develops a relationship with her that attains such a degree of intimacy that she allows him to touch her hair (258). Because Arthur suffers from an unspecified mental disability (he is often referred to as slow, simple or dumb), Mrs. Poulter believes she can have an intimate friendship with him without appearing unfaithful to her husband (253). Mrs. Poulter often beckons to Arthur

32 Bill’s time in the camp during the First World War is not explained. It is unclear whether he was an internee of German descent, a guard, or some other kind of worker in the camp. However, John Beston notes that the surname Poulter “is very like the German Polter, an objectionable, noisy sort of person” (107), so perhaps Bill Poulter could be read as an Australian of German descent.
from across the street (253), and the pair spends a great deal of time together, either in the Poulter's home or walking the suburban streets. When Mrs. Poulter tires of Arthur, who lacks the social skills to recognize that he has overstayed his welcome, she dismisses him by taking up a book and declaring that she is going to settle down alone (253). However, Mrs. Poulter is not well read; her reading matter is limited to the obituaries and advertisements in the local newspaper, the Bible and an Encyclopedia (254).

Like Mrs. Godbold in Riders in the Chariot, Mrs. Poulter is a devout Christian married to an unbeliever (294). She attends church without Bill every Sunday, unless she is ill or suffering leg pains (296). Mrs. Poulter’s relationship with Arthur is tested by a discussion she initiates concerning Christianity. Mrs. Poulter declares it is strange that the Browns have never attended church; Arthur replies that his parents attended until they learnt “they could do without it” (255). Arthur goes on to explain that his parents “began to feel it wasn’t true,” and when prompted by Mrs. Poulter, elaborates, “About virgins. About Him?” (255). Shocked, Mrs. Poulter exclaims, “Don’t tell me … that you don’t believe in Our Lord Jesus Christ?” (255). Arthur replies that he does not know much about Jesus and turns the question back on Mrs. Poulter: “How do you know, anyway?” (255). Mrs. Poulter asserts, “It’s what everyone has always known,” and claims, “I couldn’t exist without Our Lord!” (255). Arthur intensifies the debate and angers Mrs. Poulter by revealing that his mother claims Christians constantly gloat over the blood of Christ (255). When Mrs. Poulter asks, “Don’t you believe they crucified Our Lord?,” Arthur responds, “I reckon they’d crucify a man … Yes … From what you read. And what we know. Christians … are cruel” (255). As he did in Riders in the
Chariot, White uses suburbia in The Solid Mandala to explore the contested place of religion in Australian society.

When Arthur dances his mandala, his most expressive and intimate act of the novel, he dances it for Mrs. Poulter (259). Despite the fact that Mrs. Poulter breaks off her relationship with Arthur due to local gossip and her husband’s complaints, she often thinks of him fondly, especially the day he danced for her: “the bonfire of Arthur’s head had never quite gone out for Mrs. Poulter” (296). Mrs. Poulter is childless, although she was once pregnant and suffered a miscarriage (294). Despite her obvious sorrow over her miscarriage, and her husband’s lack of religious beliefs, Mrs. Poulter seems content with her life in suburbia: “You couldn’t say she wasn’t comfortable. He kept the home painted up ... Took a few jobs on the side ... For the few extra luxuries. You had to keep up with the times ... She had the electricity, she had the phone ... Bill said people in history had never had it so good ... You couldn’t complain. Not with the electric frying-pan ... not with the phone, and two doctors. And the telly” (291). In addition to the enjoyment she derives from her consumer goods, Mrs. Poulter enjoys gardening and knitting, stereotypical domestic pursuits for a suburban housewife (252; 292).

However, she derives the greatest pleasure from her television, especially the news programs: “She loved the telly. It made her sit forward ... waiting, most of all for the real programmes, when they let off one of the bombs, or an aeroplane caught fire at the moment of crashing, or those guerillas they’d collared, of course they were only

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33 The OED defines “mandala” thus: “a. A symbolic circular figure, usually with symmetrical divisions and figures of deities, etc., in the centre, used in Buddhism and other religions as a representation of the universe, and serving esp. as an object of meditation. b. In Jungian psychology: an image or archetype ... of a similar circle visualized in dreams, held to symbolize a striving for unity of self and completeness.” In The Solid Mandala, the title refers to Arthur’s cherished marble, as well as the dance he performs for Mrs. Poulter.
Orientals, and once it showed you the bodies they’d shot ... All the while they were firing on a mob of squealing Orientals, in Singapore, or some such place” (295). Earlier in this section, I referred to the effect on Mrs. Poulter of watching violent episodes on television, namely the association of genocide with violence in suburbia. However, it is also important to acknowledge Mrs. Poulter’s excitement over watching “real” violence, her ignorance concerning foreign affairs, and her lack of compassion for the foreign victims of violence, whom she views as “only Orientals” and “squealing Orientals” (295).

Beston argues that White is ambivalent towards his characters, and claims that White’s ambivalence towards Mrs. Poulter does not fully emerge until the final section of the novel (110). Furthermore, Beston claims that White uses the passages about Mrs. Poulter’s consumer goods and television viewing to mock her, portray her “as a representative of the spirit of the times,” and satirize “Australian suburbia with its ugliness and emotional emptiness and concern for material comforts” (110). Beston posits that because Waldo is dead in Part Four, “any slur on her [Mrs. Poulter] is White’s own” (108), rather than Waldo’s, and claims that Mrs. Poulter’s acceptance of suburbia, “which White rejects so disdainfully, considerably undercuts his elevation of her to the sainthood at the end” (110). However, Beston’s contention that White satirizes suburbia conflates Mrs. Poulter with suburbia, and he makes the mistake of interpreting a single example of what he perceives to be anti-suburban sentiment as representative of White’s own attitudes. Overall, White characterizes the suburban homemaker positively, while acknowledging her flaws, and she shares much in common with Mrs. Godbold, the saint of Riders in the Chariot.
Waldo: The Immigrant “Artist” in Suburbia

Whereas White used the Aboriginal Alf Dubbo to explore the role of the artist in society in *Riders in the Chariot*, in *The Solid Mandala* the artist character is an aloof English immigrant. Readers first encounter Waldo Brown as an elderly, retired man, but as the novel progresses, they gain knowledge of Waldo’s life from childhood until his death in his suburban home approximately seventy years later. Waldo is the younger of the twin brothers by a few hours, although he plays the role of “the elder by years” due to Arthur’s unspecified mental condition (20). Through Waldo, White uses the suburban setting to address the role of the artist in society, immigration, family relationships, conformity and class. Once again, White reveals the richness of suburbia as a setting for fiction. Waldo is an immigrant who aspires to be a writer, struggles in his relationships with his brother and parents, shuns religion, and conforms to deeply held convictions regarding how a person of his class should behave. Although Waldo does not possess a university education, having entered the work force after high school, he perceives himself as an intellectual belonging to the cultural elite and looks down on those whom he deems uneducated or unintelligent. Waldo views himself as middle class, despite lacking the economic and educational status necessary to be a member of that class; however, the only characteristics he shares with the working-class are a low economic status and a modest home in an outer suburb. Thus, Waldo is best described as lower-middle-class, which Rita Felski labels “a singularly boring identity” that intellectuals have typically viewed with scorn (34).

John Hartley argues that the lower middle class have “the lowest reputation in the entire history of class theory,” and that the lower middle class “attracts no love, support,
advocacy or self-conscious organization" (186). In her article "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame and the Lower Middle Class," Felski argues that individuals who meet the sociological criteria for the lower middle class “do not usually form a group consciousness around that status,” preferring to perceive themselves as middle-class because being lower middle class is a negative identity “usually applied from outside” (41). Felski claims, “The lower middle class often feels itself to be culturally superior to the working class … while lacking the cultural capital and earning power of the professional-managerial class” (35); her description perfectly describes Waldo’s attitude and economic status. Moreover, Felski identifies “status anxiety” and shame as hallmarks of the lower middle class (36, 39). Waldo displays both attributes frequently, especially status anxiety concerning his desire to be an intellectual and artist, and shame regarding Arthur’s behavior and his perceptions of how other members of the community view his family.

Waldo is obsessed with keeping up appearances, both with regard to his physical appearance and the behaviors he perceives society to deem acceptable. He is a meticulous dresser who always wears a suit in public and believes he has a duty to uphold high sartorial standards (63). Arthur’s relationship with Mrs. Poulter enrages Waldo due to the effect Waldo perceives the relationship to have on his family’s reputation. Waldo appeals to Arthur to stop seeing Mrs. Poulter, accusing him of degrading the family and declaring “‘it’s us, it’s us too, ought to be considered, if you did you wouldn’t traipse through the scrub, or in the street, the street, holding hands with Mrs. Poulter!’” (141). Felski identifies additional important attributes of the lower middle class that are reflected by Waldo’s character, namely the association of the lower
middle class with domesticity, “feminine gentility,” and “the triumph of suburban values and the symbolic castration of men” (43). Waldo does not engage in any stereotypical masculine activities and other characters frequently perceive him as feminine, a trait emphasized by his use of his mother’s dress-box to hide his literary endeavors and, especially, by the scene in which Waldo, in his old age, “obsessed” and “possessed,” tries on his dead mother’s dress (184-5).

The Browns emigrate from England to Australia while the twins are quite young, although old enough to have started school, acquired English accents and begun developing a sense of national identity. Upon their arrival in Sydney, the Browns lodge with the Thompson family in Barranugli, close to Mr. Brown’s job at the bank and a few blocks from the twins’ school. The brothers’ English accents cause problems for them at school, where their speech is not understood until they learn to speak Australian English (212). Waldo reveals his elitism by preferring to speak “English” rather than “Australian,” arguing that the former has a larger vocabulary (212). Arthur, on the other hand, quickly learns to speak Australian English most of the time because he wants to be trusted and understood (212). Waldo is “suspicious” of the locals and “inclined to call them Australians” (213). Like the protagonists of Riders in the Chariot, Waldo is indisputably an outsider; however, unlike Miss Hare, Mrs. Godbold, Mordecai Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo, Waldo is clearly not a heroic character.

Although Arthur is mentally deficient, he is physically stronger. Waldo is the weaker and smaller twin during childhood. Waldo’s father tells visitors that Arthur “got a start” on Waldo because Waldo “was born with his innards twisted” and the doctor had to sort them out (26). Waldo’s physical weakness leads his parents to shelter him as a
child, and his mother keeps him home from school when he has a cold (26). However, Waldo’s weakness is short-lived and he grows taller and better built than his parents expected (68). Waldo decides early in life to emulate his mother rather than his father (52) and identifies strongly with her aristocratic English lineage and her superior attitude towards native Australians and their use of English: “Nothing annoyed their mother more than what she called a ‘sloppy Australian vocabulary’” (92). Mrs. Brown returns Waldo’s favor, and “Waldo was officially her favorite, Arthur her duty” (22).

Waldo exhibits literary tendencies and ambitions from an early age. He stays up late reading by lamplight and copies “extracts into notebooks” (74-75). In keeping with the anti-intellectualism of mainstream Australian society, in which creative pursuits have traditionally been viewed with suspicion and the masculinity and heterosexuality of artistic boys questioned, Waldo sees his interest in literature and his writing as activities that must be hidden and is ashamed if his passions are publicized. Visitors to the Brown home “inquired about Waldo’s Writing as though it had been an illness” (23) and Waldo’s parents “scarcely mentioned” his literary ambitions “through shame or fear, or simply because they didn’t believe” (68). Waldo is so ashamed of his literary ambitions that when his mother asks about the book he is writing, he “feel[es] the flesh shrivel on his bones” (154). Waldo is a voracious reader, tackling Tennyson and Tacitus as a child, “but because Dad was the reader in the family he did most of it furtively” (74). Waldo’s ambitions and his parents’ reactions are displayed clearly in a scene in which Waldo, while still a child, declares he is going to write a Greek tragedy and act it himself on the verandah (32).
Waldo’s desire to write is not solely the product of egotism or a desire for fame. On a basic psychological level, Waldo is driven to express himself and to be recognized as special: “Other people continued to reduce Waldo’s intentions and make them appear foolishly capricious, if not downright idiotic. They did not grasp the extent of his need to express some thing. Otherwise how could he truly say: I exist. The prospect of remaining a nonentity like the schoolteachers or his parents made him sweat behind the knees” (76). Waldo is particularly critical of people he perceives as ordinary, such as the Poulterers, his teachers and his parents. When Arthur suggests that Waldo write about Leonard Saporta, the Jewish carpet merchant who marries Dulcie Feinstein (Waldo’s “first love”), Waldo protests that Saporta is “such a very ordinary man. I have nothing against him. But why I should write about him! ... There is nothing in Leonard Saporta ... that anyone could possibly write about” (23). Of course, it is evident to the reader that the Jewish immigrant Saporta is an interesting and unusual character; moreover, White expressed his intention to find the extraordinary in the ordinary in his essay “The Prodigal Son” (39), and thus Waldo’s comment on ordinariness is an ironic metafictional comment by White. Waldo’s frequent inability to find a subject he deems worthy of writing about is a result of his own elitism and narrow conception of literature.

Additionally, Waldo fears being unable to perform artistically and of running out of time. At one point he cries, “Oh ... but I have not expressed half of what is in me to express!” (24), echoing John Keats’ fear of dying before fulfilling his literary ambitions. Waldo struggles with various manifestations of writer’s block, often doubting his abilities (63). Being a writer is central to Waldo’s self-perception. When he

34 Leonard Saporta shares some characteristics with Leopold Bloom in Joyce’s Ulysses.
35 See “Sleep and Poetry.”
first meets Dulcie Feinstein, he declares, "'What I really want to do ... is write'" (87), and when she asks for specifics he replies, "'Sometimes I think novels, sometimes plays. It might even be some kind of philosophical work' ... It would have been so much easier if he had been able to tell her: I want to, and am going to, write about myself" (87).

Beston argues that Waldo is "driven to excel intellectually" because he is "denied the possibility of shining physically" and is "impaired emotionally," and interprets Waldo's lack of creative ability as "tragic" (111). Indeed, Waldo's lack of the abilities necessary to fulfill his artistic ambitions is one of the few aspects of his character that may elicit readers' sympathy.

After his retirement, Waldo attempts to increase his artistic productivity, flinging himself at the dress-box in which he keeps his work "almost every afternoon with such passion he had torn off one of the cardboard sides ... Mostly he corrected, though sometimes ... he would also write" (203). However, Waldo is unable to convert his ambitions into reality, and his literary output consists chiefly of notebooks and an unpublished fragment of a novel entitled *Tiresias a Youngish Man* (111; 166). Although Waldo somewhat presumptuously joins the Fellowship of Australian Writers, his sole literary achievement is to present a paper on Barron Field to the Beecroft Literary Society (63: 166). After a climactic encounter with Arthur over a poem Arthur composes, Waldo concedes defeat and burns his unfinished manuscripts in his suburban backyard:

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36 The title of Waldo's fragment recalls T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which Tiresias is invoked. Moreover, the physical descriptions of Waldo may remind some readers of Eliot. In his notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot writes that despite being "a mere spectator," Tiresias is "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest ... the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (70). Thus, the title of Waldo's fragment of a novel suggests his sexual/gender ambiguity.

37 Although the name Barron Field may appear to be another example of White's fondness for creating satirical proper nouns, such as Barranugli and Mungindribble, Barron Field was an English poet and literary critic who arrived in Australia in 1816 and wrote *First Fruits of Australian Poetry*, considered to be the first book of poetry published in Australia.
About four o'clock he went down, Tiresias a thinnish man, the dress-box under his arm, towards the pit where they had been accustomed to burn only those things from which they could bear to be parted. ... Then crouched, to pitch a paper tent ... got it to burn ... He began to throw his papers by handfuls ... It was both a sowing and a scattering of seed. When he finished he felt lighter, but always had been, he suspected while walking away. (205)

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe argues that “Arthur has forced Waldo to confess that he is writing about nothing” (Vision 77), and thus Waldo sees the futility of his literary ambitions and abandons them.

Waldo’s failure as a writer is emphasized by his fifty-year career working in libraries, first at the Sydney Municipal Library and later at the Public Library (63; 174). He spends his days surrounded by books, the physical evidence of other people’s ability to realize their literary ambitions, yet his own work is unpublished and he is unable to enter fully into the literary life. Waldo’s desire to be a writer is accompanied by a sense of superiority and a desire for intellectual companions. Waldo develops his sense of superiority while at Barranugli High (92): he does not “‘like to ask favours’” or “‘be beholden to anybody’” (19). He seems himself as “only marking time” before creating “the work of art he was intended to create,” but believes that his first priority must be to “create detachment” (139). Phillips interprets Waldo’s cultivated superiority and detachment as a defense mechanism, describing Waldo as “the cold intellectual who dabbles a toe in the water of life and withdraws in fear of committing himself to the depths” (32). Other critics interpret Waldo’s behavior less sympathetically. Herring describes Waldo as an “arch-egoist” (182) and Francois argues that Waldo’s “ego
inflation is suggested by his overbearing propensity to dub himself a genius, [and]
compare himself favourably with Goethe and Beethoven whom he patronizes as though
they were second-rate artists” (104). Francois goes so far as to argue that Waldo is “an
intricate parody of Goethe’s Faust” (105).

While waiting to hear if he will receive a job at the library, Waldo envisions
himself arriving at the Feinstein’s suburban villa, announcing, “Here I am, an intellectual,
working at Sydney Municipal Library . . . you must respect, not my genius exactly, but at
least my Australian-literary ambitions” (104). However, Waldo is disappointed in his
quest to find intellectual companions “with whom to exchange the Everyman classics and
play Schubert after tea” (24), or to swap books and “letters written in the kind of literary
style which went with such relationships” (85). He finds intellectual companions of sorts
with his library colleagues, some of whom he eats lunch with while debating intellectual
matters; however, he prevents the friendships from becoming intimate and does not invite
anyone to his home, “Because Mr. Brown of the intellectual breathers in the Botanic
Gardens must never be confused with the subfusc, almost abstract figure, living on top of
a clogged grease-trap . . . under the arches of yellow grass, down Terminus Road” (175).
Waldo’s reveals his lower middle class status anxiety and shame through his need to
prevent other “intellectuals” from viewing his living conditions in suburbia.

Waldo prevents his friendship with his colleague Walter Pugh from becoming
close because he views Walter’s literary ambitions as “ridiculous,” despite harboring his
own (136). Consequently, Waldo “never really had a friend of his own sex” (136).
Waldo’s desire for an intellectual companion is so strong, however, that he tries
unsuccessfully to befriend Bill Poulter, even though “the material wasn’t promising”
Waldo’s inability to develop close relationships with other people is not entirely due to his pretensions and lower middle class anxieties; it is the result of a more basic problem: although he “would have confessed it only to himself, he did not understand people” (92). In contrast, even though he is “simple,” Arthur makes friends easily and inspires affection.

Although Waldo is in many ways not a typical suburbanite, declaring, “‘I am not one to mow the lawn on Sunday’” (149), he expresses affection for suburbia on a number of occasions. While walking through Sarsaparilla, “the world in which people lived … populated by] families in advertised clothes, who belonged to Fellowships and attended Lodges and were not afraid of electrical gadgets,” Waldo secretly yearned “for the brick boxes to an extent where his love had become hatred” (24). Waldo admires the vitality, community and human progress evidenced by suburbia. Edgecombe argues that Waldo goes so far as to place “faith” in “regimented suburbia as an instance of rational order” (Vision 69). As the narrator states in the “Waldo” section, even though Waldo is “appalled” by “steel and concrete” constructions, such as service stations, “he would never have admitted [it] in public, he would never have rejected any usable evidence of human progress” (53).

Waldo’s alleged distaste for concrete and steel is partially contradicted by a passage in which he counts and names cars, an activity described as his “secret vice”: “He began to count, to name the passing cars: the Chev the Renault the Holden two more three Holdens the Morris Minor the Bentley” (108). Therefore, although Waldo does not engage in stereotypical suburban pursuits such as mowing the lawn, he finds much to admire in suburbia and spends almost seven decades there. White goes so far as to
present suburbia as a site of inspiration for the artist. Some of the most "satisfying moments" of Waldo's life occur when he returns to Sarsaparilla after a day of work in the city, "by exhausted summer light, or breathtaking winter dark, his thought so lucid, so pointed, so independent, he could have started ... there and then at the Barranugli bus stop to rough out something really important" (139-140).

In addition to lacking the ability to make friends and develop intimate relationships, Waldo hates most people, including his own family (74). Waldo views Arthur as a burden he has been "saddled with" since birth, building his hatred over the years to such an extent that Arthur fears Waldo "was preparing to die of the hatred he had bred in him" (19; 288). Bliss compares Waldo to Arthur's solid mandala marble, "Tense, rigid, involuted, and self-enclosed," argues that it is "only by seeing through his own eyes and those of his always loving brother ... [that] the reader [can] approach Waldo at all, for the very essence of his being is to repel others," and claims Waldo is incapable of either "imaginative work" or "real love" (Patrick White's Fiction 102; 103). Waldo's hatred becomes so intense that he decides Arthur should die and hopes the strenuous daily walks will cause Arthur to have a heart attack (198). David Tacey views the twins' walk along the Barranugli Road, "which is woven throughout the scenes of the first half of the novel" as "The final and almost epic event in the life of the twins" (131).

Waldo's death is precipitated by his discovery of a poem composed by Arthur, which Bliss characterizes as a "clumsy but terrifying" composition "which celebrates mankind's common pain" (Patrick White's Fiction 103). The discovery of the poem, which contains a "sense of connection and community ... brings forcibly home to Waldo his own sterility and anomie" and "drives Waldo to jealous fury" (Bliss, Patrick White's
Fiction 105-106; 103). Tacey argues that Waldo’s rage is caused “not merely because … [the poem] activates his psychic complex, but because it is a literary form … which threatens his own role as the secret poet of the Brown family” (135-36). Waldo is so enraged that he tries to choke Arthur to death; however, in the attempt, he dies of a paroxysm, thus killing himself (Tacey 136). As Herring puts it, “In the end Waldo dies of his hatred” (184). Believing he is responsible for Waldo’s death, Arthur panics and flees, wandering the streets of Sydney for three days and nights. Waldo’s body is mutilated by the twins’ dogs Scruffy and Runt before being discovered by Mrs. Poulter.

There is some disagreement amongst the critics over the meaning and appropriateness of Waldo’s death. Francois argues, “No death could be more grimly appropriate for Waldo … whose existence was bogged down in negation from the cradle to the grave” (117). Herring claims that Waldo’s death represents White’s judgment of him, and that White’s judgment, “conveyed through the dog’s symbolic mutilation of his corpse, could not be harsher” (183). Furthermore, Herring contends, “White clearly invites us to make” the harshest judgment of Waldo and argues, “he alone is denied the author’s compassion” (Herring 183; 184). In contrast, Beston believes Waldo “is treated more cruelly than any other important character in White’s novels,” arguing that White lacks compassion by denying Waldo “any achievement in life” and having him “die in such damning circumstances” (112). According to Beston’s reading, “Waldo dies in murderous hatred” before being eaten by the dogs, which rip his throat open and tear his penis off (112). Beston interprets the circumstances of Waldo’s death as “disturbing in themselves,” but even more so, “when we consider that immediately before his death
Waldo has his defenses shattered by Arthur ... [and] understandably turns in hatred upon the truthbringer. For this hatred, White damns him irretrievably" (112).

Beston argues that throughout *The Solid Mandala* White provides material that allows for "a sympathetic interpretation of Waldo" and "makes his damnation dubious" (111). He contends that a sympathetic reading of Waldo allows readers to "see where White departs from his early compassion and attempts to manipulate" readers “into adopting his growing antipathy for Waldo” (Beston 111). Furthermore, Beston claims that White himself “shows sympathy for Waldo” early in the novel, “but soon comes to abandon it,” injecting “sarcastic comments intended to make the reader dislike and even condemn Waldo ... A number of incidents, too, suggest in White an enjoyment of Waldo’s distress” (111). While Waldo obviously contains characteristics that readers may find both sympathetic and unsympathetic, individual readers may interpret Waldo’s character in conflicting ways, and no reader or critic can know White’s intention and incontrovertibly claim that White dislikes one of his characters or intends to manipulate his readers.

**Arthur: The Saint of Suburbia**

The “Arthur” section, which begins with the Brown family aboard ship en route from England to Australia, presents the events of the novel from Arthur’s point of view and conveys his thoughts through indirect discourse. Many of Waldo’s depictions of events are corrected, further developed or re-interpreted when viewed from Arthur’s perspective, often radically altering the readers’ knowledge. Herring argues that Arthur’s version of events serves as a check on Waldo’s, “showing how his apparent blunders are deliberate” (182). Thus, the “Arthur” section provides a new understanding not just of
Arthur himself, but also of Waldo, Mrs. Poulter, the Feinsteins, and the twins’ parents. Whereas Waldo’s primary concerns are his writing, class anxiety and finding intellectual companions, Arthur focuses on religion and spirituality, love and enjoying life. While Waldo presents himself as an intellectual, holds a respectable job, and outwardly appears to be a successful member of society, Arthur is the saint of suburbia, a simple character like Mrs. Godbold in *Riders in the Chariot* who lacks the trappings of material success and does not conform to societal norms, yet through his actions reveals himself to be humble, loving and primarily concerned with tending to the needs of others.

Throughout the novel, White constantly presents the twins as opposites. Thus, Waldo is a sickly child favored by his mother, while Arthur is strong, good-looking and his father’s favorite (27; 26; 22). Arthur exhibits such strength as a child that his father predicts he will become a wrestler or an athlete (27). Although Arthur is mentally slow, he is born with a gift for figures that is “found growing in him, as naturally as hair,” while mathematics is Waldo’s great intellectual weakness (29, 225). In contrast to Waldo’s early development of a passion for intellectual pursuits, Arthur learns to bake bread from his mother and derives great joy from the domestic activity, despite the disapproval of his father, who is “disgusted” and views baking as “nothing for a boy” (29). The description in the “Arthur” section of Arthur and his mother baking together calls in to question Waldo’s assertion that he is his mother’s favorite. Arthur and Mrs. Brown are described as a “closed circle” entering into a “conspiracy of butter and bread,” which is a “mystery they had to celebrate” and one that only “she and Arthur were to understand” (226). Arthur’s baking relationship with his mother gives him the most intense satisfaction he ever experiences before his relationship with Mrs. Poulter (226).
Despite his mental slowness, Arthur’s gift for numbers leads him to be “in some demand” at school, where he helps other boys with their homework in exchange for marbles (222). Arthur regards himself as immune to the physical and emotional bullying prevalent amongst schoolboys, but he fears for Waldo, whom he sees as vulnerable because he is “too clever by half,” likes books, and is “said to be their mother’s darling. Because of it all, Waldo needed defending from himself and others … poor Waldo was so different, and so frail” (222; 223). Arthur’s alleged mental slowness is called into question by the fact that he is often more perceptive than other characters and even as a child understands that Waldo’s intellectual pursuits, penchant for speaking British English, and physical appearance will not be accepted by the schoolboys who maintain the societal status quo. When Waldo is bullied at school, Arthur comes to his rescue, bellowing, “‘I’ll kill … the pair of you buggers if you touch … my brother’” (39).

After the twins complete elementary school, Waldo begins attending Barranugli High School, but Mr. and Mrs. Brown decide Arthur is unsuitable for further schooling and arrange an apprenticeship for him with the local shopkeeper, Mr. Allwright (226). In addition to serving customers and stocking shelves, Arthur drives a horse and buggy around the suburb delivering groceries, an activity that gives him a sense of independence and allows him to befriend many members of the community, including the Feinsteins and Mrs. Musto, the wealthy owner of Fairy Flour whose influence later secures Waldo’s first library job (228). Arthur spends his entire working life with the Allwrights, making him a well-known figure in the suburb for more than half a century, and retires at the same time as Waldo (280).
Arthur repeatedly demonstrates a great fondness for the physical structures of suburbia; he loves the houses and the Speedex Service Station, which is built on the site where Allwright's General Store once stood (52; 53). He is particularly fond of "the classical facade" of his family's brown weatherboard house (217). Moreover, Arthur likes to spend his mornings checking prices in the local Woolworth's supermarket (48). Indeed, it is Arthur, the most saint-like of all the characters in the novel, who most clearly celebrates suburbia and does not express any anti-suburban sentiments. It would certainly be a mistake to contend that Arthur's love for suburbia is evidence that White also celebrates suburbia; however, Arthur's attitude towards suburbia serves as weighty evidence against claims that *The Solid Mandala* is an anti-suburban novel.

Despite Arthur's "slowness" and shabby physical appearance, which often disturbs strangers (67) and serves to situate him as an outsider in his community, he is far more socially aware and integrated into society than Waldo. Arthur's five decades working for the Allwrights give him extensive experience observing, listening to and interacting with the residents of his suburb. As a result, Arthur knows much more about the lives of his neighbors, and indeed about human behavior, than Waldo does. Moreover, unlike Waldo, Arthur rarely cares what other people think and say about him (197), a trait that allows him a great deal of freedom and independence. When Waldo urges Arthur to take pride in himself and value what others say about him, wondering whether Arthur even cares if people like him, Arthur is able to confidently retort, "'No ... Because they mostly do'" (198).

Arthur's wealth of social interaction experience enhances his perceptiveness, which he demonstrates on numerous occasions. For example, he knows that the raincoat
he habitually wears makes him look “like a real old faggot” (275), senses that “only the very clever and the very stupid can dare to be dishonest” (244), and, most significantly, perceives during the Second World War that the Holocaust is not a unique or isolated event. When Waldo asks how the Holocaust is relevant to their suburban existence in Australia and asserts, “We don’t put people in ovens here,” Arthur replies, “We didn’t think of it” (166). This episode echoes White’s argument regarding the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot, namely that such acts occur in Australia “in all quarters, in many infinitely humiliating ways” (Qtd. in Bliss, Patrick White’s Fiction 86).

One of the reasons Waldo hates Arthur is because he recognizes that Arthur is unusually perceptive “and might even be the core of truth” (179).

Arthur’s “slowness” is also belied by his lifelong interest in reading literature. As a child, Arthur repeatedly begs his father to read the Greek myths to him and Waldo (217). After retiring, Arthur spends much of his time reading at the library. As Waldo’s colleague Miss Glasson puts it, “He asks for the most extraordinary things ... The Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads! He’s interested in Japanese zen” (188). Arthur also reads Western classics, including The Brothers Karamazov and Through the Looking-Glass (189). Like Waldo, Arthur also writes, attempting to create his own literary works. During the twins’ childhood, when Waldo declares that Arthur cannot perform in his proposed play, Arthur says he will write his own Greek tragedy and act all the parts. When questioned about the play’s subject, Arthur says it is about a cow that gives birth to a stillborn calf, revealing both his empathy and humility (33). Arthur also writes poetry about “the daughter he had never had” and “the wives he carried inside him” (284).
Arthur’s poems are the only part of him that he keeps hidden from Waldo, because some of them contain “a kind of blasphemy against life” (287).

Indeed, it is Waldo’s discovery of one of Arthur’s poems that causes the rage that leads to Waldo’s death. Thus, although Waldo perceives himself as an artist and his brother as an “imbecile” (23), Arthur is the twin with the ability to create powerful art. In addition to reading and writing, Arthur gives Waldo writing advice. Arthur argues that “simple people” are more transparent and that one can “see right into them, right into the part that matters. Then you can write about them” (23). Most significantly, Arthur proclaims, “it doesn’t matter what you write about, provided you tell the truth about it” (23). Waldo is unable to write truthfully in his own works, and the brutal truth of Arthur’s poem is one of the main causes of Waldo’s rage.

Although Waldo and Arthur’s parents raise them as atheists, Arthur expresses a deep interest in religion and spirituality. As Herring notes, in his old age Arthur “becomes perplexed by the problem of pain” and the emphasis on suffering in Christianity (185). Arthur declares that he does not understand cruelty and is particularly troubled by the crucifixion (51), as evidenced by the aforementioned debate with Mrs. Poulter. Arthur becomes obsessed with suffering and Christianity, and his library visits to read The Brothers Karamazov are an attempt to understand the relationship between them, as well as a quest to make sense of his relationship with Waldo (277). While Arthur is at the library reading The Brothers Karamazov, he is confronted by Waldo, who is ashamed and outraged by Arthur’s presence and afraid that Arthur will embarrass him in front of his colleagues and the library patrons (277). Waldo loudly commands Arthur to leave the library and addresses him as “Sir,” “indicating that he, Arthur, his brother, his
flesh, his breath, was a total stranger” (278-79). David Coad interprets Arthur’s reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* as evidence of “his interest in the other world, the moral, spiritual world inside man” (original emphasis) (114) and argues that it is significant that Arthur’s “quest for the sacred” does not involve the Christian church, whether represented by a congregation or a building (113). Coad sees the fact that Arthur does not consider joining a church as consistent with White’s own “mistrust and reservations about institutionalised religion” (113).

Arthur comes to perceive himself as possessing spiritual knowledge that both Waldo and their father will never acquire, and thinks of himself as “the keeper of mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light” (234). The mandala dance that Arthur spontaneously performs for Mrs. Poulter is his most intimate, expressive, and spiritual act of the novel. Through his dance, Arthur attempts to express his love for the important people in his life, including Mrs. Poulter, Dulcie Feinstein and Waldo. However, he is unable to “dance his brother out of him, not fully. They were too close for it to work” (260). Additionally, the mandala dance is an expression of suffering: “in the centre of their mandala he danced the passion of all their lives, the blood running out of the backs of his hands, water out of the hole in his ribs” (260). Afterwards, Arthur comes to see the dance as a perfect moment in his life that can never be repeated and is therefore cause for sadness (261). Although Waldo refers to Arthur as a “‘big fat helpless female’” and his “club foot” (36; 41), Arthur sees himself as Waldo’s protector, rather than as a burdensome dependent. Arthur believes that he is strong and Waldo is weak, and that he therefore has a duty to protect Waldo (209). At one point, Arthur decides that he cannot afford to die because of his duty to Waldo, which includes performing “the
humblest tasks” and allowing Waldo to believe that he is superior (285). Here the parallels between Arthur and Mrs. Godbold, both suburban saints, are abundantly clear.

When Waldo dies of a paroxysm while attempting to choke Arthur to death, Arthur believes he has committed fratricide and in his despair stampedes “through the house … It was a wonder the cries torn out of him didn’t bring the structure down” (288). When compared to Waldo’s cold decision to attempt to drive Arthur to a heart attack through strenuous walks, Arthur’s genuine grief over Waldo’s death provides yet another example of the numerous contrasting behaviors of the twins. Despite Arthur’s many positive qualities, critics disagree over whether or not he is an admirable character.

Herring views Arthur as the protector of his family (181), Bliss claims that he achieves sainthood (Patrick White’s Fiction 113) and Edgecombe sees him as an empathetic visionary mystic (Vision 64, 68). However, Beston argues that two main factors prevent readers from viewing Arthur as a saint: first, “he is presented as physically repulsive right through the book,” and second, there is not enough evidence to support the claims regarding “his inspirational effect upon others” (108). Furthermore, Beston contends that White’s language describing Arthur’s appearance and actions “are so evenly disdainful in all three Parts that one comes to suspect a repugnance in White himself for his own creation” (108). Furthermore, Beston argues that White manipulates his readers into sharing “his distaste for his character” (109). Beston’s assertion that Arthur is consistently presented as physically repulsive is incorrect; in fact, Arthur is repeatedly described in positive terms, such as strong, athletic and handsome (22; 26; 27). Additionally, there is ample evidence that Arthur inspires others, especially Mrs. Poulter, and Dulcie Feinstein, who names one of her children after Arthur. Beston’s contention
that White possesses disdain and repugnance for Arthur simply cannot be proven, nor can his claim that readers share White’s alleged distaste for Arthur.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Their House in the Suburbs

Although Waldo, Arthur and Mrs. Poulter are the central characters in the novel, the twins’ parents, George and Anne Brown, play significant roles and allow White to address important issues in suburban life, including immigration, religion and non-conformity. Superficially, Mr. and Mrs. Brown may seem like a typical suburban couple, since he commutes by train to his job at the bank and she is a housewife raising children in a modest detached home; however, White demonstrates that a great deal of complexity exists beneath outward appearances conforming with societal norms. Although the Browns are English, and thus more acceptable than immigrants from other nations, they are still perceived as being foreign, different and strange by the Australian-born residents of Sarsaparilla. Mrs. Brown is referred to as “vague” or “English” by other citizens of Sarsaparilla because she maintains her English manners and keeps to herself emotionally, “which was a Bad Thing in a new country” (25), especially one in which openness and informality are valued. When Mrs. Brown entertains visitors, she serves tea in elegant porcelain “which they had brought out with them from Home” (67). White’s capitalization of the word “home” functions on one level to emphasize the Browns’ retention of their English national identity, but also works on another as a realistic portrayal of the manner in which English immigrants referred to their homeland. 38

38 English immigrants to Australia and their descendants have traditionally referred to England as “Home,” even if they have never been there. The practice was common from the European settlement of Australia in 1788 until at least the 1950s, and is frequently reflected in Australian literature. Richard White notes that a number of critics observed the practice of calling England “Home” continuing in the 1950s (47). Although the media focuses on Asian immigration and asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East, distorting public perceptions of immigration, the English still comprise the largest percentage of immigrants to Australia each year. Patrick White was born just over a decade after Federation into a wealthy family of
George Brown also keeps to himself and does not engage in everyday practices common to Australian men, such as playing and watching sport, drinking and gambling. Instead, he spends the majority of his free time reading, and passes on his love of literature to his sons, to whom he reads Greek and Roman myths and recites Shakespeare (27, 70). Mr. Brown is rarely seen without a book; as a child, Waldo thinks that his father must be solely responsible for keeping the pocket editions in business (73). Throughout the novel, Mr. Brown is depicted reading a variety of texts, including Thus Spake Tharathustra, The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table, Religio Medici, Sesame and Lillies, Essays in the Study of Folk-Songs and The Brothers Karamazov (73, 76, 191).

While Waldo is a high school student, his father begins teaching himself Norwegian with the intention of reading Ibsen in his original language, and jokes that learning Norwegian will allow him to “translate his thoughts into a language which could not be read” (70, 264).

Significantly, Mr. Brown is never shown reading an Australian book. Indeed, all of his reading matter is European, indicating that he considers Europe his intellectual home. Mr. Brown’s reading habits and failure to engage in typical activities for an Australian adult male indicate that he is an immigrant who has made no effort to assimilate. Although he lives and works in Australia, Mr. Brown does not participate in Australian culture in any way. Essentially, he lives in the same manner that he would have if he had not left England. Mr. Brown’s retention of his English culture and habits are closely linked to the reasons for the Browns’ emigration to Australia. Unlike many immigrants, who leave their homelands to escape war and poverty, or, at the least, in

English descent: he once described himself as “an anachronism, something left over from that period when people were no longer English and not yet indigenous” (Qtd. in Ackland 401).
pursuit of greater economic opportunities, the Browns leave England to escape from Anne Brown’s family and their restrictive traditions and religious beliefs. Thus, the Browns primarily leave England to escape the Quantrells, not to escape English culture.

However, there is some evidence that the Browns perceive English culture as restrictive. After his retirement, Mr. Brown occasionally discusses his escape, which he credits to intellectual enlightenment, but recounting his physical and intellectual journey causes his mood to darken and his breathing to thicken, “clogged with the recurring suspicion that he might be chained still” (139). At one point, Mr. Brown tells Waldo and Arthur that they have been “‘reared in the light in an empty country’” in which there are no shadows or discipline, and a great deal of freedom, and as a result there is much they will never understand (153). In a brief discussion of their emigration, George and Anne Brown refer to it as an escape, and Anne calls her family “‘intolerable,’” “‘beastly’” and “‘warped by tradition,’” “‘Sitting in their pews … Sunday after Sunday. Keeping in with God and society. Then going home to sharpen their knives for the week’” (42). Mr. Brown declares that in Australia they are free and the children have opportunity (42). In the first years after settling in Sarsaparilla, the Browns enjoy a peaceful and pleasant life, spending evenings sitting on the front verandah as a family. When the southerly wind blows, bringing relief from the heat, Mr. Brown refers to it as “‘Just about the cheapest fulfillment of anybody’s expectations’”; such comments please Mrs. Brown, who had “married beneath her” partly because of her husband’s subtle wit (29).

Mr. and Mrs. Brown’s rejection of religion plays a large part in the manner in which they raise their sons, setting them apart from their community. Unlike Mrs. Poulter, who is a devout Christian, and Mr. Poulter, who is an apathetic unbeliever, the
Browns are actively atheistic, raising their sons as rationalists and demanding that they be excused from religious instruction at school. Mr. Brown teaches his sons that “everything ignorant people referred to as the supernatural” does not exist (40), and the twins are not taught to pray, being instructed instead that everything depends on their own will and that they can achieve their ambitions if they are determined and confident (71). Edgecombe argues that the Browns are rationalists because they are afraid of “risking their dignity” and “appearing vulnerable” (Vision 85). However, the Browns’ rationalism and rejection of religion is more likely caused by their association of religion with the hypocrisy and repressive traditions of the Quantrell family and the Baptist congregation George attended before rejecting Christianity.

In addition to being an immigrant who continues to dress in English styles, “which gave him away as a Pom” (35), Mr. Brown has a club foot that sets him apart and draws the attention of strangers, especially children (27). Waldo is ashamed of his father’s physical deformity, dislikes walking with him to the railway station, and resents riding the train with him to Barranugli, where his father works and he attends high school (28, 35, 69). At times Waldo would rather die than travel in his father’s company (70).

Despite Waldo’s negative feelings towards his father, Mr. Brown remains fond of Waldo and treats him justly (27). Mr. Brown insists on treating others with respect, as evidenced in a discussion between Waldo and his parents about buying his first razor, and a discussion regarding the Feinsteins. When Waldo claims that shaving will not cause him to grow a five-o’clock-shadow and declares, “I’m not a dago,” his father immediately corrects him and insists that such derogatory language is forbidden in their home (73-74). On another occasion, when Waldo declares, laughing, that the “Trouble with [the]
Feinsteins is they’re so damn Jewish. That’s usually the trouble with Jews,” his father rebukes him and states, “Mr. Feinstein’s a fine man” (118). To Waldo’s great surprise, his father is a respected member of the community. When Waldo first meets Mr. Feinstein, the cultured immigrant and successful businessman declares, “I have heard about your father. He is, they say, a fine man ... A man of independent ideas ... [possessing] The courage of his own convictions” (97).

George Brown’s job at the bank in Barranugli is the primary element of his characterization as a typical suburban husband and father. His job is portrayed as unsatisfactory and lacking opportunity for advancement. When Arthur is a child and asks his father if he will be promoted to the Head Office, Mr. Brown replies, “On their day of judgement” (46). Mr. Brown’s assessment of his career prospects is correct, and he works in the same position in the Barranugli branch until he retires. Upon his retirement, George Brown is presented with an engraved watch and “other considerations,” presumably a pension, but from Waldo’s perspective, his father seems haunted by indignity and spends most of his time in retirement simply sitting in a chair (151). When the twins are young, their mother occasionally takes them to visit their father while he is working in the bank, a solid, squat building with blistered brown paint. Waldo describes the building as solemn and cool inside, and is disappointed when their father puts a stop to their calls, since visiting the bank increases Waldo’s sense of importance (46). During their final outing to the bank, the twins see their father counting money in a “cage” (47). The sight of his father standing in a cage looking out at him leaves such an impression on Waldo that he remembers the event even more distinctly than the morning in 1922 when he finds his father dead (47-48, 114). White’s depiction of white-collar work as
imprisonment may be interpreted by some readers as an anti-suburban sentiment; however, it would be more accurate to read the scene as a criticism of capitalism and white-collar employment.

After George Brown dies, his wife becomes dependent upon her sons financially, and later, physically. The elderly Mrs. Brown and her adult sons live a quiet, simple life. She rarely leaves the house and spends most of her time reading catalogues and prospectuses (156). The Browns decide not to modernize and never obtain a telephone or have electricity connected to their house, preferring to spend their evenings reading by lamplight (155). As the years pass and Mrs. Brown’s health diminishes, she becomes an alcoholic confined to her room. Waldo reads *The Pickwick Papers* to his mother each night, even though she does not care for it (162). Anne Brown finally dies in 1932, ten years after her husband. Waldo continues to admire her Englishness and thinks of her as “carved out of stone, the true Gothick” (160).

The Browns’ suburban bungalow on Terminus Road in Sarsaparilla plays a significant role in *The Solid Mandala*, since Waldo and Arthur live in it for more than sixty years and much of the action of the novel takes place within its walls. In his autobiography, White reveals that he based the Browns’ house on Dogwoods, his house in Castle Hill, the suburb he fictionalized as Sarsaparilla (*Flaws* 153). While lodging with the Thompsons in Barranugli after their arrival from England, the Browns buy a vacant block of land on Terminus Road, named for its proximity to the railway station (215, 216). Mr. Brown visits Sarsaparilla looking for a suitable locale in which to raise his family and meets the storekeeper, Mr. Allwright, who claims the developing suburb is on the ascendancy, but will retain some quiet backwaters (215). Seeking privacy and a quiet
life, the Browns buy their land from Mr. Allwright, despite protests from Mrs. Brown, who thinks her husband’s commute to Barranugli will be too long (216).

Once the local builders begin constructing the Browns’ weatherboard home, the family travels to Sarsaparilla from Barranugli each Sunday to check on the builder’s progress (217). George Brown decides to express his difference from other suburbanites and his fondness for Greek civilization by having the builders construct a Greek pediment above the front verandah (30). However, the builders do not fully understand Mr. Brown’s vision, and are not able to properly execute his design, with the result that the finished house has the appearance “of a little, apologetic, not quite proportionate temple” (31). Later, once the family saves enough money, their house is painted brown and “accepted by the landscape,” since all the surrounding houses are brown, and the classical pediment becomes less noticeable (32).

When the house is new, it stands squarely, smells of timber, and is clearly visible from the street (31). However, as time passes, the house slowly decays and becomes camouflaged by trees and long grass. Herring argues that The Solid Mandala is “a chronicle of senescence and decay,” since three of the four family members die, the house slowly disintegrates, the quince trees “become wormy and woody,” and “the sea of grass encroaches more and more” (182). The physical decay of the Browns’ home, “a disintegrating wooden box,” is emphasized by the “irregular bricks” of the path from the gate to the verandah, the “fragile” front gate itself, which is falling to pieces, and the waves of grass, which is chest-high by novel’s end (167, 20, 21, 166, 111). Not only is the grass in the Browns’ front yard chest-high, over the years it becomes a kind of
rubbish dump, containing “shoes, crockery, sauce bottles, salmon tins, anything of an incidental or ephemeral nature” (196).

However, the changes over time to the house and the yard are not necessarily negative. In fact, they can be interpreted positively as part of the process of establishing a home. The sixty-plus years that Waldo and Arthur spend living in their house make them part of the suburban landscape and allow them to develop a deep sense of belonging that can only be acquired over time. Arthur feels possessed by Terminus Road, since that is where his life is lived. Although the brothers leave the house each day to go to their places of employment, “their actual life was the one which continued knotting itself behind the classical weatherboard facade” (276). Arthur feels that despite the “timber thin as paper, fretting iron, [and] sinking foundations,” the house will “continue to fulfill its purpose” and survive (285).

**Suburban Immigrants and Others: The Feinsteins and the Chinese**

In *The Solid Mandala*, the Browns are not the only immigrants residing in suburbia. White’s fairly small cast of characters includes the Feinsteins, a family of Jewish immigrants from Europe, and an unnamed Chinese family. The Feinsteins own two residences: a townhouse near Mr. Feinstein’s music store in the city, and a suburban villa on O’Halloran Road in Sarsaparilla (117). When Waldo meets Dulcie Feinstein, she explains that her family resides in their suburban home “‘on and off … When Daddy feels he wants a change of air’” (84). Waldo is unable to understand why anyone would choose to spend time in Sarsaparilla if they had other options, but Dulcie views the arrangement as quite normal (84). The Feinstein’s house, a white-and-green-painted villa
with shutters, is not as impressive as Mrs. Musto’s, “but neat and solid, a villa more suited to town, trimly finished” (93, 91).

Inside the Feinstein’s house, the piano is “the dominant object” (94), indicating their upper-middle-class status, which is also signaled by other accoutrements, such as a “walking-stick made from rhinoceros hide ... [a] signed photo of Sarah Bernhardt, a ship in a bottle, and ... [a] gold clock on the mantelpiece” (98). Like Waldo’s father, Mr. Feinstein no longer practices the religion of his youth, and refers to his prayer-cap as something people wore in the days when they were superstitious (102). Waldo perceives the Feinsteins to be remarkably foreign and pays particular attention to their accents. Mr. Feinstein possesses “a fairly strong Australian accent,” which Waldo interprets as an attempt to make up for his foreignness, while Mrs. Feinstein, “of doubtful syntax,” pronounces the letter R in a manner that “made you wonder,” and her use of tenses sometimes seem to “have been lifted out of a bad translation” (99, 97, 94). Waldo views the Feinsteins as so different that he “grew guilty for their own foreignness” (99). Herring describes the Feinstein scenes as “superb social comedy” (184). Indeed, much of the humor of the scenes is generated by Waldo’s reactions to the Feinsteins’ difference and the ways in which his interactions with the Feinsteins reveal his own ignorance, elitism and lack of cosmopolitanism.

The Feinsteins are not the only family of immigrants in the suburb apart from the Browns. An unnamed Chinese family live on a hill behind the Poulter’s house, where they run a market garden. The Chinese are first mentioned in the first few pages of The Solid Mandala, during the conversation between Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun, and make several brief appearances throughout the novel. Mrs. Poulter tells Mrs. Dun that she never
knew the Chinese woman, even though she lived behind the Poulters, and reports that according to local gossip, the Chinese family are people of means. According to Mrs. Poulter, the Chinese woman is not without refinement, "'But a Chinese is never the same'" (5). Mrs. Poulter’s racism, discussed earlier with reference to her television viewing, is highlighted by her emphasis of the Chinese’ difference and her suggestion that they are inferior to the white residents of Sarsaparilla.

On several occasions, Arthur sees the Chinese woman on the hillside standing beneath a flowering wheel-tree (257, 138, 281). During their first encounter, Arthur and the Chinese woman stand looking at each other for a few moments before she turns away and walks behind some poultry sheds. The narrator describes the Chinese woman as "so little connected with them [Arthur and Mrs. Poulter] or their other surroundings" (257). Herring argues that the Chinese woman standing beneath the flowering wheel tree is an "exquisite image" (187). However, White’s inclusion of the Chinese is remarkably vague. Readers never learn whether the Chinese family are actually immigrants or descendants of immigrants.39 The age of the Chinese woman is not revealed, nor is the size of her family. In fact, she is little more than a memorable image. White’s inclusion of the Chinese in Sarsaparilla and his representation of them as marginalized others serves to highlight the racism of Australian society. Simultaneously, the inclusion of the Chinese is a reminder that suburbia is not a homogenous white zone; rather, it is a locale in which a diverse array of people go about their daily lives in close proximity.

39 Chinese immigration to Australia began during the goldrush of the 1850s. In response, the Australian colonies introduced anti-Chinese immigration restriction acts (Collins 103). The White Australia Policy was implemented in 1901 and not repealed until 1972. As a result, Chinese immigration to Australia virtually ceased during the period the novel covers. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the Chinese residents of Sarsaparilla are native-born Australians, descendants of Chinese immigrants who came to Australia during the goldrush.
Portrayals of Sarsaparilla’s Infrastructure

In addition to using the lives of his characters and the Browns’ house to explore suburban life, White includes numerous physical descriptions of the suburb of Sarsaparilla in the novel. White’s depiction of his fictional outer-Sydney suburb cannot accurately be characterized as negative; rather, White provides a blend of celebratory, ambivalent and negative portrayals. Mrs. Poulter, one of White’s suburban saints, takes pride in “the glossier side” of Sarsaparilla, especially “the picture windows and the textured brick” (5), however, she feels that the suburb does not possess as much community spirit as the rural area where she previously lived (153). White includes a number of positive references to Sarsaparilla’s ongoing suburban development and the addition of new infrastructure. The new houses built after the Second World War on O’Halloran Road, where the Feinsteins live, are depicted as “flaunting” signs of life (125). Although Terminus Road is unpaved and the surface neglected, it intersects with a paved road, which Waldo views as a positive attribute (23). When Waldo and Arthur take their walk along the main street of Sarsaparilla, they are fascinated and overwhelmed by their intimate knowledge of their suburb, which they know so well that they could dismantle their surroundings “brick by brick, tile by tile” and know how to put the pieces back together (48). Woolworth’s grocery store, one of the primary landmarks of the suburb and a hub of commercial activity, is presented on several occasions as the object of Arthur’s love (48).

Waldo views the shops, houses and streets of his suburb as proof of humans’ rationality, which he prizes above all else (52). Waldo enjoys looking into the houses of Sarsaparilla, although not too closely, for occasionally his observations revealed
"displays of perversity to damage temporarily his faith in reason" (52). Waldo prefers to view the houses from a detached distance that allows him to view them as "labeled boxes" containing furniture, rather than passions (52). Such passages simultaneously reveal the vitality and variety of life in suburbia, and Waldo’s inability to deal with other humans on an emotional level. Waldo is interested in the history of Sarsaparilla, especially the remnants of early settlement, such as the Allwright’s store, the market gardens, and the few colonial houses of the rich; however, he is “particularly sensitive” to people he perceives as “failures who had been dumped in the long grass” of Sarsaparilla (76-77), probably because he is conscious of his own failures.

Waldo frequently projects his self-loathing, elitism and disdain for people whom he perceives as inferior to himself onto the suburban infrastructure. During the “Waldo” section, Sarsaparilla is described as having “ramparts” that are “erected laboriously brick by brick, to withstand some hostile thing, by those who had not yet died: the infallible ones with professions and offspring” (112). Waldo is clearly jealous of other peoples’ professions and children, and decides that it is pathetic to even think about them (112). The road to Barranugli is depicted as “a replica of itself at many other points,” such that Waldo often forgets which sections he has already passed (54). The narrator posits that if Waldo “had not been a superior man, of intellectual tastes, it might have become intolerable, or perhaps had, because of that” (54). Clearly, it is Waldo’s prejudices that cause his negative reactions to suburbia, rather than any inherent characteristics of suburbia.

On one occasion, Waldo expresses dissatisfaction about the distance between Sarsaparilla and the library where he works in Sydney’s city centre. He claims it is too far
to travel and that the lengthy commute causes him to return home exhausted (119).

Waldo comes to think of Terminus Road as too far from “everywhere,” and occasionally bitterly resents Sarsaparilla’s perceived isolation and considers renting a room in the city, where he hopes “his thoughts might take infinite shape instead of remaining the blurred mess he could never sort out” (119). Here Waldo mistakenly places the blame for his lack of creative output on his physical location, failing to realize that the problem lies within and that moving into the city will not necessarily help his writing. However, Waldo also considers the possibility that living in suburbia “allowed his thoughts their flowing line,” and moving into the city might “tighten” and extinguish them (119-120). Nevertheless, his focus on the importance of the location in which one tries to create is misguided. Moreover, Waldo does not attempt to rent a room in the city and chooses to remain in Sarsaparilla until his death.

**Conclusion: The Solid Mandala is Not an Anti-Suburban Novel**

The novel contains little material that could be construed as anti-suburban: such readings of the novel rely on highlighting White’s portrayal of Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter and interpreting them as both satirical and representative of White’s own attitudes. Arguably, the most blatant example of an anti-suburban sentiment is the following line from the opening “In the Bus” section: “In High Street the overstuffed bus began to spew out its coloured gobbetts” (12). The description of citizens of suburbia as “coloured gobbetts” (chunks of raw meat) that are spewed out is an incontrovertibly and overwhelmingly negative depiction. However, it should be noted that it is people who are described as “gobbetts,” thus the description targets suburbanites, rather than suburbia. Moreover, the line is by far the most negative in the entire novel and does not necessarily
represent White's own views. The multitude of celebratory and ambivalent depictions of suburbia in the novel far outweigh the impact of the "gobbetts" line.

Although critics such as Beston and Herring repeatedly attempt to discern White's intent, claiming that White hates and mocks his characters and that the novel "is tainted with a distaste for human beings" (Beston 106; Herring 103; Beston 113), Alan Lawson recognizes that White's narrative technique makes such assertions impossible to prove and requires critics to tread very carefully. Lawson argues that White creates characters in whom his viewpoint "is only apparently invested"; this technique "leaves readers uneasy and uncertain" ("Meaning" 287). Lawson goes on to argue that rather than limiting interpretation, White's "cryptic, enigmatic, ironic, and satiric elements" require "interpretative pluralism" ("Meaning" 287). As a result, White's work "frequently evokes ... radically contradictory interpretations" and the body of criticism on White's work contains many "utterly opposite, mutually exclusive thematic readings" (Lawson, "Meaning" 291).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter and in the previous chapter, the majority of critics who have written about White have labeled the author and his novels *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* anti-suburban. My analysis of both novels and the essay "The Prodigal Son" reveals that White's work is not anti-suburban; in fact, it contains a nuanced, complex, sometimes celebratory and often ambivalent representation of suburbia. Hopefully, future analysis of White's suburban novels will acknowledge White's complex and detailed engagement with suburbia and the many important social issues that he addresses through his use of the suburban setting. The next chapter analyzes three canonical novels set in suburbia, which, unlike White's novels, are
unquestionably anti-suburban and serve to establish and then perpetuate the anti-suburban
tradition in Australian literature.
CHAPTER FOUR

ESTABLISHING AND PERPETUATING THE ANTI-SUBURBAN TRADITION IN
THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL: GEORGE JOHNSTON’S MY BROTHER JACK
(1964), DAVID MALOUF’S JOHNNO (1975) AND TIM WINTON’S
CLOUDSTREET (1991)

In the previous two chapters, I argued that Patrick White’s Riders in the Chariot
and The Solid Mandala have erroneously been labeled anti-suburban novels. In this
chapter, I contend that George Johnston’s My Brother Jack (published in 1964, in the
time between White’s aforementioned novels) is actually the first canonical indisputably
anti-suburban Australian novel, and that subsequent canonical novels, namely David
Malouf’s Johnno (1975) and Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet (1991), are also thoroughly anti-
suburban. Moreover, as a group of highly influential novels published sequentially over a
period of almost thirty years, My Brother Jack, Johnno and Cloudstreet illustrate the
trajectory of the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction, which is established by
Johnston and subsequently perpetuated by Malouf and Winton.

George Johnston was born in 1912 in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern, the same
year White was born in London. Although both men wrote canonical novels, their lives
and reputations were markedly different. White was born into upper-class privilege,
received an exclusive private education, and earned worldwide literary acclaim, while
Johnston was born into a working-class family, attended public schools, entered the

40 Portions of this chapter appeared in a different forms in two other works of mine: (1) “Rejecting and
Perpetuating the Anti-Suburban Tradition: Representations of the Suburbs in The Tax Inspector, Johnno
and Cloudstreet,” Antipodes 20.1 (June 2006): 20-25; and (2) “Expatriation as Escape from the Cultural
Desert in David Malouf’s Johnno and A. L. McCann’s Subtopia,” presented at the Annual Convention of
workforce at fourteen, and failed to establish a literary reputation anywhere near that of White’s. In fact, Johnston is now largely remembered for just one canonical novel, *My Brother Jack*. Johnston’s family moved from Bendigo, in central Victoria, to the Melbourne suburb Elsternwick, where Johnston was raised, just before World War One. During the 1920s, while still a teenager, Johnston began working as a journalist for *The Argus* newspaper in Melbourne. In 1938, Johnston married Elsie Taylor, his first wife, and settled with her in the new suburb of Glen Iris (J. Kinnane 170).41

During the Second World War, Johnston served as a war correspondent and published books during and after the war based on his experiences in New Guinea, China, Burma and Italy. In 1951, he moved to London to work as the European correspondent for Sydney’s *Sun* newspaper, accompanied by his second wife, the writer Charmian Clift. Johnston gave up journalism in 1954 and settled on the Greek island Hydra with Clift to pursue his fiction career.42 Johnston returned to Australia a decade later, following the success of *My Brother Jack*, which won the Miles Franklin Award in 1964, and lived in Sydney until his early death in 1970, a consequence of contracting tuberculosis in Greece. *My Brother Jack* became the first volume of a trilogy: the second installment, *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), also won the Miles Franklin Award, in 1969; Johnston died before completing the final volume, *A Cartload of Clay* (1971). In 1970, two months before his death, Johnson was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his services to literature.43

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41 Glen Iris is approximately nine kilometers east-northeast from Elsternwick, where Johnston grew up.  
42 Johnston wrote *My Brother Jack* while living with Clift and their three children on Hydra (G. Kinnane, “The Reconstruction” 439).  
43 Much of the biographical and publication information in this and the previous paragraph is drawn from the entry for George Johnston in the AustLit database: http://www.austlit.edu.au.
Numerous critics have described *My Brother Jack* as canonical, and the novel has sold in large numbers.\(^4^4\) In 2002, Josephine Jill Kinnane noted that *My Brother Jack* had not been out of print since its initial publication almost four decades earlier (177). The canonical status of *My Brother Jack* and its continuing appeal was also demonstrated by a new television adaptation in 2001. In 2003, *My Brother Jack* was voted number ten on the Australian Society of Authors Top Forty Books list, ahead of White’s *Riders in the Chariot* (“Top Forty Australian Books”). Despite its canonical status, impressive sales numbers and ongoing popularity, *My Brother Jack* has received little critical attention, especially when compared to White’s work.\(^4^5\) Many of Johnston’s eighteen novels, such as *Death Takes Small Bites* (1948), *The Cyprian Woman* (1955) and *The Saracen Shadow* (1957), are classified as crime and detective novels; some were published under the pseudonym Martin Shane; and most are set outside Australia, in locations such as India, China, Tibet, Greece, France and England: all of these factors may explain the relatively small body of criticism devoted to Johnston’s novels.

In 1974, the critic Geoffrey Thurley claimed Johnston was the victim of “academic disdain” in Australia and argued that Australian academics were “as contemptuous of Johnston … [as they were] proud of the more intellectually impressive White” (62). More that two decades later, writing in 1998, Rutherford states that she lacks sympathy for *My Brother Jack* and seeks to understand why “such an ostentatiously

\(^4^4\) In 1984, Chester Arthur Eagle described *My Brother Jack* as “one of the best known and most widely accepted portrayals of Australian life,” noting that it had sold 284,000 copies by 1981 (35). Eagle predicted that the regular inclusion of *My Brother Jack* on reading lists for English and Australian Studies courses would ensure the novel’s continued influence (35). In 1985, Laurie Hergenhan declared that *My Brother Jack* was currently the most popular Australian novel (Brotherson 7). Four years later, Dorothy Jones pronounced, “*My Brother Jack* has attained canonical status” (72), and in 1990, Brian Matthews claimed the novel “thoroughly and securely warrants its status as a contemporary Australian classic” (xv).

\(^4^5\) The body of criticism on *My Brother Jack* consists of less than a dozen journal articles, book chapters and encyclopedia entries.
masochistic novel should be given the privileged status it has received in Australia” (125). Thurley takes up Johnston’s case and argues that with *My Brother Jack* he “takes his place confidently within the great classical tradition of the novel that leads back through *The Great Gatsby* and *Great Expectations* to *Don Quixote*” (62). Thurley repeatedly claims that Johnston is a better novelist than Patrick White (64, 65, 67) and declares Johnston is “the pick of the mid-century Australian novelists” (71). Moreover, Thurley argues that *My Brother Jack* is “among the better novels written in English since the death of D.H. Lawrence” (76). However, despite Thurley’s lofty claims, only a handful of scholars have produced work on *My Brother Jack* in the forty-plus years since the publication of the novel.

*My Brother Jack: Establishing the Anti-Suburban Tradition in Australian Fiction*

*My Brother Jack*, Johnston’s fifteenth novel, is an autobiographical novel and a Bildungsroman (Scheckter 115, 119). Moreover, it is a canonical example of “typically anti-suburban writing” (McCann, “Decomposing” 59). Beginning on the first page of the novel, Johnston presents an overwhelmingly negative depiction of suburbia, which he sustains throughout the entire text. The novel traces the development of the first-person narrator David Meredith from his working-class childhood in Elsternwick through his adolescence, entry into the workforce, first marriage, relocation to a newly developed suburb, ascent of the career ladder, and overseas exploits as a war correspondent, ending with the narrator in his early thirties courting the woman who later becomes his second wife.

Johnston begins the novel by declaring, “a person doesn’t begin to exist without parents and an environment and legendary tales told about ancestors” (1). On the first
page of the novel, Johnston establishes the suburban setting (and his negative attitude towards it) through a description of his childhood home in Elsternwick, which his narrator and alter-ego, David Meredith, describes as an "undistinguished" weatherboard house with "a corrugated iron roof" located "behind a wire fence, privet hedge, [and] small square lawn of buffalo grass," with "the name Avalon in gilt letters on a blackwood panel in a flat and dreary suburb far away in Melbourne, Australia" (1). Although the phrase "far away" refers to the spatial and temporal distance between Johnston's childhood home and the present time and location from which he writes the novel (the Greek island Hydra, in the early 1960s), it also serves to situate Elsternwick as remote and marginal.

Lee Brotherson argues that Johnston's decision to describe the Meredith home on the first page of the novel and to emphasize its suburban setting accords "a primordial status" to place "in the presentation of character" (2). Thus, for Johnston, setting and character are inextricably intertwined, and David and the rest of the Meredith family are products of suburbia. Robin Gerster claims that Johnston's decision to rename his childhood home "Avalon" in the novel serves to highlight the "comic pretentiousness" of suburban house-naming practices and argues that the romantic allusion to the mythical British isle highlights David's frustration with his status as "a cultural outsider who craves escape from the 'shabby suburban squalor' into which he was born" (566). Furthermore, Gerster argues that the "appearance of 'Avalon' on the first page of the

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46 Elsternwick is approximately ten kilometers south-southeast of Melbourne's central business district. Traveling to Elsternwick from the CBD, one passes through five or six suburbs, depending on the mode of transport. Whereas Elsternwick was a working-class and relatively outer suburb in Johnston's youth, the proliferation and spread of Melbourne's suburbs in the past seventy years and the gentrification of older suburbs in recent decades have led to Elsternwick now being considered an upper-middle-class inner suburb. Houses similar to Johnston's childhood home sell for between A$675,000 and A$2,000,000 (price search conducted on property.com.au, Jan. 8, 2008).
novel alerts its readers to the central theme of suburban Australia as a land of the living dead” (566). Indeed, both actual death and “living death” are omnipresent in the Meredith’s *Avalon* because of the First World War.

David’s parents both serve overseas during the First World War; his mother as a nurse in France and his father as a sapper, first in Gallipoli and later in Europe (2). After David’s parents return home from the war in 1919, his mother works in the operating theatre of a military hospital, and his father as a tram mechanic (2-3). Due to his parents’ absence during the war, and his mother’s decision to care for disabled veterans in their home for many years afterwards, “every corner” of the Meredith’s “little suburban house” is “impregnated … with the very essence of some gigantic and somber experience that had taken place thousands of miles away” (11). David describes the war and its legacy as moving in “behind the privet hedge to occupy every room and every cranny of our mundane little house” (12). The deaths inside the house of David’s grandmother and a number of older relatives, combined with the presence of amputees who will never again experience life fully, lend the house a constant aura of decay, sorrow and stymied vitality.

In an attempt to imbue his family with importance and a legacy stretching back to the European settlement of the Australian continent, David emphasizes the exploits of a number of ancestors, several of whom were allegedly involved in some of the most iconic events in Australian history. David improbably writes of a Scottish ancestor “in the naval landing party which first hoisted the British flag over the new settlement at Botany Bay in 1788” (18). He claims that his paternal grandfather, a Highland Scot, “made quite a name for himself” after traveling to Australia “as second mate on a smart Liverpool
clipper” which he abandoned in order to join the goldrush (18-19). According to David, his grandfather “later became an officer of the Mounted Constabulary in the man-hunt after Ned Kelly and his gang, and later still prospered enough to own a goldmine and two newspapers” (19). In addition to providing David’s family with a somewhat glorious past, the exploits of his ancestors serve to establish a link between the family’s suburban present and the colonial past, connecting them to what David sees as a more exciting and important era, and providing the Merediths with bona fides as true-blue Australians. As Maryanne Dever points out, David’s relationship with his homeland “is marked by a deep, on-going division … between his overt disaffection for the world of suburban Australia and his … admiration of the subtler significances of his heritage” (“Artist” 19).

As David progresses through childhood towards adolescence, his awareness of suburbia and his dissatisfaction with it increases. He writes of becoming increasingly “aware of an overpowering exterior world that existed beyond the house” (29). David describes the suburban world of his childhood in the 1920s as one that “spread forever, flat and diffuse, monotonous yet inimical, pieced together in a dull geometry of dull houses behind silver-painted fences of wire or splintery palings or picket fences and hedges” (29). David notes that the “sad, tidy habitations” of suburbia all “had names like Sans Souci and The Gables and Emoh Ruo [“our home” spelt backwards]… and The Rest and Nirvana and, of course, other Avalons beside ours … All the way through to the city proper there was nothing to break the drab flatness of this unadventurous repetition” (29). Rather than contemplating the complexities of the vast numbers of lives lived in suburbia and all the dreams, joys and achievements of his fellow suburbanites, David focuses solely on the physical features of suburbia, especially the flatness and the repetition. He
states that upon returning to visit "A lifetime later ... the horrible flatness of it all was just as real as ever, but far more depressing" (29). The negative depiction of suburbia presented here by Johnston is created primarily through David’s judgmental use of language, especially "monotonous," "dull," "sad," "nothing," "drab," "unadventurous" and "horrible" (29). The physical environment is itself neutral; it is David’s interpretation of it that is biased.

Due to what he perceives as the dullness and predictably of suburbia, David states that he and his older brother Jack are only "very occasionally" able to “experience a true adventure” (30). Apart from a freak cyclone that he and Jack are caught up in at the waterfront (30), the only excitement David describes as part of his suburban life is the presence of “feuding gangs of young hooligans” with as many as eighty members each that roam throughout the suburbs and fight with sticks, stones and razors (33-34). David declares that the most terrifying thing about the suburbs is not the gangs, but that the suburbs and their inhabitants “accepted their mediocrity” (35). In a passage reminiscent of Louis Esson, David argues that the suburbs are “worse than slums ... [because] They betrayed nothing of anger or revolt or resentment; they lacked the grim adventure of true poverty; they had no suffering, because they had mortgaged this right simply to secure a sad acceptance of a suburban respectability that ranked them socially a step or two higher than the true, dangerous slums of Fitzroy or Collingwood” (35). However, David’s assertion that the suburbs lack suffering is greatly contradicted by his own experiences, especially of the domestic violence perpetrated by his father, calling into question his self-awareness and reliability as a narrator.
Johnston’s inclusion of domestic violence in *My Brother Jack* is one of the earliest examples of authorial engagement with the issue in suburban fiction. David claims that his father’s “failure to have made anything of his life ... made him morose, intolerant, bitter and violently-tempered” (37). Jack Meredith Senior’s “displeasure and resentment” are mostly taken out on his wife (37). Johnston’s narrator depicts verbal and physical fights between his parents as an almost nightly occurrence, claiming, “I can hardly recall a night when I was not wakened in panic by the stormy violence of my parents’ quarrels. Often Mother would run from the house in the dead of night, swearing never to return” (37). David focuses in detail on “one specially terrible occasion” when he and Jack are “awakened in the sleep-out by the sound of Mother, who was outside in the rain and darkness, whimpering like an animal as she tried to crawl into hiding” (37). In response to the domestic violence occurring within his home, David develops a habit of hiding in a sea chest, where he tries to work out ways of murdering his father “without being found out or getting Mother into trouble,” since he is terrified that his mother will run away and leave her children “unprotected against his [father’s] ragings and injustices” (39, 40).

However, the domestic violence does not remain confined to the husband-wife relationship. Mr. Meredith begins inflicting violence upon his sons and institutes a system of monthly punishments. Although Jack and David are routinely punished with “a cuffing around the ears or a slash with a stick or a strap” if caught breaking any household rules (42), their father decides to also punish his sons once a month by thrashing them “for the offences which escaped his attention,” since he reasoned that the boys must be lying and

47 As we have seen, the issue was tackled five years previously by White in *Riders in the Chariot*, and also appears in later works of suburban fiction, including Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector*, and Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs.*
getting away with some offences (42). David declares that the monthly beatings “went on for several years” and speculates that they must have caused him a great deal of psychological damage (42). As Jack matures physically and becomes a prize-winning boxer, he confronts his father and tells him that he will not accept any more beatings; however, David’s beatings continue “more ferociously than ever” and only cease because his father eventually beats him so severely that he is knocked unconscious and has to be treated by a doctor, who threatens to report Mr. Meredith to the police (47).

Although *My Brother Jack* is an autobiographical novel and conforms closely to the facts of Johnston’s life, the domestic violence in the novel seems to be entirely fictional. Garry Kinnane, Johnston’s biographer, states that Johnston “appalled the whole family by the way in which he represented his father … The most disturbing thing about this brutal portrait is its fabrication” (“The Reconstruction” 436). According to Brian Matthews, Johnston’s siblings Jack and Marjorie insist their father was not physically violent and did not institute any system of regular punishment (“Notes” 368). Matthews speculates that Johnston created Mr. Meredith’s tyranny “in order to provide an element of conflict” and “a harsh environment in which to gain sympathy for young Davy” (“Notes” 368). In addition to providing conflict and eliciting sympathy for the protagonist, Johnston’s characterization of Mr. Meredith presents him “as an embodiment of all the ills which suburban male is heir to” (Eagle 38-39), adding another dimension to the anti-suburban stance of the novel. Johnston conflates the ugly behavior of Mr. Meredith with the ugliness of suburbia in an attempt to draw a grotesque portrait of the suburban male.
David’s anti-suburban attitudes are strengthened once he enters the workforce and spends more time in the city. Like his brother Jack before him, David leaves school at fourteen to take up an apprenticeship. Whereas Jack is apprenticed to a suburban plumber, David’s parents recognize his artistic sensibilities and apprentice him to a lithographic firm in the city, a position that requires him to take art classes in the evening at the National Gallery (49, 48, 20). Like millions of other suburbanites around the world, David commutes to work by train. In order to qualify for a cheaper ticket and save more of his wages, David takes an early train to work that arrives in the city an hour before his workday begins, and uses his extra hour to explore the city. He gravitates to the wharves on the Yarra river, where “for the first time” in his life, he becomes “aware of the existence of true beauty, of an opalescent world of infinite promise that had nothing whatever to do with the shabby suburbs” (70). David’s wanderings in the city and fascination with the shipping industry indicate the genesis of his romanticization of travel. In keeping with the anti-suburban intellectual tradition, Johnston presents urban space as the location of beauty and vitality, qualities that do not exist in suburbia according to those who subscribe to anti-suburban prejudices. However, beauty is clearly in the eye of the beholder in David’s case, since many residents of suburbia in the 1920s would have viewed Melbourne’s wharves as dirty, ugly and dangerous, especially when compared to their carefully manicured suburban lawns and rosebushes.

Although Jack does not express the anti-suburban attitudes frequently voiced by David, he too sees the city as the location for adventure, excitement and possibility. Jack spends almost every night “prowling the city like a tomcat” in search of sexual conquests (54). David claims that the city “was fiercely generating a life of its own” and declares
“The Jazz Age had reached its crescendo: the wail and boop of saxophones ... and the mad jumping of the Charleston had even begun to invade the hitherto inviolate stuffiness of our suburbs. Beyond our neat hedged perimeters, the world suddenly seemed transformed into a jungle of iniquities, of violence, sex, flaunted revolt, alarming uncertainties” (54). In addition to hearing tales of Jack’s nocturnal urban exploits, David encounters inner-city bohemians and artists through his art classes and “begins to move out of the suburban culture of his childhood” (Rutherford 110).

David’s entrance into the workforce, discovery of the shipping world, and encounters with cosmopolitan and bohemian youth at his art classes converge to set him on a path towards becoming a writer. David’s desire to write springs from his passion for reading, a pastime his father vehemently disapproves of in stereotypical hyper-masculine working-class style: “‘You and your blasted books!’ he would snarl. ‘All you’re doing, my lad, is muddling your mind and ruining your eyesight. Why the devil don’t you get out and do something’” (56). Likewise, Jack, the prototypical Aussie male, disapproves of David’s three male friends, who are all bookish and far from athletic, fearing that their companionship will turn David into a homosexual (56-57). Andy Medhurst argues that homophobia is a central suburban value, and claims, “sexual dissidents ... are the most vigorously policed victims of the suburban cult of conformity. Of all the hegemonies of suburbia, it is the hegemony of heterosexuality that cuts deepest, bites hardest” (266). Jack’s fears are unfounded, as David is heterosexual and claims that at the time he did not even know the meaning of the word “homosexual” (57).

Lacking formal education in literature, David and his friends compete with each other to “discover” important authors, such as Ibsen, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Balzac, Flaubert,
Gibbon and Defoe (57). Despite the fact that they understand little of their reading, David and his friends are excited by their encounters with the literary world and soon “a secret desire” forms in David’s mind: “I wanted to write. It began with poems, but they were very strange poems to emerge out of the Melbourne suburbs, because I had read *Heimskringla* and become obsessed by the Viking sagas” (57). Like Waldo in White’s *The Solid Mandala*, David understands that reading and writing literature are activities treated with suspicion in Australian culture. Just as Waldo hides his writing in his mother’s dress-box, David keeps his notebooks hidden in his mattress, “in case Jack should find them,” even though he describes his own poetry as “worthless” (57-58).

David soon becomes a published writer and embarks on a successful career, although as a journalist, rather than a writer of fiction or poetry. While still a teenager, David writes an article about the shipping industry and sends it under the pseudonym “Stunsail” to the *Morning Post* newspaper, where it is accepted and published; his reaction is to be “torn between a lofty exultation and a blushing shame” (74). David secretly cashes his payment check (the equivalent of seven weeks’ pay), tells nobody about his publication, and spends his small fortune on used books (74).

David realizes that the countless hours reading in his bedroom, the notebook full of poems hidden inside his mattress, and his rejection of Jack’s attempts to turn him into a “normal” adolescent have all converged “into the semblance of a path that would lead somewhere” (75). He states, “I was fifteen. And I was a writer. Lonely and secretive, and desperately anonymous, but still a writer” (75). The *Morning Post* accepts every piece

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Like the characters in Malouf’s *Johnno*, David and his friends only read works by European authors. As Brian Matthews notes, David “belongs more to a European version of the world” (x). The exclusion of Australian authors from the characters’ reading lists suggests anti-suburbanism, since the practice privileges the foreign and implies that nothing produced locally is worth reading.
David submits, and he quickly establishes the reputation on which he later builds his successful career in journalism (81). However, the conflict between David and his father over his reading and writing soon reaches a climax. David receives a gift of five pounds from his mother and grandmother for his sixteenth birthday, which he is expected to spend on oil paints (87). However, in a shop window next to the art supplies store he sees a secondhand typewriter on sale and instinctively buys it (87). When David arrives home with the typewriter, his father is outraged, forbids him from bringing it into the house, and demands that he either return without the typewriter or not come home at all (89, 91, 92). David chooses the typewriter and all it represents over his family home. Thus, for the first time in the novel, David physically rejects suburbia.

Not knowing where else to go, David makes his way to the city studio of his artist friend Sam Burlington, whom he knows from art class, and Sam takes him in (92-94). At Sam’s, David is exposed to a bohemian urban subculture that is presented as infinitely more exciting than suburbia. David begins his stay with Sam early in the autumn of 1928 and remains away from his family’s home until winter settles in (96). Although David usually sleeps on Sam’s sofa, Sam requires him to leave whenever he throws a party or wants to entertain a girl; on such occasions, David sleeps on a bench in Fitzroy Gardens (108). Despite his initial excitement at being exposed to urban bohemian culture, David soon tires of “the discomfort and inconvenience” and becomes increasingly homesick (108). In a ploy designed to facilitate his return home, David suggests that Jack pursue his dream of working in the bush and declares that it is his turn to protect their mother from their father (115). He helps Jack find a job in the bush, but admits that “the whole thing had been done on a kind of false basis … I could no longer face a continuance of
discomfort and inconvenience and cold and loneliness” (116). Thus, David returns to *Avalon* and finds comfort and security in the suburbia he has so long despised.

However, rather than settling into a quiet life of reading and writing in suburbia, David’s world is soon shaken by a series of events involving his urban bohemian friends, a murder in suburbia, and the expatriation of an artist. Jessica Wray, Sam’s girlfriend, is found murdered “in a desolate area of suburban parkland” (124). Sam is accused of the murder and the case becomes a media sensation. David learns of the murder and the accusation of Sam while reading the newspaper at a tram stop. Soon after, he boards a train into the city; during the journey his shock and dismay are conflated with his hatred of suburbia:

I began to feel the thing turning in and beginning to invade me. An infinite distress possessed me. The carriage rocked and clattered through the flat suburbs; the shouting of the porters was echoed by the wheels and the name of every station seemed to clang from the steel rails along which we were rushing headlong into horror ... Elsternwick, Ripponlea, Balaclava, Windsor, Prahran, South Yarra ... I was in a second-class smoking compartment. Women never rode in smokers in those days, and at each station more men would get in, and they were all discussing the murder, some of them with gravity, but mostly with coarse jokes and comments, and with lechery ... The train clattered on through the grimy deserts of suburban rectitude. (123)

In addition to David’s attitudes towards suburbia being influenced by his distress over the murder, he is also disgusted by the coarse comments of the suburban male commuters, many of whom lecherously comment that they would have liked to have had sex with
Jessica and suggest that she was “asking for it” by posing nude for portraits and being sexually active. David views the comments of the suburban commuters as further evidence of the narrow-mindedness, philistinism and conformity of suburbia, especially as the commuters express disapproval of the bohemian lifestyle, which is set up in binary opposition to the suburban lifestyle.

Jessica’s killer soon strikes again, and Sam is subsequently exonerated (141); however, the public scandal fanned by the media damages his reputation and spirits so severely that he feels compelled to leave Australia (142). Not only does Sam never return to Australia, he ceases painting and spends his life growing rosebushes in the south of France (142-43). As Eagle states, Sam “carries his suburban stigmata to the end of his days” (39). Garry Kinnane argues that suburban “prejudice against ... bohemianism” forces Burlington to expatriate himself, and claims that David perceives “the disease” of philistinism to be “widespread, infecting the whole culture,” noting that the theme “emerges frequently throughout the trilogy, especially as a factor in [David] Meredith’s expatriation” (“The Reconstruction” 437-38). Eagle posits that the murder of Jessica Wray and Sam’s expatriation occupy a “dominant position in the novel” because the episode depicts “an artist destroyed by suburban values and falsehoods” (39). It seems unlikely that such a scandal experienced during youth could crush the creativity and bohemianism of an artist so totally; Johnston exaggerates both the supposed philistinism of suburbia and the affect of the scandal on the artist in order to provide more evidence for his indictment of suburbia and his justification for expatriation.

Jessica’s murder and Sam’s expatriation are followed by the arrival of the Great Depression, which David depicts as “the insidious creeping movement of dark, strong,
unpredictable forces ... It was out in the suburbs mostly that one gradually came to see it” (152). David describes unemployed citizens who seek government assistance as “shabby figures shambling along the suburban streets, carrying a loaf of bread and ... their meager handout from the Sustenance Depot” (153). In Elsternwick, the unemployed are a constant “unnerving” presence of “pathetic and yet somehow oddly sinister figures” who knock on the door and ask “for an hour’s work to cut the hedge or to mow the lawn or to stack firewood or even to run errands ... or sometimes more bluntly just to ask for a handout of food or money” (154). David’s father demands that David paint a sign stating, “BEGGARS, HAWKERS, AND CANVASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED” and attach it to the front gate; similar signs are soon seen “on gates all over the suburbs” (154). David’s description of the victims of the depression and of the attempts of the more fortunate to keep the unemployed away presents suburbia as an inhospitable, unsympathetic environment.

During the Depression, Jack, the “honest Aussie battler at times inflated to impossibly heroic proportions” (G. Kinnane, “The Reconstruction” 438), struggles to find consistent employment and lives with Sheila, his future wife, in the suburb of Windsor. Describing a visit to Jack and Sheila’s house, David claims that they live on “an even sadder street” than the one he and Jack grew up on (160). For David, the physical manifestations of sadness are “facing rows of identical little duplexes, sitting behind picket fences and small desiccated garden plots filled with geraniums ... All the houses had door-knobs that were brightly polished, and coloured glass leadlights, and names on their gates” (160). Interestingly, the very physical features of the suburb and the houses that David interprets negatively are now highlighted as selling points by real estate agents
who sell homes in Melbourne’s formerly-working-class suburbs for small fortunes to affluent professionals.

As the Depression worsens and the employees at the lithographic studio are forced to take alternating two week periods off work without pay, David tells his boss that he can support himself by writing and asks the firm to release him from his apprenticeship (159). The firm and David’s parents agree, and soon he is working full-time for the Morning Post, publishing under his own name (160). While Jack struggles to find work, David prospers financially and pays for his parents to redecorate their house, “which was looking pretty down-at-heel because nothing much had been done to it since the end of the war” (171). While helping with the renovations and hammering up new paneling in the hallway, David realizes that his motivations are not altruistic. Rather than generously sharing his money with his family, he is “trying to hammer out the past, trying to seal it off forever behind a skin of polished veneer” (171). As he hammers, he attempts to batter away “at childhood and boyhood and youth, desperately driving nail after nail after nail through the treacherous emotions of a tiny suburban history” (171-72). David views the home improvements as marking a major turning point in his life, and declares that even though he still lives at home, the renovations and Jack’s return have combined to dislodge him from Avalon (174).

David’s burial of his suburban childhood under layers of paneling is soon followed by the beginning of his relationship with Helen Midgely, who becomes his first wife. David presents the genesis of their relationship in the context of resistance to the Depression, stating that the Depression had caused an “enormous ‘escape’ thing … a yearning desire among people to be distracted from the miseries and fears of the times,”
one of the manifestations of which is “a fantastic flourishing all through the suburbs of
the threepenny lending-libraries ... Along the main street in our suburb there must have been at least a score of these libraries at that time” (175-76). David visits one of the libraries and discovers that the employee on duty is Helen, a young woman he once met at a birthday party who tremendously impressed him (176, 84-86). David writes of “being startled at the improbability of her smartness and her obvious self-confidence in that rather dreary suburban setting,” claiming that he “was too naïve then to realize that the great suburban artifice is to be smart on nothing” (178). David soon calls regularly on Helen at the library and stays after closing time, first to talk, but soon to have sex (181, 183-84). The couple maintains a sexual relationship for almost four years before Helen decides they should marry (186, 192, 210).

Since he plans to marry Helen, David decides that his mother’s sixtieth birthday party would be a good time to introduce Helen to his family (210). However, Helen finds the Merediths’ working-class manners too rough for her liking and is uncomfortable with the presence of David’s nieces and nephews, one of whom smears jelly on her expensive skirt (213-221). When the conversation shifts to politics and the Spanish Civil War, Helen and Jack get into an intense argument, which prompts Jack and David to go into the backyard to talk and urinate (222-226). The Merediths’ suburban backyard is described as “squalid” and “scruffy,” containing broken fence palings, “messy thickets” of “untrimmed shrubs,” “patchy unkempt lawn,” and “the tangled wire of the ruined fowl-house and the old wood-shed with the chassis of some ancient invalid wheel-chair rusting on its roof” (226). Jack becomes nostalgic for his childhood and yearns “to just stand there on the cracked brick path looking at this shabby suburban squalor that
surrounded him, this sad and pointless world confined within the patched palings of the dividing fences and the red, ribbed rooftops” (227). The birthday party ends badly, and David’s negative attitudes to suburbia are emphasized yet again when he drives Helen home and shouts “‘To hell with them all!’ … through the windscreen to the road … to a channel of asphalt that was grey and flat and treeless, like a dead drain running through a dead landscape, to the slithering flickering of the picket fences and the hedges and the lamp-posts and the neat letter-boxes and the names on gates” (232).

David and Helen marry two months after the birthday party debacle (233). Despite David’s hatred for suburbia, the couple begins their married life by moving into a newly constructed house in a freshly developed suburb.\textsuperscript{49} When the couple marry, David is twenty-six and Helen thirty (233). Describing the events in retrospect, David speculates that the age disparity led him to entrust the majority of “the material construction” of their life together to Helen: she “naturally assumed leadership on matters of taste and sophistication … It was she who decided on the house in Beverley Grove, in a new ‘garden’ subdivision in what at the time was considered a ‘good’ suburb, and which placed almost half suburban Melbourne between us and the two old, shabby, antiquated houses where we had separately grown up” (237). The new house that Helen chooses is an iconic “double-fronted, ultra-modern, red brick, three-bedroom villa” located on a block with a “sixty-foot frontage behind a low brick fence … beside a concrete drive leading to a separate fibro-plaster garage” (237). David notes that the new house in

\textsuperscript{49} Johnston based the Beverley Park Gardens Estate on Glen Iris, where he lived with his first wife. Although Johnston describes Beverley Grove as having half of suburban Melbourne between it and Elsternwick (237), Glen Iris is less than nine kilometers from Elsternwick. Although Glen Iris was of course an outer suburb when first developed, it could now be described as located on the inner edge of the middle belt of eastern suburbs and considered relatively close to the CBD, especially when compared to the newest suburban developments in the south-east at Cranbourne, which are fifty kilometers from the center of the city.
Beverley Grove was a token and symbol “of social progression. Of an advancement of caste, even” (238).

Laying the foundations for his later rejection of the Beverley Grove house, David describes the new subdivision in terms frequently used by critics of suburbia, noting that there were “only three basic ground-plans … for all the hundreds of houses in the subdivision” (238). However, since David is not yet ready to reject the new manifestation of suburbia, he claims that despite the lack of floor-plan choices,

there were still no two houses in any one street, grove, crescent, drive, or avenue which could be said to really look alike. Each front elevation had its own distinct difference, in the design of the porch, in the placement of the picture-window, the run of the paths … the position of the drive, the design of the chimney, the style of the front door, and so on, and even further permutations were possible, because there were three distinct ways in which the roofs of flat terracotta tiles could be pitched. (238)

Although the above passage reads more like an apology for suburbia than a criticism of it, and gives a glimpse into the variety present within suburban architecture (not to mention the lives lived within the houses), David’s diatribe later in the novel totally nullifies and contradicts the positive claims he makes for suburbia here.

By the time David and Helen move into their Beverley Grove home, he is firmly established in his career, earns a good salary, has money in the bank, and possesses an “unshakable self-confidence” (239). Feeling optimistic about the future, David and Helen purchase consumer goods on credit: David “extravagantly” buys a late model, flashy red MG sports car, while Helen bargains and shuns “excessive extravagances,” being “a
dedicated home-builder in the best practical sense,” although she does have “her heart set” on decorating and furnishing the home according to her precise wishes (239). Helen also takes control of the couple’s social life, choosing companions “as conscientiously and with as much attention to taste and suitability as she would select the picture for a wall, the guest-towels for the bathroom, the mats for the dining-table, the tapestry covering for a lounge chair” (240). David notes that Helen considers it a great success that within weeks of their arrival in Beverley Grove they are “on the friendliest visiting terms with Wally and Sandra Solomons,” a couple David describes as occupying “a rather special little niche in … [his] memory as perhaps the two must stupid human beings … [he has] ever known” (241).

Soon after moving to Beverley Grove and beginning to socialize with other middle-class suburbanites, David realizes that the Turleys (David’s colleague Gavin and his wife Peggy) are the only couple that interest him (251). David perceives Gavin to be the only member of the social set who is able to converse intelligently (251). A small dinner party that the Turleys hold for the Merediths exposes David to a different lifestyle and instigates his rejection of suburbia. The Turleys, importantly, do not live in working-class or middle-class suburbia. Rather, they live in a huge dilapidated mansion in Toorak,50 “which had been built some seventy years before when old Sir Luke Turley … decided on something a little more substantial than the Colonial residences which, in various pink sections of the Imperial map, he had for decades inhabited” (252). The Turley mansion, named Bangalore, emphasizing its colonial provenance, is described as

50 Toorak is an inner suburb approximately two kilometers from the CBD that is perhaps the most expensive and exclusive suburb of Melbourne. Toorak contains many mansions and is synonymous with wealth, exclusivity, celebrity and “old money.” Small two and three bedroom houses in Toorak currently sell for over A$1,000,000, while mansions cost as much as A$6,500,000. Search conducted at property.com.au on Jan. 18, 2008.
being "quite a walk" up a long driveway, and possesses a "massive old entrance with the
name of the house ... chiseled in stone above a heavy, paneled door" (252). David
describes the Turley mansion as possessing "solidity and dignity ... and even a sense of
some continuing splendour in its decay" (253).

Despite their address and aristocratic lineage, the Turleys live simply in a single
wing of the mansion amidst "extraordinary" mess and clutter, and serve their guests a
basic meal (253, 255). Matthews describes the Turleys as stereotypes of "the moderately
affluent, cultured class who are above the need for outward show, and whose very
casualness, untidiness and apologetic disorder are marks of their inherent and inimitable
style" (xv). After dinner, the men retire to Gavin's study for brandy, where David is
exceedingly impressed by the disarray of the room, which is furnished with old leather
armchairs, a long trestle table and jerrybuilt bookshelves (256-58). David admiringly
describes the room as one that "no woman was ever allowed to clean up" (256). While
David and Helen are driving home later, Helen begins laughing and exclaims, "And
there I was thinking the Turleys would probably have a butler! David, how can people
like Gavin and Peggy live in such a shambles! In that midden! Goodness! wouldn't you
just love to put a vacuum-cleaner through it?" (262). Helen's adherence to suburban
standards of cleanliness serves to emphasize the importance she places on appearance and
consumer goods, a trait also alluded to by her reference to a vacuum-cleaner. In his
article on My Brother Jack, Thurley argues that the visit to the Turley's "is decisive in
crystallizing David's own disgust with the life he and Helen have set up, or rather which
he has allowed her to set up" (73).

51 The OED defines a "midden" as "A dunghill, a dung heap; a refuse heap." The word is a common
synonym in Australian English for "rubbish-heap."
On the “despondent morning” after the visit to the Turleys, David turns against his new suburban home (263). David sees the disorder of the Turleys’ home as evidence of vibrant life, “passionate interests and pursued purposes”; he views the Turleys’ lifestyle as “delightful, illuminating and enviable” (Matthews xiv). Standing in his study contemplating the differences between his life and Gavin’s, “tense and wary as a trapped animal,” David hears “the Sunday morning sounds drifting ... through the thin brick walls ... Beverley Grove awakening to the active pursuits of its day – the snarling chirrup of its lawn-mowers and the hiss of garden hoses ... and the idling cough of the cars coming out of their fibro-plaster garages for the ritual washings” (263). This passage draws heavily on the anti-suburban intellectual tradition and is remarkably similar to Allan Ashbolt’s critique of suburbia in Meanjin, which I discussed in chapter one. Ashbolt’s article was published two years after My Brother Jack and may well be heavily influenced by Johnston’s anti-suburban tirades. David notes that looking out his study window he has a view of “the top of a paling fence, part of a red brick wall, and the plumbing outlets from the Phylands’ bathroom” (264). In contrast, Gavin would be able to look out from his study and “dwell on the rank vegetation and broken statuary of his ‘splendid’ old garden” (Gerster 568). The privileging of the older, established inner suburb over the new, developing outer suburb that Johnston presents is a trope that is repeated in subsequent suburban novels, namely Malouf’s Johnno, Winton’s Cloudstreet and McCann’s Subtopia.

When Helen asks David if he will wash the car, as he usually does on Sunday mornings, he says he is busy and will do it later (264). As an act of rebellion against the suburban order Helen has imposed, David re-arranges his study and destroys some of the
decorations Helen purchased for him (265-68). The following Sunday, David washes the car as usual, and notes that there are seven others being washed on his street at the same time (270). David’s hatred for suburbia continues to grow, and he declares that the next Sunday is the worst yet (271). David has to climb onto his roof to install a mast to hold the aerial for a new radio he and Helen have purchased (271). After completing the installation, David stays on the roof and looks out over the Beverley Park Gardens Estate, and declares that as far as he can see there is “nothing … but a plain of dull red rooftops in their three forms of pitching … and the green squares and rectangles of lawns intersected by ribbons of asphalt and cement, and I counted nine cars out … being washed and polished” (271). David’s use of the word “nothing” reflects his dismissal of the presence in suburbia of anything other than the physical, whether houses, lawns, streets, driveways or cars. Johnston’s narrator consistently refuses to seriously consider the lives of the residents of suburbia, let alone admit that they may have value. When David does refer to his fellow suburbanites, it is to pronounce them lower than slum-dwellers and slaves to conformity.

Repeating in a modified form his earlier claim that the suburbs are worse than the slums, David posits that the slum-dwellers “might be a worthier tribe … because they still grappled with existence where audacities were possible, and even adventure” (272). In other words, audacity and adventure are not possible in suburbia. Still sitting on the roof, David reflects that while the slum-dwellers have “a fetish about keeping front door-knobs polished,” the fetish is applied to cars and gardens in the “‘good’ respectable suburbs” to such an extent that suburbanites will follow their suburban car-washing and gardening rituals “no matter what desolation or anxiety or connubial treacheries” are
“practiced behind the blind neat concealment of their thin red-brick walls . . .” (271-72).

David takes a pro-working-class, anti-middle-class stance and draws on the anti-suburban tradition of representing the inner-city slums as more vital and non-conformist than suburbia.

David’s rooftop reverie, which Paul Carter describes as one of the most memorable passages of the novel (291), eventually develops into an epiphany: “I stayed up on the roof because once I had worked this out a great many other things began to follow. Strange things. Terrifying things. Wondering things” (272). David realizes, “quite dispassionately at first,” that he does not love Helen and never has (272). In one of the most anti-suburban passages in all Australian fiction, David concludes that many of the problems in the world have “nothing whatever to do with ‘downtrodden masses,’” but are caused by “half the world” residing “in mental deserts very much like the Beverly Park Gardens Estate” (272). David goes further, claiming that “the real enemy was not the obvious embodiment of evil, like Hitler or his persecution of the Jews or the Russian purges or the bombs on Guernica,” rather, it is suburbia and its “awful fetish of respectability that would rather look the other way than cause a fuss . . . I stared around over the whole of the sterile desolation, and I realized with a start of panic that I had got myself into the middle of this red and arid desert, and there was nobody to bring me water” (272-73).

Gerster describes David’s epiphany as a “terrible vision of the tedium and complacency of suburban life and ritual,” and argues that David’s vision instigates his separation “from both his enthusiastically suburban wife and his country” (568). Eagle notes that a full twenty pages of the novel are devoted to David’s “realisation that he
hates his suburban existence in Beverly Grove, to the hatred he feels for everything he sees as he sits on the roof of his house” (37). The “savage attack” reaches a climax with an “extraordinary passage” in which suburbia is described as “a mental desert” (Eagle 37). However, David’s anti-suburban rant does not end with his claim that suburbia is a desert; in fact, it continues for another ten pages, prompted by a further realization: “There was not one tree on the whole estate” (274). David speculates that trees must have been present before the development of the suburb and declares that upon close examination of the landscape “there were little folds to it and faint graceful rises and declivities ... The place would have been really beautiful at one time ... before ... bulldozers²² and graders grubbed out all the trees ... And now there was nothing but a great red scab grown over the wound the bulldozers had made, and not a single tree remaining” (274). David’s response to his realization that suburbanization has destroyed the natural environment is to climb down the ladder, jump in his car, and drive straight to the local nursery (275).

At the nursery, David insists on purchasing a tree that will grow quickly (276). After some discussion with the nursery owner, Mr. Goodenough, David purchases a sugar-gum that should grow thirty or forty feet within a few years (276). Unsurprisingly, Helen is not keen on the idea of a gum-tree in the middle of the front lawn: “‘I personally think they’re rather ordinary. They’re so drab ... I’d honestly prefer something decorative ... some nice flowering shrub, or camellia ... What would look lovely would

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²² Johnston’s depiction of the role of the bulldozers in the destruction of the natural environment and the construction of the suburb echoes White’s reference to bulldozers in Riders in the Chariot. Bulldozers are also used as emblems of suburbanization and environmental degradation in Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet and his short story “Aquifer,” A.L. McCann’s Subtopia, and Peter Carey’s The Tax Inspector. The bulldozer is also present in the literature of other postcolonial nations; for example, it serves as a symbol of westernization and neo-colonialism in Derek Walcott’s poem “Midsummer.” See also Adam Rome’s The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.
be one of those Japanese dwarf-maples’’ (277). Just as White did in *Riders in the Chariot*, Johnston raises the issue of indigenous versus native vegetation and presents the indigenous trees as superior to foreign imposters. Intent on reclaiming a tiny piece of the natural environment from suburbia, David resists Helen’s preference for a foreign tree, exclaiming, “‘No dwarf anythings! I want a tree. A proper bloody tree!’” (278).

Attempting to explain his vision to Helen, David shouts, “‘... there’s not one tree growing in this whole damned street ... on the whole estate ... And this is a grove we live in, darling ... We’ve been letting them pull the wool over our eyes. The Beverley – Park – Gardens – Estate ... It isn’t a park and it isn’t a garden and this isn’t a grove ... And what this damned place needs is a good firm far-sighted policy of reafforestation!’” (278). David notes in retrospect that he was in conflict with Helen from the moment of his epiphany on the roof and that the sugar-gum was “ultimately the hammered-in wedge that split” them apart (278).

As his marriage disintegrates, David derives “spiteful comfort” from the sugar-gum, which grows remarkably quickly and becomes “very much more than merely a symbol of protest against suburban values” (280). In addition to being a narrative device that allows Johnston’s narrator to fight and eventually flee suburbia, the sugar-gum also provides Johnston with a means by which he can depict David’s neighbors as narrow-minded conformists. David’s neighbor, Mr. Treadwell, complains to Helen that the sugar-gum’s roots are getting under his driveway, which they might damage, and where they might extract nutrients from the soil near his dahlias. David refuses to act and exclaims, “‘... what’s wrong with some upended cement slabs? The place is too damned neat as it is ... I’d like to have two whacking great Moreton Bay figs like those at the Turleys,’ and
then we could tip the slabs up the whole length of the street! Which might be a bloody
good thing!” (281). Several weeks later, Mr. Phyland, another neighbor, also complains
about the sugar-gum. David’s response is to add fertilizer around the base of the tree
(282). Eventually, the neighbors threaten to make an official complaint to the municipal
council, and since Mr. Treadwell is a retired magistrate, David concedes defeat to “the
forces of conformity” and agrees to remove the tree (282, 283). He takes his anger out on
Helen, exclaiming, “‘God! you just can’t afford to be different, can you? You always
have to conform to their rotten dreary suburban sameness … let’s go the whole hog, shall
we, and give a name to the house?’” (283).

Soon after the sugar-gum incident, World War Two begins and David is swamped
with work at the newspaper, leading him to lead a separate life from Helen. David is
chosen to be the war correspondent for the *Morning Post* and sent to New Guinea, where
he is stationed for over a year and emerges with “a greatly enhanced reputation” (313,
319). After New Guinea, David’s employers send him abroad again, first to the United
States, where he has two books published, then to London, Rome, Athens, Cairo, Iran,
India, Burma, Ceylon, China, Afghanistan and Romania (333-34). David’s articles are
“admired, syndicated, [and] published abroad” (320). His overseas adventures allow him
to meet “Prime Ministers and Presidents and great generals and admirals and statesmen
and leaders” (334). David’s adventures and successes overseas starkly contrast with his
former life in Beverley Grove and further serve to present suburban life as boring,
mundane and routine. As Eagle argues, “the Australian needs adventure, a *man* needs
adventure. Suburban life, domestic life, cannot give it to him … so the great, the
necessary *adventure* must be sought elsewhere” (37). While Jack has his adventures in
the bush and the city, David has his overseas. David expects Helen to end their marriage while he is abroad covering the war and dreads returning to “drop back again into the mundane horrors of the Beverley Park Gardens Estate” (344-45).

When David returns to Melbourne at the end of the novel for a week’s leave after two years away, he nostalgically revisits the favorite haunts of his childhood and youth, spending all of his time in the city and by the waterfront, not once setting foot in the suburbs. In addition to avoiding suburbia, he begins an affair with a much younger woman, Cressida Morley, who later becomes his second wife. Not only is Cressida much younger than Helen, she is decidedly not suburban; she was raised in a rural area by the ocean and “would never have known a suburban street in her life, or a garden subdivision” (354). Cressida represents virgin nature, especially the ocean and the bush. Brotherson interprets David’s decision to “abandon the bourgeois values of suburbia” as finding “its supreme expression in his love affair and eventual marriage with Cressida Morley” (7). Likewise, Matthews reads David’s union with Cressida as the culmination of a journey that began with his rejection “of the melancholy suburbs and the empty marriage” (xiv).

David Meredith, as both narrator and protagonist, is undeniably and overwhelmingly anti-suburban. On the surface, it may seem that Helen is pro-suburban, since she chooses to live in suburbia and both conforms to and upholds suburban values. However, Helen can certainly be read as a character created by an author as an attack on suburbia. Helen is materialistic, selfish, shallow and domestic. Rutherford argues that Helen is “entirely vapid and lacking” and that her “interest in aesthetics and art is a social pretence” (112). Although My Brother Jack is an autobiographical novel, Helen is a
fictional character. Matthews states that Helen “is not a portrait of Johnston’s first wife, Elsie” (“Notes” 369), while Johnston’s biographer, Garry Kinnane, notes that “Helen bears more resemblance to Johnston himself than to his first wife” (“The Reconstruction” 441). Johnston’s overwhelmingly negative depiction of suburbia and suburbanites such as Helen can be read as self-loathing and a repudiation of his former suburban self. Both Matthews and Kinnane interpret Johnston’s characterization of Helen as an attack on suburbia (“Notes” 369; G. Kinnane, “The Reconstruction” 441), while Eagle suggests that the negative characterization of Helen is the result of Johnston’s “need to blame women for the feeling of imprisonment he felt in suburbia” (38). Helen is certainly not a sympathetic character and her suburban values and desires are presented by Johnston in an entirely negative manner.

Although many suburban novels deal with a wide range of social issues, Johnston’s novel has a narrower focus. He does not engage in any detail with issues common in suburban fiction, such as immigration, multiculturalism and religion, referring only briefly to an influx of Jewish immigrants and refugees (whom he dubs “human flotsam”) before World War Two (153). Unlike White’s suburban novels, which present a multiplicity of voices and attitudes towards suburbia, making it impossible to identify a dominant message, Johnston’s narrative is entirely dominated by David Meredith’s voice and presentation of events, characters and settings. David’s portrayal of suburbia is overwhelmingly negative, and other characters who might defend suburbia, or at least present it more neutrally, are not given a voice in the narrative by Johnston. My Brother Jack is the first anti-suburban canonical Australian novel; as such, it establishes
the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction. The first novel to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition established by Johnston is David Malouf’s *Johnno*.

*Johnno: Perpetuating the Anti-Suburban Tradition*

A generation younger than White and Johnston, David Malouf was born in 1934 in Brisbane to parents of Lebanese and English descent. Malouf enjoys an international readership and reputation perhaps greater than any Australian author since White; Peter Carey is the only Australian writer with a comparable or greater international standing. Referring to Malouf’s numerous awards, Andrew Taylor states that Malouf is one of Australia’s “most celebrated and rewarded” authors (“Bread” 715). Within Australia, Malouf’s work is widely read and highly respected, and a number of his novels have attained canonical status, including *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and *Fly Away Peter* (1982). Malouf graduated from the University of Queensland with an Honours degree in language and literature in 1954. He left Australia in 1959 for Europe, and worked in England as a secondary school teacher for a number of years before returning to Australia in 1968. Malouf taught in the English Department at the University of Sydney from 1968 to 1977, when he turned to writing full-time, and for many years thereafter divided his time between Australia and Tuscany, where he owned a home. Although his current reputation rests primarily on his novels, Malouf published

53 Carolyn Bliss argues that Carey is “increasingly seen as the heir and successor to Patrick White” (“Peter Carey” 291).

54 Malouf’s many awards include the Grace Leven Prize, the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal, the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award, the Age Book of the Year Award, the Friends of the National Library of Australia Celebration Award, the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, the Lannan Foundation Literary Award, the Geraldine Pascall Prize for Critical Writing, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the Prix Baudelaire, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Prix Femina, and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award. Malouf has also been short-listed for the Booker Prize and many other awards. He was awarded the Order of Australia in 1987 and declared an Australian National Living Treasure in 1997.

55 *An Imaginary Life, Remembering Babylon* and *Fly Away Peter* were all voted into the Australian Society of Authors’ Top Forty Australian Books list in 2003, at number eight, twelve and thirty-five, respectively.
two volumes of poetry before publishing his first novel, *Johnno* (1975), and has continued to publish poetry, as well as collections of short fiction, an autobiography, a play, numerous essays, and two opera libretti, one of them based on White’s novel *Voss* (Rooney 214-15; Randall xv-xvii).

Published eleven years after *My Brother Jack*, Malouf’s first novel contains many echoes of Johnston’s work, depicts the suburbs in an overwhelmingly negative manner, and perpetuates the anti-suburban attitudes presented by Johnston, thereby becoming the second canonical novel in a developing body of anti-suburban Australian novels. Malouf claims that *Johnno*, set largely in Brisbane during the 1940s and 1950s, broke new ground by engaging with the urban environment, stating that “no one else had got [Brisbane] into fiction” (Willbanks, *Australian* 145). In his Neustadt Lecture, Malouf states that he “wanted to put [Brisbane] on the map; to make it, in all its particularity, a place that would exist powerfully in the lives of readers in the same way that Dickens’s London does, or Dostoevsky’s Petersburg” (“A Writing Life” 702). Although Malouf sees himself as an innovator (and has certainly produced a great deal of innovative work), in *Johnno* he approaches the urban and suburban environments in a conservative manner, utilizing traditional anti-suburban strategies and consistently presenting Australian culture as inferior to European culture; as a result, the novel is an extended postcolonial manifestation of the cultural cringe. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, “the extraordinary global reach” of European imperialism “still casts a considerable

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56 Randall notes that Malouf’s “close concern with the interrelations of place, memory and sense of self” is reflected in his poetry, which contains frequent references to suburbs. Brisbane’s suburbs “may also have attracted Malouf’s early-career imagination because they are definitionally marginal spaces, but nonetheless may come to define centres as much as they are defined by them” (16).
shadow over our own times” (5) and contemporary Australians, like Malouf, remain heavily influenced by European culture.

In his 2007 study of Malouf’s work, Don Randall argues that Malouf uses European culture as a resource from which he derives his “principal standards of style” (190). Likewise, Delys Bird partially attributes Malouf’s international reputation and sales to his “transnational style,” which she describes as “urbane, poetic and classically allusive” (184-85), while other critics claim Malouf is “thoroughly European in his interests and attitudes” (Wilde et al 455). However, Malouf’s privileging of European culture is not confined to his prose style or the novel’s content; the circumstances of the novel’s composition and other texts produced by Malouf situate the novel in a European context. In a preface to *Johnno* written twenty-five years after the novel’s initial publication, Malouf describes his composition of the novel in Florence in an apartment adjacent to the one in which Dostoevsky wrote *The Idiot*, placing himself within the European intellectual tradition (“Preface” vii). In Malouf’s Neustadt Lecture, delivered in 2000, he states that he sought to emulate Dickens and Dostoevsky when writing *Johnno* (“A Writing Life” 702). Malouf does not refer to any Australian writers in his preface, in the Neustadt Lecture, or in *Johnno*, which contains numerous references to European literature. Moreover, since *Johnno* is an autobiographical novel that closely adheres to the details of Malouf’s life and Dante is more like Malouf than any other Malouf character (Randall 30-31), the attitudes presented in the novel regarding suburbia, Australia and Europe may mirror Malouf’s own.

Although setting *Johnno* in Brisbane is logical in that *Johnno* is an autobiographical novel and Brisbane is Malouf’s hometown, using Brisbane as the setting
also allows Malouf to emphasize the city’s marginality (Antor 513). Brisbane is doubly marginalized, since it is far from Europe and outside the cultural and political triangle of Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra. Australia’s two largest cities and former national capitals, Melbourne and Sydney, have always overshadowed Brisbane, which, in comparison, was for many years perceived as “a big country town,” rather than a real city (Winter 46). Moreover, if Australian cities are marginal in relation to Europe, and Brisbane is marginal in relationship to Sydney and Melbourne, then Brisbane’s suburbs are even further displaced, and, perhaps, inferior. Randall considers Malouf a “writer of place,” arguing that his writing career is shaped by a desire “to discover and delineate the specific places in which experience unfolds” (15-16). Thus, it is entirely in character for Malouf to use his first novel as a vehicle to explore the location of his childhood, which he describes as “poor, shabby, [and] unromantic” in his 1997 preface (xii).

Much like *My Brother Jack*, *Johnno* is a hybrid novel that contains elements of the Bildungsroman and autobiographical writing (Antor 509). The novel begins with a prologue in which Dante, the “somewhat conventional” first-person narrator returns to Brisbane from London (Daniel 184). Dante’s father suffers a heart attack, triggering his return. While Dante is en route from London to Brisbane, his father suffers a series of strokes and dies. Sorting through his father’s possessions after the funeral, Dante discovers his school magazine from 1949, which contains a photograph of his friend Johnno. At this point, the narrative reverts to Dante’s childhood, and the story of Dante and Johnno’s mysterious relationship begins. Both Dante and Johnno consider Australia to be a cultural desert and look to Europe as the source and centre of culture. Dante’s English mother “imposes” English manners and morals on him (3), and from an early age
he immerses himself in European literature and history. Dante is uninterested inAustralian history, preferring to read about the Plantagenets and the Wars of the Roses(20); he considers Australia to be “familiar and boring” (20). The narrator, whose realname is never revealed, is dubbed “Dante” by Johnno after he publishes a poem entitled“To Beatrice.” The constant repetition of the name “Dante” serves as a reminder that boththe narrator and Johnno privilege European culture.

Throughout Johnno, depictions of Brisbane and its suburbs range from negative tonostalgic, although the depictions are mostly disparaging, and Malouf never engagesclosely with the outer suburbs. Dante initially resides with his family in a large, upper-middle-class home in South Brisbane, replete with a tennis court. Later, Dante’s familymoves to a new house in the new suburb of Hamilton; however, he states that hismemories “were all of our old house in South Brisbane, with its wide latticed verandahs...[and] its vast garden that ran right through to the street behind” (4). In fact, Dante’sfamily only decides to relocate from South Brisbane to Hamilton after the arrival of theSecond World War in Australia’s theater, which profoundly affects Brisbane and itsinhabitants. The arrival of the American military in 1942 turns Brisbane from a provincialbackwater lacking in culture, or an overblown country town, into a city of importance:“Brisbane was suddenly at the centre of things. Though we hardly knew it at the time, ourcity was having its moment of greatness, its encounter with History: General MacArthurhad arrived and the whole Pacific campaign was being directed from his office at St.Lucia” (27).

However, the war that awakens Dante’s “sleepy sub-tropical town” (28) alsocauses “the sudden fall from grace” (30) of several local girls and the relocation of “the
negroes” to the south side of the river, giving Dante’s old-fashioned suburb “a ‘bad name’” (31); as Dante comments, “South Brisbane, with its big rambling mansions, each one with a tennis court … was finally done for; no-one respectable would ever live there again” (31). Here, Malouf depicts Brisbane as unimportant until the foreign influence of the Americans lends it prestige and transforms the social landscape; the inner suburbs are subsequently depicted as a haven for the “less desirables” (Aboriginals, prostitutes and the homeless) who are forced out of the urban area. Dante’s concern with status and class distinctions, highly apparent here, is a trope that runs throughout the novel.

Believing that South Brisbane is no longer good enough for them, Dante’s family relocates to Hamilton, where Dante’s father has built a three-storey brick house, paid for by profits earned from “buying and selling houses in the suburbs” (6). Although Dante describes Hamilton negatively, he also refers to it as “one of the best suburbs in Brisbane” (49). South Brisbane may no longer be respectable enough for a family who send their son to Brisbane Grammar, but Hamilton makes the social grade. Dante describes the new house at Arran Avenue as “huge, ugly, show-offish,” (4) “grim” (49), and “depressingly modern” (4); Hamilton has none of South Brisbane’s old-world charm. Here Malouf follows the Australian literary tradition of privileging the old over the new (Gerster 569) and presents the old house in the inner suburb as superior to the new house in the outer suburb, a strategy Johnston previously employed in My Brother Jack, and which Tim Winton mimics in Cloudstreet. Malouf alludes to the destruction of the natural environment that occurred in order to create Arran Avenue, describing Dante’s new address as “a narrow dead-end street that runs straight into the hillside,” with “bush
beginning where the bitumen peters out into a track” (49). However, Malouf does not address the issue of environmental degradation in any detail.

Despite Malouf’s stated aim of creating a fictional Brisbane as important and realistic as Dickens’ London or Dostoevsky’s Petersburg, both Dante and Johnno disparage Brisbane repeatedly. Dante describes Brisbane as “so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely!” and declares, “I have taken to wandering about ... looking for one simple object in it that might be romantic, or appalling even, but there is nothing. It is simply the most ordinary place in the world” (51-2). Compared to European cities, Brisbane does not stand a chance; romance and loveliness are qualities found in the old world, not the new. In an echo of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s Ulysses, Dante recoils from the idea that he may have been shaped by his hometown, a place so backward that “Kids, even in this well-to-do suburb [Hamilton], go to school all the year round with bare feet” (52).

In contrast to the established, ancient European cities to which Dante and Johnno fantasize about escaping, Brisbane is “shabby and makeshift,” full of “wooden houses perched high on tar-black stilts ... Nothing seemed permanent ... Brisbane was a huge shanty-town, set down in the middle of nowhere” (83). During one of his most negative rants, Dante dismisses Brisbane as “nothing: a city that blew neither hot nor cold, a place where nothing happened, and where nothing ever would happen, because it had no soul. People suffered here without significance. It was too mediocre even to be a province of hell. It would have defeated even Baudelaire! A place where poetry could never occur” (84). According to Dante’s way of thinking, European cities have souls, important things happen in them, suffering is significant, and poetry is abundant; the Australian city and
its suburbs are unworthy of art. Malouf’s inclusion of tirades against Brisbane and its suburbs perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition established by Johnston, especially when one considers the fact that, unlike White’s novels, they are not countered by neutral or celebratory descriptions of suburbia.

During their years as university students, Dante and Johnno frequent the Greek Club in the city and cause trouble at brothels in an attempt to live the kind of life they have read about in novels by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Balzac, and to discover the adventure and excitement that they perceive suburbia to lack. However, no amount of alcohol or recklessness can alter their conception of Brisbane, which Johnno describes as “the ugliest place in the world” (82) and “the bloody arsehole of the universe” (83). Heinz Antor argues that Malouf depicts Brisbane as “a backwater of boring homogeneity” (513-14); however, the presence in the novel of Aboriginals and immigrants provides clear evidence of difference, even though they are not depicted in any detail. Upon graduation from university, Johnno secures a job at a copper mine in the Congo (98). Before departing and making his break “into perfect freedom” (98), Johnno delivers his most virulent diatribe against Australia: “I’m going to shit this bitch of a country right out of my system … How long will it take me, do you think, to shit out every last trace of it? … I’ll say to myself every morning as I squat on the dunny, there goes another bit of Australia … And at the end of seven years I’ll have squeezed the whole fucking continent out through my arsehole” ” (98). Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman argue that “Johnno’s scatological rejection of Australia is the most forceful” in all the Australian literature of exile and alienation (86).

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57 Martin Leer interprets Johnno as “a study in the title character’s attempt to escape his ‘fate’ … Australia, and particularly Brisbane” (10).
Johnno spends three years in the Congo as an anti-Kurtz, reading works by Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, and Bonhoeffer in an attempt to acquire “civilization” before moving to Europe (107). After educating himself, Johnno declares he is “no longer a barbarian” and possesses “the capacity for living … among civilized men”; he urges Dante to “give up shadow boxing in the suburbs of limbo” and join him in Europe (107). Although almost everyone he knows has escaped from Brisbane, Dante lingers for two years, traversing the suburbs on his motorbike, learning nothing and achieving nothing (109-110). Eventually, Dante relents and travels to Europe, where Johnno has already spent a year in Paris, which Dante finds “grey” and “smog-ridden” (111). When Dante arrives, Johnno fails to meet him at the railway station, and Dante declares he is “more miserable” than ever before in his life (112). Clearly, Europe is not the antidote to suburban boredom and despair that Dante imagined it to be, nor has it met Johnno’s expectations. In order to secure work teaching English, Johnno must pass as Scottish, since the French detest the Australian accent (114). Dante soon learns that Johnno had been hoping Dante would arrive with enough money to help him escape (115). As Randall notes, Johnno’s only place in Europe is that of the outsider who drifts unenlightened from one cultural site to the next (36). As an Australian, he simply does not belong.

Dante stays in Paris with Johnno for a month, during which time he sees little of the city and Johnno spends most of his time reading in bed (116). Disappointed, Dante crosses the channel to England and takes a teaching position “in a bleak industrial town” where he is soon living “a life as suburban and ordinary in its way as anything … [he] might have settled for at home” (127). Dante discovers that even Europe contains suburbs
and ordinariness, and pursues a suburban existence devoid of exoticism for several years, although the details are not provided, presumably because Malouf does not consider suburban life worthy of serious discussion or of interest to his readers (129). Three years pass and people in Australia consider Dante an expatriate, a term he considers “too grand” to describe his situation (128). Friends visiting from Australia resent Dante’s settled state and object to habits they perceive as “non-Australian and therefore a betrayal” (128). Meanwhile, Johnno leads a nomadic existence, moving from Paris to Vienna to Bucharest and finally Athens, where Dante reunites with Johnno and finds him to be living a squalid, aimless life, far removed from the European glamour the pair imagined in Australia (130). After four years away, Dante returns from the centre to the margins, disappointed in Europe and himself, and discovers that Johnno returned to Australia three months earlier (145). Johnno drowns under suspicious circumstances before Dante is able to learn whether Johnno returned to Australia due to defeated expectations (148).

Gerster claims that Dante makes a “qualified reconciliation” (573) with the previously rejected suburbia at the end of Johnno after his return from Europe, arguing that the novel “allows for some final acceptance of [suburbia’s] limitations and recognition of its potentialities” (573). Despite the “qualified reconciliation” Gerster identifies (and does not explain), Johnno closely conforms to the anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature by including many negative depictions of Brisbane’s suburbs. Significantly, Malouf’s most memorable and positive descriptions of Brisbane are of the urban core and South Brisbane. Moreover, Malouf largely ignores the new, outer suburbs, where most of Brisbane’s population resides. Malouf’s characters are rarely seen at home.
in the suburbs, which are referred to disparagingly in passing. Gelder and Salzman argue that Malouf’s Brisbane is “the archetype of the supposedly arid Australia of the post-war period” (85). The Australian actor David Tredinnick, writing in Meanjin, states that he first read Johnno while being “tortured … by the living death that passed for adolescence in an Australian outer suburb of the early 1980s” and found that it accurately depicted the suburban milieu (165).

Johnno is remarkably similar to My Brother Jack in that it is an overwhelmingly anti-suburban novel that contains numerous negative depictions of suburbia; it is also a tightly focused novel that does not grapple with a wide range of social issues. Whereas White’s Riders in the Chariot and The Solid Mandala engage with issues such as immigration, religion, racism, multiculturalism, environmental degradation and the role of the artist in society, Johnno largely ignores these important aspects of suburban life. The primary concerns of the novel are death; guilt; adolescence; memory; expatriation and exile; marginalization and belonging; and male relationships. Critics including Ivor Indyk and Stephen Kirby argue that a homosexual connection exists between Dante and Johnno; however, Malouf asserts in his 1997 preface to Johnno that it is not a “gay novel in disguise,” although he does acknowledge that his characters have had homosexual experiences (x). Moreover, Patrick White, who read Johnno soon after its publication and considered it one of the best Australian novels, complimented his friend Malouf for “finding the ‘only way’ to write a book about the love of two men for one another. Malouf took this to mean that he had the emotions right in Johnno but saved

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58 See page 7 of Indyk’s monograph David Malouf, and Kirby’s article “Homosocial Desire and Homosexual Panic in the Fiction of David Malouf and Frank Moorhouse.” Meanjin 46.3 (Spring 1987): 385-393.
everyone from the difficulties: the special pleading of homosexuality and the messy business of writing about sex between men” (Marr 583).

Randall considers White to be the Australian writer most like Malouf, notes that both writers adopt “an international style and perspective” and claims that Malouf’s work reexamines “topics and concerns inaugurated by White” (7). According to Randall, Malouf shares with White a “multi-sited imagination and a perspective upon Australia that is not quite inside and not quite outside the place” (7-8). Discussing the postcolonial character of Malouf’s work, Randall situates it in a body of writing from settler colonies that includes Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje and J.M. Coetzee, with whom Randall perceives Malouf to share “a deep-seated insecurity about belonging to one’s place” (8). Randall argues that Malouf and Coetzee share “an intense and abiding concern with the marginalization, disenfranchisement, and exclusion that are at work in the social order of the postcolony” (9). Dante’s rejection of suburbia and subsequent expatriation are a manifestation of a postcolonial anxiety regarding belonging. The degree to which Malouf himself belongs in Australia has been debated, partly due to his periods of residency in England and Italy, but also because his Lebanese ancestry has made him “susceptible to construction as an other in the society of his birth” (Randall 11). In his classic novel *Cloudstreet*, Tim Winton provides a thorough engagement with the postcolonial quest for belonging while following Malouf’s example of perpetuating the anti-suburban tradition established by Johnston.
Cloudstreet: Anti-Suburbanism, Indigenous Australians and the Struggle for Belonging

In 1991, sixteen years after the publication of Malouf’s Johnno, Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet was published and quickly became a highly influential canonical novel. Almost thirty years younger than Malouf, and approximately fifty years younger than White and Johnston, Winton can be seen as a third-generation member of a group of anti-suburban writers. Born in 1960, Winton is the most popular and critically acclaimed Australian novelist of his generation. Robert Dixon notes that Winton has won “a staggering number of national and international literary awards” (“Tim Winton” 248).59 Winton was declared an Australian National Living Treasure in 1997 and listed in the Bulletin magazine in 2006 as one of the “100 Most Influential Australians.”60 He is known for his description of West Australian coastlines and landscapes, vivid depictions of working class Australian life, and a remarkable prose style that makes extensive use of the vernacular. In her recent study of Winton’s work, Mind the Country: Reading Tim Winton’s Fiction, Salhia Ben-Messahel notes that Winton defines himself as an “author of the working classes” and argues that his work “reflects a strong commitment to political and cultural issues, such as Aboriginal rights and reconciliation, the protection of the environment, and cultural heritage” (8).

Cloudstreet was an instant success and the recipient of a number of prestigious awards, including the Miles Franklin Award, the NBC Banjo Award and the Western Australian Premier’s Book Award. By 1995, less than four years after its initial

59 For an excellent, detailed analysis of Winton’s extraordinary career and the conditions that enabled it, see Robert Dixon’s “Tim Winton, Cloudstreet and the Field of Australian Literature.” Westerly 50 (Nov. 2005): 240-60.
60 For a complete list of Winton’s awards, see http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=ShowAgent&agentId=A)i8.
publication, *Cloudstreet* had already sold 130,000 copies in hardcover alone (Field 63). *Cloudstreet* is often required reading in secondary and tertiary courses, and less than ten years after publication was already established as a “Great Australian Novel” (Dixon, “Tim Winton” 247, 258). Moreover, *Cloudstreet* has arguably become the most popular Australian novel; it was voted number one on the Australian Society of Authors’ Top Forty Australian Books list in 2003 (“Top Forty”). Due to its tremendous popularity, influence and critical acclaim, *Cloudstreet* plays a significant role in perpetuating the anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature, although it does so in a much more complex manner than *My Brother Jack* and *Johnno*.

Winton was born in the Perth seaside suburb of Scarborough and spent most of his first twenty years in Karrinyup, “a suburb freshly carved out of thick scrub on the outskirts of Perth” (Bennett 282; Flanagan 12). However, Winton rarely writes about the suburbia of his youth, choosing instead to set the majority of his work in coastal towns and rural areas. Thus, *Cloudstreet* is an anomaly within Winton’s body of work, since most of the action of the novel takes place in West Leederville, an inner suburb of Perth, from the middle of the Second World War through to the early 1960s. Winton depicts suburbia negatively in *Cloudstreet* and has frequently expressed his dislike for the suburbs, which he has described in interviews as “a pretty narrow world” (Rossiter, “The Writer” 30) that is “bland” and produces “a kind of autism” (Taylor “Interview” 4); moreover, Winton has stated that he is not interested in writing about “people who have no real existential questions and are purely hedonistic consumers” (Qtd. in Rossiter, “In His Own” 3).
Dixon argues that the many strengths of *Cloudstreet*, including the elevation of the regional to national significance, the re-creation of colloquial speech, and the location of the spiritual in the everyday, combine to make Winton “seem like an anti-modern, anti-metropolitan, even anti-intellectual writer” (“Tim Winton” 257). Although Winton has a reputation as a champion of the working class, frequently touts his working class credentials, and is not viewed as an intellectual, his attitudes towards suburbia mirror those of numerous anti-suburban intellectuals. Winton also follows Malouf’s method of privileging the older, inner suburb over the newer, outer suburb. Despite the novel’s suburban setting, all of the central characters are involuntary transplants from the bush, forced to move into the city due to tragedy, death, and poverty, perhaps because of Winton’s stated disinterest in writing about characters that are thoroughly suburban.

Although *Cloudstreet* is often described as a family saga and a novel about suffering (Watt 62), Winton addresses numerous other issues, including tragedy, faith, doubt, religion, work, violence, nationalism, community, belonging, European settlement and the treatment of Indigenous Australians. While *My Brother Jack* and *Johnno* are narrowly-focused novels, *Cloudstreet* is epic in its scope. Rather than attempting to address all of the aforementioned issues, my analysis focuses on the ways in which Winton perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition, his representation of Indigenous Australians, and the struggle of non-indigenous Australians to establish a legitimate claim to belong on a stolen continent.

Suburbia, colonialism, Indigenous land rights and non-indigenous belonging are fundamentally intertwined, since all Australian suburbs occupy land stolen from Indigenous Australians. Graham Huggan argues that Australian literature “is thoroughly
if not always explicitly racialized" (*Australian Literature* 151), and thus it is not uncommon for Australian suburban fiction to address racial issues. Marilyn Anthony attributes *Cloudstreet*’s greatness to the way it confronts readers with difficult issues, and involves “generation after generation in a search for moral consistency” (93). Indeed, Winton’s engagement with Indigenous issues and settler-colonialism makes the novel far more than a beautifully written nostalgic family saga: it is a narrative about the past, present and future of the Australian continent and the peoples who claim it as their home.

David Crouch views *Cloudstreet* as a novel that is “concerned with the continuity and legitimacy of settlement” (“National” 102). At the beginning of the novel, the Pickles and Lamb families are forced by a pair of tragedies to leave their respective rural, coastal homes in Geraldton and Margaret River, and settle in Perth. When Sam Pickles’ brother dies suddenly, Sam inherits the house on Cloud Street in the inner suburb of West Leederville and moves his family there, since he is legally prohibited from selling the property and has nowhere else to go. Sam soon realizes that he can earn money by renting out half the house, which is an “enormous, flaking mansion” (47). The Lambs find the house through a newspaper advertisement, and soon the two families begin sharing the structure that over time becomes their home.

Bill Ashcroft argues that *Cloudstreet* is “squarely grounded on its central metaphor,” which he identifies as the house on Cloud Street “that stands for the nation itself: irascible, hybrid, haunted by its past, myth ridden but ultimately redeemable” (148). In interviews, Winton has acknowledged that the house on Cloud Street is indeed a metaphor for Australia, and the Lamb and Pickles families are forced to move into it, rather than choosing it for themselves, just as the convicts were taken from Britain to
Australia against their will (Shore 44). Winton has stated that the house “doesn’t want the Lambs and the Pickles; it wants to shrug them off all the time. It’s strange and scary, and totally alien to them and resistant, and the continent is that way and in lots of ways remains that way for us’” (Shore 44). Thus, Cloudstreet is a novel about the displacement of Indigenous peoples through urban and suburban development and the settlers’ struggle to establish a legitimate claim to belong.

Like Australia, the house on Cloud Street has a tragic, shameful history. Before Sam’s brother Joel purchased the house, which had stood uninhabited for over twenty years, it was owned by an elderly widow who trained Indigenous girls to become domestic servants (36). The girls were part of the stolen generations and were forcibly removed from their families. One of the girls committed suicide in the library by ingesting ant poison, leading the widow to evict the others. A few weeks later, the widow died of a heart attack in the library while playing the piano (36). When the widow died, she fell forward and her nose hit middle C; the echoing note is heard decades later by Fish Lamb. Stuart Murray argues that the house is “a palimpsest of the nation even as it is the domestic space that contains individual struggles. The note from the piano rings throughout the house in an echo of the barbarity of racial prejudice” (87). The ghosts of the Indigenous girl and the widow haunt the house for almost half a century, and they are not exorcised until Rose gives birth to her son Wax Harry in the room where the Indigenous girl and the widow died. Thus, Winton situates the brutal treatment of the Indigenous people by the settler-invaders in the suburbs, rather than presenting the issue as one that only possesses relevance in the bush.
Crouch argues that the haunted house on Cloud Street "seems to draw its animation and potency from its own unpleasant history" and suggests that Winton explores "uncomfortable regions" lurking "beneath the surface of dwelling and dwellings in Australia" ("Writing" 44). Crouch claims that Winton "only conjures the indigenous past, the prior occupation of the house or the country, as something shadily other, suppressed, and belonging to some unearthly haunted realm" ("National" 99), points out that the Lambs and the Pickles are haunted by "the ghost of the stolen Aboriginal girl," and speculates that the characters "perhaps suffer the unease of dwelling upon her land, and the greater massacres and injustices standing in the shadows" (original emphasis) ("National" 100). Crouch is correct to assert that Winton's engagement with Indigenous issues occurs "beneath the surface"; it is not the primary focus of the novel, yet it is ever-present and repeatedly resurfaces.

Winton's presentation of the Cloud Street house as a metaphor for Australia also operates on the level of landscape. Crouch argues that when the Pickles first move in to the "great continent of a house" that "doesn't belong to them" (Winton 41), they explore it "like fearful first settlers" and "The expanses of space and unyielding alien surfaces ... paralyse the inhabitants in a way that echoes the same sense of primal unease, a sense of not belonging," which "plagued settlers as they initially encountered the 'vast outdoors' of Australia" ("Writing" 48-49). Ben-Messahel claims that the house provides "material form to the history of the country and of British colonization" (167). Crouch suggests that the tension between non-indigenous possession and the quest for belonging "are crucial": he points out that the Lambs and Pickles are homeless and uprooted before arriving at Cloudstreet, then "unsettled in their occupation of the new place" ("National" 99). By
settling in an inner suburb, which is an alien environment to them, the Lambs and the Pickles begin the process of establishing belonging and unconsciously participate in the ongoing displacement of the Indigenous peoples.

One of the major themes of *Cloudstreet* is the characters’ struggle to adapt to the inner-suburban environment, which also functions as a metaphor for the struggle of non-indigenous Australians to adapt to life on a new continent. The refugees from the bush find themselves dwelling in a house so close to a railway line that the windowpanes rattle when trains pass. The fact that the residents of Cloudstreet are transplants from the country is emphasized soon after the Lambs arrive, when they convert their half of the backyard into a semi-rural environment: “Wire was unrolled to fence off a back corner and Quick Lamb built a fowlhouse from broken teachests and an old forty-four gallon drum” (51). Just as English settlers in the colonial period introduced non-indigenous species and created English gardens, the Lambs modify their environment to suit their tastes, since they are unwilling to throw off their rural traditions and embrace suburban life. Meanwhile, the Pickles’ half of the yard is neglected: “The grass is shin high out in their half of the yard. Bits of busted billycarts and boxes litter the place beneath the sagging clothesline” (78). Although the Pickles do not convert their portion of the backyard into a mini-farm, neither do they embrace the suburban lifestyle and create a garden with flowerbeds and carefully mown lawns. The refusal of both families to abide by suburban conventions is consistent with the anti-suburban sentiment that reaches its height at the end of the novel.

The process of establishing a sense of belonging is largely achieved through the development of community. Suburbia is often criticized for lacking a sense of community
and opportunities for social interaction. According to the stereotype, suburbanites live separate lives in separate houses. However, Winton presents West Leederville as being more akin to a village than a stereotypical impersonal suburb, and thus worthy of celebration. The shop that the Lambs open in their front room creates a sense of community in the area, becoming important enough to be a tram stop, and soon “the shop was Cloud Street, and people said it, Cloudstreet, in one word” (60). Both Cloudstreet and its residents are known throughout the suburb and the shop serves as a meeting place and focal point. Winton’s Cloudstreet has much more in common with Malouf’s South Brisbane than with White’s Sarsaparilla and Barranugli or Johnston’s Beverley Park Gardens Estate, as both Cloudstreet and South Brisbane are in close proximity to the city center, whereas White and Johnston’s fictional suburbs are many miles from the centre of the cities in which they are located.

Like many other authors of suburban fiction, Winton addresses the relationship between the suburbs and the natural environment. Winton, a “passionate environmentalist” (Jacobs 311), depicts the new suburban developments on the margins of the city as destructive, since they are built on bushland cleared with bulldozers, while in the inner suburbs, which the Swan River flows through, the natural environment and the built environment enjoy a more symbiotic relationship. Winton presents characters that prefer the remnants of the natural environment to the built environment. Cloudstreet both begins and ends with Fish Lamb returning to nature by drowning himself in the Swan River in central Perth, an act Winton presents as joyful and liberating. The Lamb and Pickles children frequently swim in the river, many of the characters fish on the river, and when the families hold a celebratory picnic, they do so at the river. Throughout the
novel, the natural environment, particularly bodies of water, is depicted as a source of life, comfort, escape and joy, in stark contrast to the built environment, especially the new outer suburbs. Ashcroft argues that water is “a constant presence on the horizon of the novel” and serves as “the element of ambivalence and transition” (148). More specifically, Ashcroft posits, “Virtually everything of importance in people’s lives, every major change, self-discovery, or shift” occurs “on, or in relation to, the river” (149), rather than in suburbia.

Winton does not depict the city center and the inner suburbs as active destroyers of the natural environment, even though they are built upon land that was once undeveloped. However, he does use the binary construction common in Australian literature to set the city and its suburbs in opposition to nature: “From the river you could be in the city but not on or of it. You could be back from it out there on the water and see everything go by you, around you, leaving you untouched” (138). Similarly, when Lester Lamb converses with his son Quick as they fish from their boat on the river, he emphasizes the difference between rural and urban/suburban life: “Easy to be a good man out here … Lester pointed to the lights above Perth water where the city hung and the suburbs began their outward roll. But up there, that’s the test” (304). Life in the city and suburbs makes being “a good man” difficult, as Lester learns first hand when he commits adultery with Dolly Pickles, a spontaneous act resulting directly from the economic pressures of the urban/suburban environment, which cause the Lambs and Pickles to share a house. Here Winton depicts both the city and the suburbs as morally degrading environments, suggesting that moral standards are more easily maintained in the natural environment.
Winton’s perpetuation of the anti-suburban tradition in *Cloudstreet* is achieved in part through Toby Raven, an ambitious, cosmopolitan young journalist whom Rose Pickles meets while working in the city and with whom she has her first romance. In a passage reminiscent of *Johnno*, Toby describes Perth as “the biggest country town in the world trying to be a city. The most isolated country town in the world trying to be the most cut-off city in the world, trying desperately to hit the big time ... There’s something nesting here, something horrible waiting. Ambition, Rose. It squeezes us into corners and turns out ugly shapes” (289). Despite Toby’s disdain for Perth, he revels in introducing Rose to the world of the cosmopolitan urban intellectual. He presents Perth as a place where culture resides, a far cry from Geraldton, Rose’s childhood hometown. Even though Perth contains some culture, it is far too provincial for Toby, who, like Dante and Johnno in Malouf’s novel and Waldo in *The Solid Mandala*, sees himself as a cosmopolitan intellectual: “Toby read the London newspapers and talked of escaping Perth for a real culture: Bloomsbury, the Left Bank, or Sydney at a pinch” (290-1). Toby represents urban culture, which he sees as superior to suburban culture. Despite the fact that Toby treats Rose poorly and ultimately rejects her, and is certainly a poor ambassador for cosmopolitanism, Rose also eventually rejects suburbia, albeit for different reasons.

While in a relationship with Toby, Rose nurtures dreams of middle-class suburban bliss, imagining herself “married with children, with a house in the clean new suburbs” (291). Later, once Rose marries Quick, she renews her suburban dreams, imagining the kind of house millions of Australians aspire to own: “I want to live in a new house ... In a new suburb in a new street. I want a car out the front and some mowed lawn” (326). In Toby’s contention that there is “something horrible waiting” foreshadows The Nedlands Monster.
order to pay for the new house in the suburbs, Quick joins the police force, where he becomes involved in the hunt for The Nedlands Monster, Perth’s first serial killer. Eventually the killer is caught and revealed to be a husband and father from the suburbs. Winton’s inclusion of the Nedlands Monster supports the notion, also present in Carey’s *The Tax Inspector*, that suburbia is an environment where evil develops and resides.62

Quick and Rose both work hard to achieve their suburban dream; their new home is located on land freshly carved out of the bush by bulldozers (just like David’s new house in Beverley Grove and Dante’s new house in Hamilton). Rose and Quick’s new suburban home is clearly modeled on the house in which Winton was raised, located in the Perth suburb of Karinyup on a street inhabited by Dutch, English and Yugoslav immigrants who lived in “little boxy” houses (Field 62).63 Winton cites one of his major influences as “living a suburban life when the suburb itself was a work in progress. When I was a kid in Karrinyup there was bush on one side of the fence and civilization on the other and it was all just happening before our eyes, the pushing back of the bush, the domestication of the landscape” (Rossiter, “The Writer” 35). Winton states that the destruction of the natural environment by suburban development “had an impact” on him, which he describes as “a sense of loss from early on” (Rossiter, “The Writer” 35).

Quick is dissatisfied with the suburban accommodation he and Rose rent while awaiting the construction of their house: “This was orderly, calm suburbia. This was merely a list of things missing” (339). Significantly, when Quick escapes the stresses of family life earlier in the novel and transitions from childhood to adulthood, rather than moving to another suburb of Perth, he flees to the bush where he finds freedom outside

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62 My final chapter analyzes Carey’s engagement with suburbia in his novels *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector.*
63 Winton provides a detailed examination of his childhood suburb in his wonderful short story “Aquifer,” which is included in his most recent collection, *The Turning.*
the confines of suburbia and comes to terms with his traumatic childhood. Stuart Murray argues that Quick fails as a bushman, and that his failure reveals that meaningful identity is not necessarily “informed by an engagement with the land and settler values” (86). However, Quick certainly does not find meaningful identity in suburbia either; rather, it is within his extended family and their atypical living arrangement that Quick finds belonging.

Not only does suburban life dissatisfy Quick, he eventually loses all interest in moving to the new suburb: “And the new house, their dream? Well, it went up bit by bit and Quick sometimes went out just to look at it, the brick box with its red tile roof same as all the other half-finished houses in the street. It looked empty and he’d lost his way with it somewhere. He couldn’t imagine them living in it” (339). Here Winton’s description of the new suburb echoes the anti-suburban rants in My Brother Jack and the critiques of anti-suburban intellectuals such as Robin Boyd. Meanwhile, Rose holds on to her suburban dream: “‘We’re getting somewhere,’ Rose thought. ‘Our own house, a baby, money in the bank’” (360). To Rose, suburbia represents safety, security, and privacy, a place where she and Quick can raise a family away from the intrusions of their parents and siblings; for Quick, the new suburbs represent conformity and isolation from “real life,” which takes place in the inner suburbs or the bush. Winton’s negative depiction of suburbia echoes that of Johnston and Malouf; all three authors portray the new brick houses as empty, depressing, and lacking in character and history.

During a visit to the new house, Quick encounters the Indigenous man who repeatedly appears to him and other characters throughout Cloudstreet, often as a guardian angel or black Jesus. The Aborigine tells Quick to go home and declares, “This
isn’t your home. Go home to your home, mate” (362). Ben-Messahel claims that the Indigenous man is “the mystical holder of the truth about the community,” who “bears testimony to colonial deeds and ... reminds White Australians of the power and importance of place” (214). Winton has stated that “the black man serves as the conscience of the people,” describing him as “a ‘guardian angel’ who is rejected ... the guy is saying: Learn to belong, don’t break community” (Rossiter, “In His” 12-13). Not only does the Aborigine’s appearance and command serve to remind Quick of his feelings about suburbia, it also reminds readers that the European settlers stole the land from the Indigenous peoples. Thus, in addition to being the site where the suburban and natural environments collide, the outer suburbs are the site where the issue of Indigenous land rights, one of the central issues in Australian society, must be addressed. The question of who owns the land in Australia and who can legitimately lay claim to belong to the land is central to Cloudstreet. Moreover, it is an issue that Winton has addressed repeatedly in interviews.

Winton has made it clear that he believes “White Australia” should value Indigenous culture highly. He has stated that “we live with a contradiction in Australia: one of the most anti-religious European cultures on the most spiritual and religious of continents” (Qtd. in Rossiter, “In His Own” 4). Winton’s position regarding Indigenous ownership and belonging is complicated, however, by his statements regarding his sense of belonging and identity as a non-indigenous Australian:

When I got to Europe I knew the moment I set my foot down that I wasn’t European. I’d been brought up all my life to think that I was a European ... I felt torn, almost, like torn out of the soil from home ... I knew that if I stayed away
too long I’d be adrift, and I felt like I was going to wither up and die. I know this is where I belong. I know my continent, I know my country … No-one’s really going to be able to convince me that I don’t belong here … I wouldn’t say it’s a kind of new Aboriginality, I wouldn’t even feel that I had to even chase after the term, but it’s a feeling of belonging … I’m not embarrassed about coming from here, although I’m ashamed of the way my forebears have brought me into the country … I’m not ashamed to be here as a white Australian. (Qtd. in Rossiter, “In His Own” 13)

Winton’s position is certainly not unique; in fact, it is typical of many non-indigenous Australians who recognize and acknowledge that the continent was stolen from its original inhabitants, yet feel a deep sense of belonging for the country in which they were born and raised. Crouch notes that Winton’s work reveals the complex sentiment described by Peter Read in his book Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership: “I want to feel I belong here while respecting Aboriginality, neither appropriating it nor being absorbed by it” (Qtd. in Crouch, “Writing” 51).

In an interview with Salhia Ben-Messahel in which she asks Winton if he feels closer to Aboriginality than to Western culture, he replies, “I have learnt to be closer to the land, but this hardly compares to genuine Aboriginal belonging. I wouldn’t make too bold a claim for myself here. I envy Aborigines for their oneness with the land and the spirit of the country but I don’t envy them their confusion and irredeemable loss” (107). Elsewhere, Winton speaks of Indigenous attitudes to the land, claiming, “The notion of knowing your ground and your country is almost a religious thing,” and indicates an awareness of the complexities of his position by positing, “I suppose if my skin were dark
this would have more credibility” (Guy 128). Crouch suggest that Winton may possess a “latent guilt … which undermines a sense of belonging” (“Writing” 50). Huggan argues that “the continuing struggle for cultural ownership in Australia” contains “a fundamental dissonance between what we might call the politics of ownership and the poetics of belonging … belonging might somehow provide the moral grounds for illegitimate ownership” (viii-ix).

Likewise, Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson argue that the European settler/invaders “referred to themselves as indigenous” in order to establish their legitimacy and express “their own increasingly secure sense of moral, spiritual, and cultural belonging” on the Australian continent (363). Furthermore, in order to establish a nation, settler/invaders need to “write the epic of the nation’s origin” (Johnston and Lawson 365). Winton’s claims regarding belonging are clearly a part of the process that Huggan, Johnston and Lawson identify. Moreover, Cloudstreet reveals characters attempting to establish themselves as Indigenous. Furthermore, as a national narrative, the novel itself plays an important role in establishing claims to belonging by non-indigenous Australians.

While Quick and Rose’s new house is under construction, the inner suburbs undergo redevelopment and gentrification. In the inner suburbs, “All the old houses were coming down and salmon pink duplexes were going up in their place” (363). Sam Pickles considers joining the development boom, discusses his intentions with his wife Dolly, and suggests selling Cloudstreet and moving to a new suburb, like Rose and Quick. Significantly, the Indigenous man who commanded Quick to go home also appears to Sam, and when Sam tells him of his plan, the Aborigine states, “You shouldn’t break a
place ... Too many places busted ... You better be the strongest man” (406). After a combined family dinner with the Pickles, Sam decides to stay in the established inner suburb rather than move out to the new suburbs. Winton’s inclusion of the Indigenous man’s assertion that Sam should not break a place is problematic, since it suggests that the Indigenous man does not have a problem with Sam occupying land that once belonged to Indigenous people. Moreover, it also implies that Sam is already at home in Cloudstreet, even though the house (and the suburb in which it is located) occupies stolen land and is haunted by Indigenous ghosts. Winton seems to be suggesting that non-indigenous Australians can legitimately claim to belong on the Australian continent, whilst simultaneously arguing that further suburban development/occupation should not take place and that Indigenous cultures should be respected.

During a spontaneous bush holiday, Quick and Rose discuss their parents’ decision to remain at Cloudstreet. Rose admits that she cannot bear to leave either: “I don't want our new house. I want the life I have” (419). Rose and Quick decide not to move into their new house in the new suburb, rejecting suburbia as an isolated site where they do not belong. Murray argues that Rose and Quick’s decision to stay at Cloudstreet and participate in the establishment of a “new tribe” represents a “reformed national space ... a world that is more supportive and just” and indicates that Winton is making a point about European settlement (88). All of Winton’s characters reject the suburbs: thus, the novel perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition and presents suburbia as an inferior locale in comparison to both the bush and inner urban areas. However, the manner in which suburbia is rejected also serves as a reminder that the suburbs are built upon stolen land.
Discussing the composition of *Cloudstreet*, Winton tells Andrew Taylor, "'I was writing Perth for myself. I was re-imagining it. In a civilized city the city of your parents exists, the city of your grandparents exists, the city of their parents and their grandparents exists'" ("Interview" 376). Winton’s belief that age and history are essential elements of a "civilized city" strongly echoes Dante’s views about Brisbane in *Johnno*. In both *Johnno* and *Cloudstreet*, the inner, older suburbs are more authentic and worthy locations as settings for fiction because they have history and permanence, whereas the newer, outer suburbs are rejected due to a perceived isolation, emptiness, and lack of culture. Moreover, Winton’s claim that a "civilized city" is one that is unchanged for many generations reveals a belief that belonging can be established over time, regardless of the circumstances of the initial settlement/invasion, and points to a nostalgic attitude towards urban space. Dixon argues that "nostalgia is by its very nature conservative: it prefers the past to the future; it is at best ambivalent about modernity; it prefers the local and the traditional to the global" ("Tim Winton" 257). *Cloudstreet* is certainly a nostalgic novel; it also in many ways inherently conservative and reactionary.

Critics present conflicting assessments of Winton’s use of Indigenous characters and his engagement with Indigenous issues, such as the stolen generations, land rights and belonging. George Watt argues that the presence of Indigenous characters “helps to reinforce Winton’s view of existence as fluid ... [and] interconnected, where history and now, me and you are somehow not entirely separate” (65). Watt suggests that Winton’s inclusion of ghosts in the house makes “the past part of the present” and reveals that even a single Aboriginal death leaves “an indelible mark on the white Australian community” (66). Winton’s use of Indigenous characters also contains a positive element, according to
Watt, since non-indigenous characters “experience something approaching enlightenment” when they “open themselves to the spirit of Aboriginal presence” (66).

However, Crouch questions Winton’s use of Indigenous characters, arguing that the “ghostly, or otherworldly, status given to indigenous people in the novel becomes a way of erasing, objectifying and othering them” (“National” 100). Moreover, Crouch takes issue with Winton’s method of resolving “the evils of the past,” namely the exorcism of the ghost of the Indigenous girl by the birth of a white child (“National” 100). Crouch argues that the issue of possession is not resolved in Cloudstreet and that the novel “offers a fantasy of perfect reconciliation that denies any further need to negotiate with either the past or the other” (“National” 100; 102). Moreover, the removal of the fence dividing the backyard of Cloudstreet, the joint folding of the tent by Oriel and Dolly, and the symmetrical ending of the novel, which concludes in the same moment where it began, all serve to indicate closure and suggest that resolution has been achieved, even though issues such as belonging and Indigenous land rights are clearly unresolved.

Although Cloudstreet deals with Indigenous issues in a problematic manner, it does so in a far more detailed and complex manner than any other novel set in suburbia by a non-Indigenous author. Moreover, despite the presence of conservative attitudes, Cloudstreet is a remarkably innovative novel, especially with regard to style, structure and theme. Nevertheless, Cloudstreet contains numerous negative depictions of suburbia and perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition established by Johnston and Malouf. Since Cloudstreet is arguably the most popular Australian novel, it plays a crucial role in perpetuating the anti-suburban tradition and has probably disseminated anti-suburban
sentiments to more readers than any other Australian novel, with the possible exception of *My Brother Jack*. My next chapter examines two recent novels that further perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition: *Steam Pigs*, by the Indigenous author Melissa Lucashenko, and *Subtopia*, by the academic and novelist A.L. McCann. I use the works by Lucashenko and McCann to demonstrate that contemporary, non-canonical novels published since *Cloudstreet* draw heavily upon the anti-suburban tradition established and perpetuated by the novels discussed in this chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

A NEW GENERATION PERPETUATES THE ANTI-SUBURBAN TRADITION:
MELISSA LUCASHENKO’S *STEAM PIGS* (1997) AND A.L. MCCANN’S
*SUBTOPIA* (2005)\(^{64}\)

Drugs, Booze, Violence and Indigenous Identity: Suburbia in Melissa Lucashenko’s

*Steam Pigs*

Published six years after Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, Melissa Lucashenko’s first novel, *Steam Pigs* (1997), addresses in great detail issues that Winton explored in his novel, especially suburbia, Indigenous identity and belonging. However, unlike *Cloudstreet*, *Steam Pigs* examines the aforementioned issues from the perspective of an Indigenous writer and protagonist. Melissa Lucashenko was born in 1967 in Brisbane; she is of European and Indigenous Yugambeh and Bundjalung descent. Lucashenko grew up in Brisbane’s southernmost suburbs (the primary setting of *Steam Pigs*) and received an Honours degree in Public Policy from Griffith University. After working briefly in Canberra for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and living in Darwin, she returned to Brisbane and began doctoral studies at Griffith University on the work experiences of Indigenous women. However, she abandoned her doctoral studies to

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pursue a full-time writing career. Since the release of *Steam Pigs*, Lucashenko has published the novels *Killing Darcy* (1998), *Hard Yards* (1999) and *Too Flash* (2002), as well as essays, short stories and poems. *Steam Pigs* won the Dobbie Award for women’s fiction and was shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards and the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Lucashenko is firmly established as one of Australia’s leading Indigenous authors.

Like Johnston’s *My Brother Jack* and Malouf’s *Johnno*, *Steam Pigs* is a combination of a Bildungsroman and an autobiographical novel. Like her protagonist, Sue Wilson, Lucashenko lived on the southern outskirts of Brisbane, worked as a barmaid and delivery driver, practiced karate, and attended Griffith University. The autobiographical aspect of the novel is emphasized by its final line: “A person should write a book” (245). However, unlike many autobiographical Bildungsromane, the protagonist does not tell her own story through a first-person narrative. Rather, Lucashenko utilizes a third-person narrative, albeit a limited one, written almost exclusively from the protagonist’s point of view, which frequently employs the second-person voice and occasionally slips into a first-person authorial commentary (early in the novel the narrator states, “I am getting ahead of myself” (7)). Although the novel is ostensibly written in the past tense, a number of passages are written in the present tense. Lucashenko’s shifts in voice and tense do not appear to follow any logic; however, they may be deliberate strategies to eschew traditional “white” narrative techniques.

At the beginning of the novel, seventeen-year-old Sue lives with her brother Dave in the working-class suburb of Eagleby on Brisbane’s southern outskirts. Sue seeks

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65 The biographical information in this paragraph is drawn from Austlit’s author record for Melissa Lucashenko: http://www.austlit.edu.au.
sanctuary in Eagleby after fleeing the north-Queensland city of Townsville when an accidental pregnancy and subsequent abortion damages her relationship with her family. However, after a few short months, Dave kicks Sue out following an argument over money, and she moves in with her boyfriend Roger. The couple initially shares a flat with Roger’s cousin Maureen and her kids, and later move into their own flat in the neighboring suburb of Beenleigh. Sue soon becomes the victim of domestic violence, and after several months of abuse, summons the courage to leave Roger. She discovers that the suburbs cannot provide the sanctuary she seeks, and by the end of the novel escapes suburbia and re-settles in the inner-city neighborhood of West End. Steam Pigs is a bold and innovative novel that utilizes a working class outer suburban setting to address crucial social issues such as Indigenous identity, racism, belonging, domestic violence, gender and sexuality, and alcohol and drug abuse. However, the novel ultimately presents suburbia as a destructive site that needs to be rejected in favor of the life-affirming inner city, serving to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction, and calling into question the novel’s radical power.

Lucashenko depicts the working-class suburb in an overwhelmingly negative manner with regard to the physical environment, the residents’ lifestyles, and the suburb’s relationship to the city, the bush, and other suburbs. Eagleby is flat, hot, ugly, boring and isolated. Sue lives with her brother Dave in a “tiny brick box” on Slammer Street (6). The street name suggests both a prison and violence, emphasizing the isolation of the suburb, the residents’ lack of mobility, and one of the many social problems within the community. The suburb’s residents engage in a range of destructive behaviors, including substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, racism, assault
and theft. In her article, "Subdivisions of Suburbia: The Politics of Place in Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* and Amanda Lohrey’s *Camille’s Bread*," Margaret Henderson argues that Lucashenko “positions class as critical and unavoidable in her suburban geography” (79). Not only are the social problems depicted in the novel presented as working-class issues, Lucashenko places Eagleby in opposition to Brisbane’s middle and upper-class suburbs.

Eagleby is one of approximately thirty suburbs comprising Logan City, a local government area located on the southern edge of Brisbane, home to approximately 170,000 people.66 *Steam Pigs* contains numerous criticisms and negative depictions of Logan City as a whole, and of individual suburbs within the region. Eagleby is described as “that death of outer suburbia” in which passive unthinking suburbanites “slumped and sweated it out in their pokey rooms … melded into limpid living rooms, tranced by the flicker of [television] screens” (5). The residents of Eagleby are unable to “admit the killing boredom of their existence,” and the narrator declares Eagleby to be “the same as the rest of Logan City, a society of fine distinctions, [with] tiny differences to mark the untouchables” (5). Sue thinks of Eagleby as a “‘fucken dump’” (43), and she and Dave disdainfully refer to the “snarling locals” as “Argles” in an attempt to distinguish themselves from their neighbors (5-6).

Sue’s life in Eagleby is “flavoured” by sweat and beer, and despite her “mockery of the ‘fat fucks’ smoking dope next door,” she knows she belongs and worries that she will “drown” without realizing it (6). Life in Eagleby is a life without hope or progress; the sole goal is survival. Moreover, Eagleby is a parochial and isolating community.

When Sue is hired as a delivery driver, she desperately seeks to share the news with

66 See the Logan City Council’s website for more information: http://www.logan.qld.gov.au/LCC/.
someone, but Maureen is at bingo, Roger is taking an exam, and Dave is at work. (60).
She cannot think of the name of a single person she can visit, even though she has lived
in Eagleby for nearly eighteen months, since the outer suburb provides few opportunities
to socialize (60).

The working-class suburb is presented as an isolated site lacking in opportunities
for economic advancement. Some of the youth of Eagleby, “slum kids,” move into
Brisbane hoping to “make their million,” lured by images of the city and “big money” on
television (7). However, they do not realize that wealth cannot be acquired with hard
work, that it is “bred on town ridges that look to the mountains” (7). Lucashenko’s
narrator claims that “Very little [money] trickles down the gullies onto the stinking frying
plains, for those who hold it take very good care not to let it go” (7). Lukashenko presents
the affluent middle and upper class suburbs in Brisbane as a closed world to which the
working class are denied access. Although Sue lacks analytical skills, she instinctively
knows enough to avoid wasting her time and energy trying to improve her social and
economic position, choosing instead “to withdraw gracefully” and receive “an
honourable discharge in the race to be Working Class Hero of 1998” (7).

One of the many negative aspects of Eagleby is the suburb’s lack of entertainment
options. Since the suburb does not have a public swimming pool, and only one family can
afford a private pool (17), Eagleby residents must leave their suburb to go swimming,
which is one of the most popular activities for people of all ages in Queensland.
Eagleby’s closest swimming spot is located in the neighboring suburb of Beenleigh,
where “six pipes took Cedar Creek under the country road,” creating “a free waterslide”
(12). On weekends, “nearly two hundred people” would travel to Beenleigh for a swim
Suburbanites with a car and money can drive thirty minutes south to the beaches of the Gold Coast, or drive north to the Hyperdome at Loganholme to see a movie or go shopping. Within Eagleby, entertainment options outside the home are limited to the video store, a few shops, and the pub.

Even though the pub is considered by many to be the most important site in the suburb, the building itself is ugly, reflecting the lack of attention paid to aesthetics in the suburb: "The besser-brick building squatted fatly beside the main road, marooned in a sea of white gravel" (1). Sue lands her first permanent job as a barmaid at the Riverleigh Tavern, where she observes the drinking habits of the locals at close quarters: "The casual labourers by the ute-load, the dole-bludgers, the salesmen who didn’t sell, the whingers, the losers, the strugglers ... all one temporary family united in their passion for grog ... All week they threw money at the pub, and come the weekend they’d vomit obeisance at the altar" (1). The drinkers take refuge in the pub, seeking to escape from the harsh world of “unpaid bills, knocking cars, [and] whingeing kids” (8). Sue thinks of pubs as worlds inhabited by alcoholics, “where adults drank and fought and bullshitted,” whereas ordinary, respectable people, like she and Dave, “got takeaway and drank at home” (2).

Domestic entertainment in the outer suburb largely consists of watching television, drinking copious amounts of alcohol, and taking drugs. Lucasenho presents Eagleby as a community in which alcohol and drug abuse is rampant. Alcohol and drugs are used as an escape from the brutal realities of suburban working class life, although they frequently exacerbate problems such as violence and poverty. The narrator notes that Sue and Dave “drank too much” and that “Sue drank negatively sometimes, slugged it

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67 In American parlance, besser-bricks are known as “cinder blocks.”
down till she spewed” because she has “no reason not to” (6). Sue’s attitude towards marijuana is summed up in the following passage: “Ah fuck what’s the difference, stoned once a week, once a day, or all day every day, life goes on pretty much the same. Not as if we’re bloody brain surgeons, is it? Then it might matter” (103). Lucashenko’s narrator reveals that the average Eagleby resident views drugs as a cure for all problems: “Too fat? Have a cone. Too poor? Have a cone. Lonely, bored, unemployed, sick of yer family or yerself? Have a cone” (104). The negative effects of drugs, such as Roger’s short-term memory loss, are only occasionally revealed (137).

Teenage pregnancy is common in Eagleby, and since Sue spends a lot of time looking after her nephews Kirk and Lucky, people often mistake her for their mother, even though she is only seventeen and the boys are six and four: “that made her a mother at eleven, but give or take a couple of years on their part and she was just another teenage mum, and the colouring matched” (11). The narrator declares that puberty begins at eleven in Eagleby and “middle age hits hard at twenty-five” (57). Sue’s boyfriend Roger lives with his cousin Maureen, who is thirty-six and will become a grandmother once her pregnant fifteen-year-old daughter gives birth. Sue thinks of teenage pregnancy as “the first step on the road to poverty for all us blackfellas” (57). Lucashenko depicts the children of Eagleby as mistreated and neglected. The kids are “treated as subhuman until they hit puberty and start demanding otherwise with voices, fists and occasionally, the law” (45). Maureen’s kids spend most of their time playing video games or watching television and horror movies (36). In Lucashenko’s version of suburbia, life is a struggle, and new lives are usually unplanned, unwanted and neglected.
One of the numerous anti-suburban passages in the novel begins when Sue drops her nephews off at their mother’s unit in the nearby suburb of Woodridge. As Sue leaves the treeless and litter-strewn Housing Commission flats, she is thankful that she is childless: “There but for the graceagod go I, she thinks, and who woulda been surprised if I had ended up at twenty or so, down here with two or three or four kids in a shitty little box” (116). Sue thinks of the mothers on welfare as a bunch of “bloody bludgers,” and considers herself to have broken free of her racial, economic and family background, “conveniently forgetting the months of abuse” she had received from relatives and friends once they learned of her abortion (116). However, on another occasion, Sue considers the possibility that she may end up as “an Eagleby housewife, dodging Roger’s crunching fists and crying into pillows over a life lost to screaming children” (46).

In an anti-suburban rant prompted by a trip to the local shopping centre to buy Christmas presents, Sue

... looks around in teenage contempt ... [at] Fat women in cotton skirts that showed their pooltable legs bearing crap presents ... Straggly kids crying being dragged by one outstretched arm, fathers walking ahead cursing them. Whole families of beergutted twenty-five year-old men in T-shirts proclaiming that ‘Holdens Shit On Falcons’ ... O they’re an attractive lot, alright, Sue told herself, the poor white trash that looks down on us Murries as ignorant and drunken, while they piss their own lives away at the pub and the video store. All of a sudden she feels a surge of anger at the dull, pale, acned faces that surround her. These are the bastards that put us on Palm, she thought, the ones who voted for that cunt Joh. Ah, go get rooted, ya braindead lotta cunts” (101).
Sue's disgust is initially driven by aesthetic concerns, but she quickly conflates ugliness with whiteness and blames working-class suburbanites for the racism and forced removal from their native lands that her fellow Indigenous Australians have suffered, as well as blaming them for the election and repeated re-election of Queensland's notoriously corrupt longest-serving Premier, Joh Bjelke-Peterson. Suburbia, class, race and violence continually intersect in such ways throughout the novel.

Lucashenko depicts crime as an aspect of suburban working-class life that is ever-present, condoned and taken for granted. Kids in Eagleby siphon petrol from neighbors' cars at night to refuel their trail bikes (vii); the possession and use of illegal drugs is so common that "every second backyard" contains "a black plastic potted plant" (104); assaults and domestic violence are almost daily events; and drink-driving is considered normal behavior. Although Sue does not approve of Roger dealing marijuana (50), she does not ask him to stop, and frequently partakes of his supply. Furthermore, Sue is not averse to breaking the law herself. She steals a bottle of rum from a drive-in bottle shop simply because she has the opportunity. Moreover, her brother, who is with her when she commits the crime, expresses approval, and later the same evening she and Roger return and steal three more bottles (65, 66). While discussing with Roger the details of her new job driving a van delivering auto parts, Sue declares that she could "knock heaps of stuff off" and claims she will get her hands on some of it before she leaves (74).

Lucashenko presents violence as an ever-present component of life in the working-class outer suburb. The violence is prevalent in both the domestic and public spheres; in the former, most of the violence is perpetrated by males against women and children, while in the later, violence erupts in the form of fights at the pub and in a
controlled sporting arena, namely karate. However, the violence of both the public and domestic spheres are linked, as the narrator reveals during an explanation of the Eagleby residents' motivations for taking karate lessons at the community centre: “Survive ... without a jarred head or winded gut and you know you’re well on the way to hardheaded Logan City competence in the carpark and the pub ... that’s what they’re all there for, every one of them, avenging their father’s beatings, their mother’s sarcasms, building themselves painful ladders into new worlds where they’re the biggest, the strongest, the least vulnerable, where nothing can get them again” (4).

The children of the suburb are frequently the victims of violence, which is often inflicted upon them as punishment. Kirk and Lucky are described as “good kids by Eagleby standards, meaning they didn’t whinge and did what they were told automatically for fear of being hit – hard” (11). After Sue starts dating Roger, he spends a lot of time with her nephews and does not hesitate to beat them when he feels they need to be punished. After Roger belts Kirk for almost scratching Roger’s Ute with his bike, Sue expresses her disapproval: “You didn’t have to belt him, Rog. It’s not as if he’s yours, you know, and he didn’t scratch the car anyway ... I had enough of being flogged by my old man when I was a kid, I don’t need to see it happening to them” (32).68 However, as the novel progresses, Sue is less inclined to defend her nephews: “a childhood of floggings has conditioned her to be cautious with men’s anger. What to do, what to do? See the child picked on, or speak up and maybe cop it herself?” (53).

Lucashenko presents domestic violence as being passed down through the generations by males, who are beaten as children, then repeat the behavior as adults.

68 “Ute” is short for “utility vehicle,” an iconic Australian vehicle that is similar to the American pick-up truck in that it has a bed or tray behind the cab. However, utes are usually built on a car chassis, closer to the ground than pick-up trucks. The closest American equivalent to the ute is the El Camino.
The suburban pub is one of the primary sites where violence frequently erupts. While Sue is working as a barmaid, she witnesses numerous fights, which she nonchalantly accepts as "mainstream violence" (13). Sue and Roger have their first major conflict during a night out at the pub. Annoyed that Roger is flirting with another woman, Sue decides to "show Roger who he could and couldn't treat like a stay-at-home dishrag" and retaliates by picking up a man to take home. Roger spots Sue and her conquest kissing in the parking lot and a fight ensues in which Roger is knocked unconscious and receives three fractured ribs (77-85). When Sue takes Roger to the doctor afterwards, the narrator reveals that the doctor "sees the walking wounded from the pub every night of the week" and thinks of them as "stupid bastards ... no better than animals" (85).

The primary type of violence Lucashenko deals with in *Steam Pigs* is domestic violence. Henderson argues that the houses in Eagleby rarely contain "a sense of comfort or permanency," since the domestic spaces "are temporary accommodations within an environment that may suddenly erupt into violence" (75-76). Lucashenko addresses domestic violence in detail through Roger's abuse of Sue. Even before Sue moves in with Roger, it is apparent to the reader that he is a violent individual, since the couple meet at a karate class and Roger's reaction to the news that Dave has kicked Sue out is to offer to beat him up (41). Throughout their relationship, Roger repeatedly beats Sue. She comes to live in constant fear of triggering another attack through her words or actions.

In the aftermath of the pub fight in which Roger is injured, Sue wonders how he will "react to being stripped of his dignity" and decides that men are "temperamental buggers" who may flip at any time and "start throwing punches around or screaming abuse" (87). Sue's generalization about men and violence indicates that her only
experience with men has been with violent and abusive men. Sue believes that her nephews do not have appropriate male role models and need to be around “strong, proud, gentle men, not the shells of violent adolescent-minded bastards they encountered in Eagleby” (54). She contemplates taking them up north to the bush to show them “how their people used to live,” since they have “only the vaguest hint of an idea” that they are black (54).

After a verbal fight on Christmas morning, Sue contemplates her relationship with Roger and the “immediate panic of the fight” is “replaced by a sad, slow hopelessness” (110). Sue wonders if her relationship with Roger will always be violent: “She loves Rog, and he’s supposed to love her, but they fight so much all the time, and each time’s getting worse. She can’t work him out, one minute everything’s fine, the next he’s exploded into rage over absolutely nothing” (110). Having left the flat in a rage and gone drinking with his mates, Roger’s feelings about the fight are presented in one of the rare passages of the novel written from his point of view: “His anger is quick to come, quick to go, only problem was, when it went there is usually a fucken pile of guilt a mile high … But I didn’t hit her, he reminded himself continually, I didn’t, even if she was asking for it I didn’t, that’s something isn’t it, I didn’t” (111). By thinking “she was asking for it,” Roger reveals that he believes domestic violence is justified in certain situations. His attitude is the exact opposite of that held by Kerry, Sue’s social worker friend and eventual savior, who insists there are “no excuses for domestic violence” (139).

The day after receiving yet another beating from Roger, Sue visits Kerry’s house with a black eye (141). While comforting Sue, Kerry insists that she repeat the mantra, “It’s not my fault” (143). When Sue tries to defend Roger, Kerry declares, “I don’t care
if it’s Roger or fucking Adolf Hitler who done that to you, it’s not your fault, okay? No woman ever deserves to be bashed, ever. No excuses” (145). Later in the novel, on the morning after Roger gives Sue the worst beating she has ever received and then rapes her, she calls Dave in tears begging him to provide her with a safe haven (195). However, Dave refuses, so she turns to Kerry and her partner Rachel for help. The women are out of town for the day, so Sue has to wander the hot, empty suburban streets until they return (196-98). When Rachel collects Sue from a phone box, she declares she will not go back to Roger: “It was true. She had had enough. And she remembered, for the first time since Kerry’d said it weeks ago, about how many women got killed, not just bashed, but killed, in domestic violence. Once a week in Queensland, and a black homicide rate ten times that of whites” (200).

Kerry lives in an old Queenslander in Beenleigh (63). The house serves to set Kerry apart from the other residents of the southern suburbs, since most of them live in small brick houses or flats. Kerry’s big white wooden house has a jacaranda tree in full bloom in the front yard, and “The front of the house is draped with towels and sheets hanging over the front railings, and a mobile made out of crystals sparkles above the front door. The whole place with its wraparound verandahs has an inviting feel to it that the local brick boxes can never attain” (67). Like Johnston, Malouf and Winton, Lucashenko privileges the old wooden house over the newer brick houses. Inside, Kerry’s walls “are adorned with posters and geegaws from around the world. The pictures are full of

69 The Brisbane architect James Davidson writes that the Queenslander “is a hybrid dwelling form developed during the height of the British colonial period [that was] borne out of the syncretism of cultures when the English house met the tropical climes of India and south-east Asia.” Davidson notes that “the Queensland house went through a number of local iterations before its final ‘settled’ architectural form … In Queensland where I live, it is common to see a large yard full of Queenslanders lined up next to each other on the backs of semitrailers ready to be purchased and moved to their new site. From an architect’s perspective, they are a renovator’s dream as their light-weight single-skin timber walls are easily modified.”
women, lots of them black women – talking, laughing, marching, working” (68). Sue describes Kerry’s house as “‘amazing’” and declares, “‘You’ve got so much stuff – it’s really different to our place’” (68). While giving Sue a tour of the house, Kerry shows Sue “her artefacts from the Northern Territory, painted birds from Ramingining, [and] clothes from the Tiwi islands ... Kerry’s been in enough Eagleby homes to know that tiny fishbowls with miserable orange inmates, posters of Elvis, and pride-of-place family photos are as great a gesture towards aesthetics as Sue’s likely to have seen” (68). The interior decorations serve to emphasize the difference between middle-class and working-class domestic spaces and the absence of foreign and high cultures from the lives of the working class.

When Sue first visits Kerry’s house, she finds her cooking fish in onion and garlic and asks, “‘But what are you doing to it?’” (67). For Sue, fish “means fish’n’chips, or sweet and sour from the Beenleigh Chinese” (67). Kerry’s Thai-style fish signifies her cosmopolitanism and emphasizes Sue’s narrow range of experience. Sue begins visiting Kerry and Rachel weekly and describes their house as “a feast of words, [with] books in every room, a motley assortment of paperbacks, women’s studies texts, tattoo mags, ancient orange Penguins ... and a whole library of poetry” (188). Kerry and Rachel’s Queenslander shows Sue an alternative life that she may be able to attain if she can escape from the shackles of her class.

Lucashenko writes about Queenslander houses in her essay “Not Quite White in the Head.” She reads the Queenslander, especially in its contemporary manifestation as a signifier of middle class affluence, as representative of a “lifestyle [that] is meant to convey a mood of summer indolence, perhaps by the pool but certainly taking in a
verandah and an open plan weekend in which cold drinks and friends replace the claustrophobia and TV of the brick bungalow” (Lucashenko, “Not Quite” 29). The Queenslander in Steam Pigs serves as an example of a superior alternative to the typical suburban existence in Eagleby, not merely in terms of architecture, interior decoration and class, but also in a more literal sense. Kerry and Rachel are university-educated lesbian feminists and the house serves as a physical manifestation of their identity, often in very literal ways: no men are allowed to enter the house, which has been declared “women’s space.”

Lucashenko also uses the working class suburban setting of her novel to examine issues of gender and sexuality, which are intertwined with class, race and socioeconomic status. Sue grows up in a highly patriarchal culture and is expected to conform to traditional gender roles. Sue begins cooking during childhood, since her father leaves when she is four or five and her mother is usually too drunk to cook, and, as a female, Sue is expected to fulfill the role her mother neglects (226-27). After moving to Eagleby, Sue becomes a surrogate mother for her nephews, providing childcare, but also cooking and cleaning and collecting the kids from school (16). Once Sue begins seeing Roger, she takes over the cooking and cleaning duties, even when visiting friends (32). Moreover, Sue tries to conform to mainstream standards for female beauty, having “absorbed the lessons of hundreds of Dolly’s and Cosmo’s only too well” (39).

Likewise, Roger holds fixed and narrow views of both male and female gender roles. He expects women to cook, clean, obey and provide sex upon demand. While thinking about masculinity, Roger decides there are “three general categories of bloke”:

“Normal fullas like himself, into sport and women and having a good time, the stiffs who
wore suits and drove flash cars and had big dough but didn’t know how to enjoy it, and the sorry cunts who might as well’ve been drowned at birth, the latter including Datsun drivers, screws, coppers and poofers” (126). Roger is openly homophobic and misogynistic, and frequently expresses disapproval of Sue’s friendship with Kerry and Rachel.

Lucashenko uses Kerry and Rachel to present alternative performances of gender and sexuality, and both women constantly prod Sue to become more open-minded and enlightened regarding such issues. Kerry is a social worker with an office in the community centre where Sue takes karate lessons. Sue sees a flyer at the shopping centre advertising one of Kerry’s courses in self-esteem for women, and is particularly interested in learning about “negotiating skills and conflict resolution,” thinking that “Eagleby could do with a bit more of that” (60-61). Sue has seen Kerry around the suburb and considers her “deadly cool,” remembering that she rides a Harley and “doesn’t take shit from no-one” (60-61). Sue visits Kerry and finds that the tattooed blond woman possesses “an openness and friendliness that puts her at ease” (62). When Sue learns that Kerry’s house is “women’s space,” she is “a bit stunned by the idea of women telling men they weren’t allowed to go somewhere … Wild. Most of the men she’d grown up with would give you a flogging for less. Wow” (63). Lucashenko’s narrator notes that during Sue’s first meeting with Kerry, the “seeds of revolution” are sown, although Sue is oblivious to the fact that she has begun the process of enlightenment and escape (64).

Sue soon meets Kerry’s partner Rachel, but due to her naiveté takes a while to realize the women are lesbians (69, 70). Sue holds conflicting views on lesbianism; she is disgusted by the thought of lesbian sex, but otherwise considers it to be a great idea: “No
muss, no fuss, no fucken blokes being heroes or beltin ya up all over the place” (114). When Sue finally leaves Roger, she embraces life as an independent woman, thinking, “I never want another man fucking me over, ever ever again! Just peace and quiet, and a little place of me own. Bitta freedom, no hassles” (216). Lucashenko has written about gender and sexuality in several essays, stating that she sees Australia as “a deeply misogynistic society” that “has a deep terror of powerful women of any culture” (“Many Prisons” 141). Lucashenko argues that non-Indigenous people can learn a lot about gender from Indigenous culture, and claims that “Not many non-Indigenous people know much about gender … To the extent that most white Australians, for example, have thought about gender, it’s to support or mock the idea of female equality” (“Gender” 50).

In addition to introducing Sue to new ideas about gender and sexuality, Lucashenko uses Kerry and Rachel, and, to a lesser extent, Roger, to introduce Sue to higher education. Although Roger is a university student, he is by no means typical or representative of Eagleby’s residents, and Lucashenko presents the pursuit of higher education as an unusual activity in the working-class outer suburbs. Rachel attends university, where she is studying to be a history teacher (71). Kerry suggests that Sue can also attend university if she wants and suggests that she go in for a day with Rachel to check it out (72). Kerry delights in prodding Sue to break out of her comfort zone, declaring, “don’t sit in Eagleby on yer black arse whining about how dumb you are when we both know it’s bullshit” (72). During one of Sue’s visits, Kerry and Rachel engage in a heated intellectual debate about the causes of poverty and oppression, leaving Sue astonished and confused, since “there wasn’t a hint of violence or even fear” and she
had never witnessed an intellectual debate before, because “most of the people in Sue’s life were as articulate as dog turds” (72).

When Rachel takes Sue to university for a visit, Sue is intimidated by the concrete and glass buildings. Rachel explains that university is “not like outside. You can do whatever you want, practically, and say what you think, you don’t haveta hide it. No-one gives a damn what you do or why you do it” (121). Sue is confused and unconvinced: “... as for not minding what you said, she’s never heard of anything so bloody silly. Everywhere she’s ever been there’s been a boss or father or uncle or someone to flog ya into line, bugger saying what ya think!” (121). Rachel tries to convince Sue to apply for admission to the university, and sees herself “melodramatically” as “a guardian angel standing at a crossroads, urging Sue to go on to the great God of Higher Education and Future. The other signpost said (in code) poverty, racism, patriarchal bullshit, getting fucked over all your life” (121-22). Sue tells Rachel that Roger is not keen on her attending university, since her wages pay the rent, and they would have to move to cheaper accommodation (122-23).

After Rachel informs Sue that she will be eligible for Abstudy and the degree will only take three years to complete, Sue agrees to let Rachel fill out an application form on her behalf (123). The third person narrator then shifts into omniscient mode and depicts a racist white woman named Carol processing Sue’s application and “unwillingly” letting “another boong into uni,” thinking “its’a wonder this … Sue Wilson can read if she’s anything like the ones she’s seen from a distance in Musgrave Park, but nah, she’s going off to Griffith to do Arts; to uni where she never got to go cos her old man’d laughed, said uni wasn’t fer the likes of us … but it makes yer think dunnit, when

70 A program of government financial assistance for Indigenous students.
they’re letting anyone in these days, Abos and Asians and everything” (123-24). Carol’s attitudes represent commonly held racist beliefs in Australia about the intelligence of Indigenous Australians, affirmative action, and government financial assistance.

Much to Sue’s surprise, Roger is delighted by her acceptance into university, proclaiming, “‘We’re gonna be rich’” (192). The couple proceeds to discuss how much money they will be able to make after graduation. Roger has heard about a job opening for a research officer with the student union, which he describes as “‘Thirty grand a year for sitting on yer arse! That’s enough to pay off a house, and everything.’ Rog couldn’t believe it, he was twenty-six and in a position to buy a place of his own, well, assuming he got the job, that is … Pretty good for a blackfella” (193). Sue suggests that they buy a weatherboard house in the suburb of Mt. Gravatt, near the campus, and the couple spend the next half hour “planning where to buy their dream house … the years ahead positively gushing with money, cos everyone knew that uni graduates got the good jobs, the government jobs on big money where you could flex on and off and no-one cared if you were gone for two hours at lunch, and they paid you heaps for doing fuck-all” (193). Sue and Roger’s discussion of money and white-collar jobs reveals their ignorance of the realities of white-collar work and middle class life.

Throughout *Steam Pigs*, Lucashenko repeatedly examines the attitudes towards employment and money held by the residents of working-class suburbia. Most of the working-class suburbanites who are employed work in menial, low paying and unrewarding jobs. When Sue first arrives in Eagleby, she has not yet discovered “the tedium of bluecollar employment” and “would have gone to extraordinary lengths to be admitted to the mythic world of Work” (2). Driven by “an urgent need for cash,” Sue lies
about her age and experience and obtains the job as a barmaid (2, 10). Before she even starts work, Sue celebrates by spending money on new clothes for herself and dinner for Dave and her nephews (10).

Sue’s decision to spend money she has not yet earned is indicative of working-class attitudes and behaviors regarding money depicted throughout the novel. The working-class characters constantly struggle to meet rent, mortgage and car payments, partly due to unemployment and low wages, but largely because of their habit of spending large portions of their income on alcohol and drugs. Moreover, any time a character receives an unexpected financial windfall or a new job, his or her first instinct is to spend the money on a night out on the town, clothing, or a new vehicle, rather than paying off debts or saving for the future. Sue perceives money as providing her with the ability to “stay away indefinitely from the claustrophobia of her too-large, too-poor family in a too-small town,” although even in Eagleby she is “tied to them by the umbilical cord of the phone, the line that rang like a cash-register when her social security money arrived” (2). While Sue lives with Dave, she gives most of her income to him for board, and the rest goes towards payments on her used car (14, 28). Dave struggles to meet his mortgage payments after his wife leaves him and takes her income with her, and Sue manages to buy groceries for the household of four with just fifty dollars per week; however, half of the bill is spent on Dave’s beer (8-9).

Sue loses her job at the pub when it goes out of business, much to everyone’s surprise, but realizes that she is much better off than her co-worker Helen, who has mortgage payments to make and an unemployed husband who is “liable to bash her head in when she told him” (49). Sue dreads going to the dole office, where she will have to
“stand in a humiliating queue with forty other people who can’t look each other in the eye” (50). However, Sue soon gets over the disappointment of losing her income, telling herself that something will come up, and decides that in the meantime she will “spend a few days in a pleasant blur of beers and sunshine between home and the pool” (51).

When Sue visits the CES (Commonwealth Employment Service) office, she learns that a high school education is an adequate qualification to obtain office or factory work, but “good jobs” in the area are “few and far between” without “a trade, or specific training” (57). In *Steam Pigs*, work is never depicted as fulfilling or as part of a career with an upward trajectory; it is merely a means to make money, which is valued solely for its acquisitive power.

Eventually, Sue finds a job driving a van delivering auto parts to service stations around Brisbane and immediately starts dreaming of a better life (58). She calculates how much money she will make and decides that it will be enough for her and Roger to rent a townhouse, “Maybe even a flash one in a complex with a pool” (59-60). Henderson argues that a job such as Sue’s is “highly valued” in Eagleby, since it is full-time and involves driving a new vehicle (76). While driving her delivery van around the suburbs, Sue sees a used car for sale for eight thousand dollars, decides that Roger will co-sign the loan, and imagines herself taking the car for weekend trips to the Gold Coast beaches (77). Sue performs well at her job and receives a twenty dollar per week raise, which prompts her and Roger to visit a real estate agent and start searching for their own flat with a pool (77). Sue and Roger never consider saving money for the future; they are solely interested in the power of money to buy material goods that will supposedly improve their present situation. Lucashenko’s depiction of suburban consumerism is
consistent with critiques of suburban materialism in the anti-suburban intellectual
tradition.

Sue’s first exposure to the inner-urban environment occurs when Kerry and
Rachel set-up a surprise eighteenth-birthday-party for her at a café in Brisbane’s West
End, an area Sue associates with hippies, yuppies and Murries (134). Sue arrives before
Kerry and Rachel, and is met by their friend Louise, “A dark-haired, pasty-faced woman
... in black combat boots and a vomitous-coloured dress, [who has] a Murri bracelet
dangling from her wrist, but Sue can tell from the way she talks and stands that she’s
white” (133). While waiting for Kerry and Rachel, Sue and Louise discuss Eagleby,
which Sue admits is a long way from the city centre and has lots of unemployment and
domestic violence. However, Sue becomes tired of “hearing about Logan City’s faults”
and thinks “what about the bush being close? and we’re only twenty minutes from the
surf?” (134). Sue has acknowledged Logan City’s faults before, and even claimed to hate
the suburbs, but does not like discussing the suburbs’ social problems with a

After Sue leaves Roger and temporarily moves in with Kerry and Rachel, the
women devise a plan to help Sue reclaim her possessions, and locate a new place for her
to live, in the city (205, 206). The women’s friend Bianca is going to Europe for six
months and wants to rent out her flat, located on the top floor of a building in West End
with a view over the city (206). Sue decides that fleeing north out of the suburbs is the
way to “keep out of trouble and Roger’s grasp,” and gratefully accepts the offer (206,
209). Kerry arranges for Louise to look after Sue and introduce her “to the feminist

71 “Murries” is the plural form of the noun “Murri,” which refers to the Indigenous peoples of Queensland.
scene,” since she lives around the corner from Sue’s new flat (209, 210). Sue and Kerry successfully retrieve Sue’s possessions and car while Roger is absent (213-216), and Sue moves into her new home in West End, located just a few hundred metres from the location of Dante’s South Brisbane home in Malouf’s Johnno (and Malouf’s own childhood home at 12 Edmonstone Street).

Once Sue is settled in her West End flat, which she shares with Melinda, a fellow student, she learns that her brother Mick is in jail and starts writing letters to him, which Lucashenko presents through an italicized font. In her letters, Sue informs Mick that she often goes to movies and libraries in the city, which is home to many yuppies and quite a few Asians and Indians (221). Sue describes West End as being full of “ethnics” and Murries (221). After a couple of months in West End, Sue is amazed that six months previously she had not been able to recognize immediately that Kerry and Rachel are lesbians (235). Sue’s newfound ability to decipher cultural and sexual signifiers serves as evidence of her increasing cosmopolitanism, which she has acquired in the inner urban environment, and could not have acquired in outer suburbia.

When Rachel and Kerry visit Sue they jokingly refer to her as a “city girl” and discuss her new life, which is the polar opposite of her suburban life and includes “The discovery of a political world on the edge of the city, a complex feast of groups, arts festivals, anarchists, Murri organizations, [and] bookshops,” which Rachel describes as “‘Café society’” (236). Kerry mockingly refers to the residents of West End as “‘The liberal elite’ and ‘Champagne socialists,’” to which Sue replies, “‘whatever ya call it, it’s like another fucking planet … I can’t work out why youse live down in Yobsville’” (236). Rachel admits that some of the residents of the southern working class suburbs are
“‘pretty neanderthal,’” but argues that “‘there’s something down there’” and there are “‘people in Logan City that are alive, not just existing’” (237). Kerry snorts in response to Rachel’s claims, but says nothing.

The narrator reveals that Kerry would “move north in an instant herself, if the job wasn’t in Eagleby. Fucking working-class heroes were all bullshit as far as she was concerned, and so-called working-class vitality was more often than not fuelled by booze or borderline mental illness than anything constructive” (237). Sue is intrigued by Rachel’s somewhat positive view of Logan City, since she had “spent the last couple of months congratulating herself on her narrow escape ... and had successfully persuaded herself she didn’t miss a thing about ‘Slumsville,’” but now wonders if she really feels that way (237). Kerry states that she and Rachel live in Logan City “‘cos that’s where all the social welfare work is. Eagleby’s just the place for the poor, and the uneducated, and the marginal ... but those people (surprise, surprise) are also the bashers and the drinkers’” (238). Sue claims she hated Eagleby when she lived there and really likes West End, but admits she sometimes thinks “‘about moving back down to Dave’s or just a flat by myself in Eagleby’” (238). However, Sue does not express such feelings on any other occasion and when the novel concludes she is residing happily in West End, her suburban life far behind her.

Living in West End not only provides Sue with safety and freedom and allows her to become more culturally sophisticated, it also precipitates a physical transformation. Before going out for lunch in Chinatown with Kerry and Rachel, Sue changes into “long army pants, a dark blue T-shirt and genuine secondhand Doc Martens” and fastens “a necklace of tiny Murri beads around her neck” (238-39). Kerry and Rachel make a fuss
over her outfit, declare that she looks “fantastic,” and ask, “What have ya done with Sue Wilson?” (239). Sue feels that she finally blends in with her friends and strides out to the car “on top of the world,” thinking, “Maybe I can leave Railway Estate and Eagleby behind ... as she felt the red, black and yellow beads around her neck” (239). On one of the final pages of the novel Kerry half-ironically declares, “So Sue ... you’ve done it! Thrown off the shackles of patriarchy! Vindicated your race and sex! Well done” (241).

Henderson argues that Sue’s “contact with feminist politics and alternative ways of living,” combined with her “gradual uncovering of her Aboriginality,” eventually culminate “in her rejection of the white masculinist values of Eagleby and its destructive culture,” choosing instead “the more plural and feminised habitat of West End” (77).

Along with class and gender, Indigenous identity is one of the primary issues Lucashenko addresses in *Steam Pigs*. Tanya Dalziell argues that the novel refuses “any ethnographic notion of Aboriginality as a fixed and entirely knowable identity” and claims, “Lucashenko deliberately introduces the complexities that the shifting intersections of class, gender, race, and sexuality across cultural differences can precipitate in postcolonial Australia” (144). Sue gradually learns to embrace her Indigenous identity as the narrative progresses. Early in the novel, when Dave mocks her for building a fire in the backyard, the narrator states that Sue considers having “a bit of Aboriginal blood” as “largely an irrelevance” (9). However, by the end of the novel Sue identifies herself primarily as Indigenous.

When Roger watches Sue arrive at his flat for their first date, he approvingly notices her athletic body and attributes it to her being Murri (19). Roger has red hair, freckles and fair skin, but has an Aboriginal father and identifies himself as Indigenous.
Since Roger does not possess outward markers of Aboriginality, Sue initially thinks he is white. When she asks if he has “black blood,” he replies, “Where I come from we just say we’re all Aboriginal, eh? None of that half-caste, quarter-caste bullshit. Like, I’ve got Scots and Irish too, I won’t deny that, but my heart’s with the blackfellas. Waka Waka I am” (20-21). Roger’s father is a member of the stolen generations, taken from his family as a child (21). Sue decides to accept Roger’s claims about his heritage, but thinks that it will take an effort for her to accept him as Indigenous, since she is “used to the northern omnipresent dark faces … Together the two of them might add up to a real Aboriginal, she thought briefly” (21). Roger is sensitive about his fair skin and does not like to be reminded “that he’s freckly and pale” (27, 130).

Roger attends Griffith University, where he takes classes in economics, law, politics and Aboriginal studies, and Sue learns a lot from him about Indigenous history and culture, such as the “Gurindjii fight of the sixties” (43, 52). Roger is very political and forbids Sue from watching the news on the commercial television station, labeling it “ruling class propaganda” (138). Sue reflects that she “had no clue” about her Indigenous identity “until talking to Roger woke her up” (54). By midway through the novel, Sue thinks of herself primarily as Indigenous. When Sue and Roger bargain over a used car she wants to buy from a farmer, and the farmer complains about the drought and times being tough, she thinks, “Times’re tough all round, buddy ... try being a Murri and broke yer whole life and not just when there’s a drought on, then you’ll know what tough times are” (119). Sue comes to embrace her Indigineity to such an extent that she wishes her

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72 In 1966, Vincent Lingiari led a walk-off of the Gurindjii people from the Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory, owned by the British Lord Vestey, in protest over wages and working and living conditions. The dispute evolved into a national battle for Indigenous land rights. For more information about Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindjii fight for land rights, see http://www.lingiari.org/.
skin were darker. While looking at a *Dolly* magazine, Sue resents “the dark skin of the beautiful Maori girl modeling sarongs” and thinks “poorfella me, black inside but looking like a wog all me life. Unreal innit, years ago when Annette [her mother] was a girl all she got for being a bit dark was abuse and running away from the welfare with her babies, and now of course it’s trendy, (so long as you’re not ‘too’ dark that is) and here’s me with me pale skin” (127).

While talking with Kerry and Rachel after one of the many beatings she receives from Roger, Sue claims that being a victim of domestic violence is “‘part of being Murri, you know, you expect it’” (145). Kerry will not let Sue make excuses for domestic violence and challenges her, asking, “‘If Roger was white, would you put up with this? ... Kerry stares Sue down, not angry with her, but angry with a system that could do this to people, fucked up Murries all over the damn country. Land – *gone*, families – *gone*, dignity – *gone*, culture – *gone*” (146). Kerry argues that Sue confuses “colonisation with culture, and blackness with oppression,” declaring, “It’s manipulative bullshit that whites use to fuck minorities all the time, internalised oppression, letting us define what makes you who you are, and till you get over this hurdle, your whole life is going to revolve around being fucked up one way or another. What you’ve more or less said is what most whites think too, that there’s nothing more to being Aboriginal than drinking and fighting and being poor” (147). Throughout the novel, Lucashenko uses the suburban setting to confront questions of Indigenous identity and racism in similarly direct language.

Sue claims she does not have “‘some big identity crisis,’” but had previously told Kerry and Rachel she was raised white and was deeply hurt when other Murries “reminded her she had a family of coconuts” (145). When Sue visits her family in
Townsville and takes Kirk with her, she points out Palm Island from the window of the plane and wonders “whether she’d ever know her true family story, ever know why her mother wouldn’t talk about growing up, and which was her tribe” (149). Sue thinks of Dave as a “coconut” and decides he does not understand assimilation and reclaiming Indigenous identity: “It was all too complicated for Sue to try and explain to him, he’d just mock her and ask her when she was going to put in for land rights, like she had no right to and it was all a bit of a joke. The whites had done a real good job on him” (166). Sue’s mother does not view herself as Indigenous at all: Sue attributes this to shame caused by “being brought up like a whitefella … they’d brainwashed the old people so well that it wasn’t a matter of denying their Aboriginality, more a matter of them really thinking they were white” (166). While in Townsville visiting her family, Sue tries to pay attention to a news story on television about land rights, but cannot hear the report because her family members are uninterested and want to talk instead (156).

Once Sue returns to suburbia from Townsville, Kerry continues to push her to develop her Indigenous identity and take responsibility for her life. Kerry declares that “a person can only blame society while they’re still ignorant” and argues that people who know that they have to live with racism and sexism every day have to decide how to live: “You want to be a victim, fine, go ahead … Just don’t expect any help from me to do it. There’s enough white wankers out there who are more than happy to see blacks as the downtrodden sufferers, and you know why? … Cos victims are safe, sister. No-one ever got challenged by a victim” (189). After Sue is accepted into the Bachelor of Humanities course at Griffith University and decides to major in Aboriginal studies (191), Kerry
warns her that the other Murries at university will disapprove if she speaks out and projects strength, since it “challenges their own way of thinking” (190).

While Rachel helps Sue move into her flat in West End, Sue learns that Bianca, the owner, an “ordinary old British Aussie … another West End feminist, heavy on the ideology,” has been discussing Murri issues with Kerry for years and jumped at the chance to do a good deed for an Indigenous woman (220). Sue is annoyed, but thinks, “yeah, okay Biankah I’ll be your huddled masses if it makes you feel better. Just don’t think we’re even … rent on a continent don’t come cheap” (220). Once in West End, Sue begins reading a collection of stories by an unnamed Indigenous author and starts contemplating issues of land ownership and belonging. Lucashenko includes five pages of a piece entitled “Anyday Story,” which is written from the point of view of a male Indigenous narrator from Brisbane. The narrator of “Anyday Story” claims, “in the white places of Australia,” such as Brisbane, “the Europeans walk arrogantly, and exhibit none of the fear they bring to Alice Springs or Kakadu. They drive to work up Brunswick Street, or take the train home to Yeerongpilly without pausing to think” (229).73

After reading “Anyday Story,” Sue reflects on information Roger passed on to her from Aboriginal studies lectures:

Queensland coppers issued licenses to shoot blacks … they used native police to track and betray tribes not their own … they came swooping in at dawn and [within] half an hour it was all over, for the Bundjalung, the Kamiloroi, the Yugambeh, the Yuggera … and the coastal nations have had to rebuild from splinters and remnants … A slow growing back of the clan over the years,

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73 Brunswick Street is a major thoroughfare in the inner Brisbane suburbs of New Farm and Fortitude Valley; Yeerongpilly is a southern suburb of Brisbane.
After reading about indigenous history, Sue goes to sleep without the aid of a bedtime drink for the first time in weeks (234). Lucashenko presents Indigenous history as a cure for Sue’s nightmares, a positive substitute for alcohol or marijuana, and the knowledge that will allow Sue to fully embrace and understand her Indigenous identity. In her essay “A Lighter Shade of Pale: Being Aboriginal in 2002,” Lucashenko argues, “there’s more than one way to be a blackfella” and points out that “blackfellas still live all over Australia ... Murris in Queensland. Koories in New South Wales and Victoria. Other words in other places. Some of us still dark, still black looking. Some of us with fair skin and blonde hair, only inside we could be real black” (1). Lucashenko insists that skin color is unimportant: “its about what’s under the skin. Your heart, and your mind. Your spirit” (1).

Nevertheless, to a great extent, skin color affects the manner in which Indigenous characters in *Steam Pigs* perceive themselves and are treated by others. The novel contains numerous instances of racism, most of them inextricably linked to perceptions of skin color. Roger’s cousin’s kids have “their father’s dark skin” and Sue realizes that “it won’t be long ... before the local shop owners and coppers’11 have them pegged as Trouble” (27). While Sue is in Townsville, she witnesses the harassment and arrest of an
Indigenous man by the local police, which enrages her: "'Geez, don't it make yer fucken wild! They get away with murder, I hate them, I just hate them!'" (182). When her friends console her and suggest that the man will soon be out on bail, Sue exclaims, "'But he didn't do anything in the first place! He's gotta go to the watchhouse, why? Cos he's black, that's why. And if they killed him, who'd fucken care? Just a bunch of poor hopeless blackfellas ...' Sue spoke bitterly, thinking of little black Oliver who'd been in her class in grade eight, and who'd died in the cell over two years ago now" (182). The issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody is referenced a number of times in the novel, and Sue sometimes wears a T-shirt declaring, "Stop Black Deaths in Custody" (135).

At the end of the novel, Sue walks through the Brisbane's Fortitude Valley and observes a group of Murries hanging out on some steps, "one of them begging with a weather eye open for the law, the rest passing a bottle around and laughing at their countryman's lack of success ... Sue found herself wondering morbidly which of them would die next, would it be another 'accident' in the park, a drunken brawl that got 'out of hand' ... another suspicious death in custody" (243). Remembering the lack of opportunity in Eagleby, Sue thinks, "And now I'm a million miles away from all that ... living in luxury in my flat that the government's paying for, and half me life spent listening to people at uni talk about blackfella's problems or poor people's problems like they know what the fuck they're on about" (243). Thanks to being "saved" by Kerry and Rachel, Sue occupies a liminal space in society somewhere between the Indigenous people begging on the streets and the privileged whites who are her peers at university.

In her autobiographical essay "Black on Black," Lucashenko declares, "Racism isn't in the past" (114). While counseling Sue regarding what to expect once she starts
university, Kerry claims that whites will dismiss Sue as “just angry, or politically naïve, or a thousand other things, before they’ll admit that Murries can be as smart and capable as them. The racism’s engrained into us Sue, and it takes constant weeding-out” (190). Sue considers the fact that just up the road from her new luxury flat, the notorious Boggo Road jail is “full of black women and poor women and addicted women and women who snapped from being bashed one time too many” (243). Reflecting angrily on a debate at university over a case in which an Indigenous woman was released after serving six years of a life sentence, Sue wonders how she refrained “from slamming this white bitch’s teeth down her throat” and thinks how easy it is for outsiders to argue that being released after serving just six years of a life sentence is a miscarriage of justice: “Try living it from inside those white walls of time. Try being black and being in jail when you walk out the gate, born jailed, live jailed, die jailed” (243-44). In another of her essays, “Many Prisons,” Lucashenko argues that mainstream Australian society “does not understand Aboriginal people. White people and most non-Aboriginal people of colour in Australia have almost no idea what it is to be Aboriginal” (140).

Although Lucashenko presents the treatment of Indigenous people by non-Indigenous Australians extremely negatively, she is also not afraid to address problems within the Indigenous community, such as domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and racism against whites and other groups. During the aforementioned pub car park brawl, Roger calls Sue’s conquest, Carlos, a “‘wog,’” and moments later, when Sue fights the woman whom Roger has been flirting with, she calls her a “‘fucken ugly old white slut’” (83). Thus, although both Roger and Sue are often the victims of racism, they also often use racist epithets against others. Sue’s racism is revealed again during the
Townsville section of the novel, when she refers to her brother’s girlfriend as a “‘dirty white slut’” and during a confrontation with a trucker in a pub, who she calls a “fucken ugly white cunt” (175, 177). After moving to West End, Sue continues to hold onto her racism, thinking of her flat-mate Melinda as “a stiff whitey” (223).

Like other Australian suburban novels, *Steam Pigs* contains a number of references to the bush and the natural environment. Although Lucashenko does not directly address the destruction of the natural environment caused by the development of suburbia, she depicts it as the true site of indigenous culture and a site to which characters long to escape. During her early days in Eagleby, Sue creates a garden outside Dave’s house, in a “largely futile” attempt “to coax greenery into the Eagleby dust and rocks” (16). However, Sue does not create a traditional suburban garden consisting of English-style flowerbeds; rather, she plants Indigenous species and experiences “solace and serenity” as she waters her garden: “When she looked after her bottlebrush trees it was like she was in another world, earthspeaking” (16-17). Later in the novel, after Sue moves in with Roger, she worries that her Indigenous plants are not being watered and wonders if they will survive the summer (54). Here, the Indigenous plants clearly represent both Sue’s own plight and the future of Australia’s Indigenous people.

Lucashenko presents the bush as a site of escape and renewal, especially for the suburban Indigenous characters. While contemplating Dave’s sorrow over being abandoned by his wife of eight years, Sue thinks, “Man, you wanna take a trip out bush, get your head clear again” (25). Similarly, Sue thinks that if Roger “spends some time out of the city he’ll settle down ... stop having these periodic fits of depression that come over him, stop smoking [marijuana] so much and ease up on Kirk too” (55). The narrator
reveals that Sue possesses “great faith in the recuperative powers of the bush” and believes that if a person can “listen to the early morning magpies, or see the sun dawning on dew-wet grass without feeling something holy,” they may as well shoot themselves in the head (55). After one of his many fights with Sue, Roger thinks that he should “head out west away from the bloody cities and drama, go bush” (112). Although Lucashenko does not directly address the destruction of the bush caused by the construction of the suburban streets and houses, she explicitly addresses the issue of land ownership and Indigenous history.

During a scene in which Roger drives into the city from Beenleigh, past the suburbs of Springwood, Rochedale, Eight Mile Plains, and Mt. Gravatt, the narrator notes that the region is Yuggera country (111-112). Lucashenko explicitly depicts suburbia as occupying Indigenous land; however, she does not depict suburbia as having replaced Yuggera country, but as existing on top of it, as an overlay, so that the true history and identity of the land exists underneath, visible to those who possess Indigenous knowledge. Lucashenko has obviously thought deeply about the relationship between suburbia and Indigenous ownership and belonging. In her essay “Gender, Genre and Geography,” Lucashenko claims that “the vast majority” of Australians “are still struggling with the concept of the land of the quarter-acre block and the great Australian dream” (50).

Lucashenko argues that Indigenous people who “know the land and sea” allow it to “enter into” them and possess “the potential to experience healing and wholeness”;

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74 As I child, I lived in Rochedale between 1980 and 1985 and attended primary school in Springwood. Although I had Indigenous neighbors and classmates, I had no verbal interaction with them and was never made aware that I lived in Yuggera country. I was not even aware of the fact that I lived on stolen land, which I think was pretty typical for a white child living in Australia in the early 1980s.
moreover, they “don’t need to know about quarter acre blocks because geography doesn’t come in that, it comes in whacking great slabs and plateaus and beaches. It comes in valleys and ranges. It comes with responsibilities attached and it comes with the ability to teach us how to live correctly if we are humble enough to recognise our true significance in relation to it” (50). Here, Lucashenko clearly argues that suburbia divides Indigenous land into discrete pieces that makes it difficult for people to appreciate the scale of the natural environment and to forge strong connections with it. Moreover, she rejects the suburban quarter-acre block as an artificial division. Lucashenko has rejected suburbia in her own life by moving from Brisbane to a small town in northern New South Wales.

Throughout *Steam Pigs*, Sue struggles with issues of belonging, in several senses: namely, belonging to her family, belonging in working class suburbia, belonging to the Indigenous community, and belonging to Indigenous land. Near the beginning of the novel, Sue admits she belongs in Eagleby, but later adopts inner-Brisbane as home. Walking through the inner suburbs of Brisbane, Sue remembers “Anyday Story” and sees the city “through different, more confident eyes,” realizing “for the first time” that she can claim it “as her own, [as] a part of her life and her psyche” (239-40). Sue remembers that the land Brisbane occupies is Murri land, “whatever they’d done to it or put on it. It was Yuggera country ... and that meant she had a connection to work from. No matter what monied artifacts they put on the surface, her belonging roots reached deep into the soil, anchoring her like an old rivergum” (240).

Henderson argues that Sue’s escape from outer suburbia to “‘bohemian’ inner-city West End” resembles “a classic bourgeois trajectory of self-improvement” and “the feminist quest for personal liberation away from the deserts of the outer-suburbs” (78).
However, Henderson suggests that the narrative is complicated by “Sue’s growing awareness of her Aboriginal identity and its specific history of space,” since she simultaneously occupies Yuggera country and the Brisbane of the white feminists and yuppies (78). In “Black on Black,” Lucashenko addresses colonialism and Indigenous land ownership, arguing that labeling Australia “post-colonial” is “the biggest crock of shit I’ve been asked to swallow in a long time,” since two years before the publication of her article, the government of Queensland “used its legislative powers to put 12 percent of the state off-limits to native title claims … is that post-colonialism? Cos, if it is, it feels a lot like colonialism to the Indigenous owners” (115). Likewise, Graham Huggan states that even though Australia is “postcolonial with respect to its former British colonizers, it remains very much colonial or, perhaps more accurately, neo-colonial it its treatment of its own indigenous peoples” (Australian Literature 27).

*Steam Pigs* is an innovative and confrontational novel that addresses many of the most pressing issues in contemporary Australian society, including Indigenous identity, land ownership and belonging; domestic violence; gender and sexuality; alcohol and drug abuse; and racism. However, the novel ultimately adopts a conservative position by presenting suburbia as a locale that should be rejected in favor of the inner city, which serves to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction and detracts from the novel’s potential to demonstrate a new method of engagement with suburbia. Moreover, the fact that Sue is “saved” and enlightened by urban whites, rather than her fellow Indigenous Australians, sends a troubling message about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, echoing the banishment of the Indigenous girl’s ghost in *Cloudstreet* by the birth of a white child. *Steam Pigs* suggests that the
solutions for Indigenous working-class, suburban social problems are to be provided by white university-educated residents of the inner city, a relationship that perpetuates the colonial relationship between white and Indigenous Australians.

**Subtopia: Suburbia, Radicalism, Terrorism, and Expatriation**

A.L. McCann's novel *Subtopia* (2005) is the most recently published example of suburban fiction addressed in this study. Like Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs*, published eight years earlier, McCann's novel combines innovative and provocative subject matter with an overwhelmingly negative depiction of suburbia. However, unlike Lucashenko, McCann does not address issues of Indigenous identity or the struggle for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to develop a strong sense of belonging, thereby ignoring several of the most important contemporary issues in Australian society. Moreover, Indigenous Australians are conspicuously absent from *Subtopia*. Nevertheless, as Peter Pierce argues, McCann's novel is a groundbreaking addition to Australian literature, a "bold and adventurous" novel that possesses a range that "makes most contemporary Australian fiction seem parochial" ("Subtopia" 1). In his recent article on the novel, Rodney Wetherell argues that *Subtopia* deserves the high praise it has received (175). Despite its fascinating engagement with radicalism, terrorism and expatriation, *Subtopia* is yet another addition to the body of anti-suburban fiction, drawing from and perpetuating an anti-suburban tradition that is now more than four decades old.

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75 The architecture critic Deyan Sudjic states that the term "subtopia" was used in the 1950s by *The Architectural Review* in what he describes as their "war" on "the suburban dream" (12). Discussing the novel's title, McCann states: "Subtopia" is a satirical contraction of 'suburbia' and 'utopia.' I wanted to suggest the ways in which urban and suburban environments deliver much less than what they promise us. I also wanted to evoke, ultimately, a politicized consciousness linked to an awareness of that fact. The sense of utopia betrayed is as evident to me in New York City as it is in the outer suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney" (Nicholson 1).
Moreover, given McCann’s extensive knowledge of Australian literature, especially suburban fiction, the anti-suburbanism of the novel is surely not accidental.

Andrew McCann was born in Adelaide in 1966 and grew up in the Melbourne suburb of East Brighton. He attended private school before undertaking an arts degree at the University of Melbourne, followed by a Ph.D. in English at Cornell University. McCann returned to Australia in 1996 and taught successively at the University of Queensland and the University of Melbourne before accepting his current position at Dartmouth College in 2005, where he is Associate Professor of English.76 He has published extensively on Australian and British literature and is the leading critic on suburbia in Australian literature, and is often cited in this project. He publishes fiction as A.L. McCann, partly to distinguish himself from fellow Australian novelist Andrew McGahan (Griffin 1).77

McCann’s debut novel, The White Body of Evening (2002), won the 2002 Aurealis Award for Excellence in Horror Fiction. McCann’s decision to publish his second novel, Subtopia, with Melbourne’s independent Vulgar Press, an independent left-wing publisher, especially after publishing his first novel with HarperCollins, reflects his disenchantment with the mainstream Australian publishing industry. On its website, the Vulgar Press prominently declares that it is “dedicated to the publication of working-class and other radical forms of writing.”78 McCann has expressed his views on the publishing industry in interviews, and, most memorably, in his controversial essay, “How To Fuck a

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76 Interestingly, the biographical note accompanying one of McCann’s most recent works of literary criticism, an article in Overland entitled “The International of Excreta: World Literature and its Other,” describes McCann as “an Australian writer currently teaching in the US and author of Subtopia,” downplaying his privileged status as an academic at an Ivy league institution, and privileging his role as a novelist.

77 Biographical information from Griffin (1) and AustLit: http://www.austlit.edu.au.


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Tuscan Garden.” In response to a question from Kara Nicholson regarding his intended audience for *Subtopia*, McCann claims the novel “will appeal to disgruntled Generation-X types and to everyone else bored with national allegories, happy endings and the idea that we have to feel good about crap. It is also a novel about radical experience (or its impossibility) and the ghosts of the late sixties and early seventies. So it is pitched at the left more generally” (1).

As an academic who grew up in Melbourne’s suburbs and has written extensively about suburbia in Australian fiction, McCann possesses a broad and deep knowledge of his material. The novel’s themes, including suburbia, expatriation, male friendship, consumerism, radical politics, music, terrorism, and the gothic, overlap McCann’s academic expertise. Michelle Griffin notes that *Subtopia* draws heavily from an honors seminar McCann taught at the University of Melbourne entitled “Suburbia in Post-War Fiction,” and McCann has stated that fiction allows him to explore his ideas “in a way that is liberated from the narrowness of academic writing” (Griffin 1). When asked about the novel’s setting, McCann states that he has spent most of his life in cities and that his experience “is almost entirely urban” (Nicholson 1). Thus, the suburban setting of the novel reflects both McCann’s life experience and his academic interests and expertise. It is fitting that McCann has been mistaken for McGahan, as *Subtopia* could easily have been marketed as grunge fiction due to the characters’ drug and alcohol abuse, the urban settings, and the graphic descriptions of sexual acts and organs.79

McCann is clearly uninterested in pleasing nationalists and satisfying mainstream literary tastes. Not only does *Subtopia* avoid common themes for Australian novels, such as first contact, exploration, the bush, and national identity, McCann mocks celebrity

79 Andrew McGahan’s debut novel *Praise* (1992) is the archetype of Australian “grunge fiction.”
authors such as David Malouf, Thomas Keneally and Peter Carey through the figure of David Murray-Merry. McCann takes many risks in Subtopia, not just in terms of subject matter and setting, but also with his narrator and plot (or lack thereof). The protagonist and first-person narrator, Julian Farrell, is not very likeable or worthy of admiration; he is sarcastic, passive, and lacks ambition. Wetherell describes Julian as an “exceptionally humourless young man” and “a melancholy, colourless type who somehow manages to be engaging” (175). Subtopia begins in 1977 in Moorabbin, a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, after a brief prologue set in Berlin reveals that Martin Bernhard, one of the central characters, is dead, and that Julian is “Sick, angry, unattractive” and “pushing thirty” (10).

In his article “Subtopia or Sunnyside?,” Wetherell describes Moorabbin as located in “Melbourne’s vast sandbelt, a score or more of suburbs straddling the Nepean Highway from, say, Brighton down towards Frankston. Moorabbin is flat, relatively featureless, and bisected by a multi-lane highway. Like much of suburbia throughout the Western world, it looks unsurprising though not unpleasant. It is neither posh nor down-at-heel” (174). Eleven-year-old Julian meets Martin, a rebel from a broken family, moments before witnessing a symbolic auto accident. Martin quickly becomes the most important person in Julian’s life, and their relationship unites the novel, despite its tenuous nature. The novel is divided into four sections, each carrying titles indicating the major themes: “Notes from Suburbia,” “Free Radicals,” “Your Sickness is a Weapon,”

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80 David Murray-Merry is a fictional Australian celebrity author in Subtopia who lives in New York City (like Peter Carey) while writing novels set in Australia, enjoys an international reputation, and frequently returns to Australia for readings and media appearances.

81 Julian is the same age in 1977 as McCann was that year.
and "Dislocations." Within these sections, the action moves from Melbourne to Berlin, then to New York and back to Melbourne, before concluding with a return to Berlin.

Discussing the international movements within the novel, McCann states: "The novel’s movement from Melbourne to Berlin is partly about an interest in this fantasy of a radical, politicized city that is sharply juxtaposed to suburbia" (Nicholson 1). About half of the novel is set in suburbia, including the Melbourne suburbs Moorabbin, Elwood, Brighton, St. Kilda, Malvern, Fitzroy and Carlton, and an unnamed suburb of New York City located in Queens, all of which McCann depicts in an overwhelmingly negative manner. Like Johnston’s _My Brother Jack_ and Lucashenko’s _Steam Pigs, Subtopia_ contains many explicitly anti-suburban passages, and presents suburbia in a one-dimensional manner. Almost half of the novel takes place in Germany, while a little less than a third is set in the USA. In addition to covering a lot of ground geographically, the novel spans three decades, from the late seventies in Moorabbin, to the early eighties in St. Kilda, the late eighties in Berlin, and the early nineties in Queens.

Both the plot and subject matter of _Subtopia_ reveal the influence of Malouf’s _Johnno_ and Johnston’s _My Brother Jack_; all three novels are explicitly anti-suburban and feature protagonists who reject suburbia and escape to Europe. Additionally, the relationship between Julian and Martin is remarkably similar to that of Johnno and Dante in _Johnno_ and David and Jack in _My Brother Jack_. Julian receives a copy of _My Brother Jack_ from his father and strongly identifies with the novel’s “near-hysterical hatred” of suburbia, states that he had not previously realized one could write a book about hating suburbia, and credits the novel with consolidating his dreams of escape (56). Pierce argues that the novel is partly “a grunge version” of _Johnno_ ("Subtopia” 1). Although
McCann’s direct, gritty and often-graphic prose style is unlike that of Malouf (who is mentioned in Subtopia), the novel, like Johnno, is packed with references to European writers, including Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Camus, Dickens, Fielding, Trollope, Kant, Hesse and Adorno. Like Dante and Johnno, Julian’s intellectual life revolves around European texts and ideas. Since only a third of the novel takes place in Australia and the narrator is ambivalent about his nationality, lacks a strong desire to return home, and rejects mainstream Australian society, one could argue that the novel is barely Australian.

The anti-suburbanism of Subtopia is already evident in the brief prologue, which, despite being set in Berlin, refers to the “wide, flat suburbs of Melbourne’s south,” where one has to “concentrate hard to effect even the most minimal kind of transformation” (10). The first chapter begins with Julian recounting an act he witnessed at the age of ten beside the swimming pool in a suburban backyard: his uncle, nicknamed the Silver Fox, molests Julian’s nine-year-old sister Connie by slipping his hand inside her bathing suit (13). Not only does McCann associate suburbia with child sexual abuse from the outset, he also associates suburbia with the Silver Fox, a lecherous, egocentric character who works in “real estate and development,” races a yacht named Moby Dick, keeps a stash of pornography, and evokes an “easy, leisured lifestyle,” replete with a “house in Hampton, the pool, a pine sauna, a big Ford Fairlane” (14, 17). The narrator encourages the reader to despise the Silver Fox, who is conflated with suburban ideals, and thus despise suburbia as well.

Julian describes his childhood home in Moorabbin as “a brick-veneer box with paper-thin fibro walls” (20), a description that echoes the anti-suburban description of brick-veneer houses in White’s Riders in the Chariot, Johnston’s My Brother Jack,
Malouf’s *Johnno*, Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, and Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs*. Martin also lives in “a brown brick box,” although his home has “fallen into disrepair” and is “surrounded by giant weeds” that have “taken over the lawn … The backyard was worse. Waist-high grass concealed all sorts of junk … The yard looked like the ruins of an ancient society reclaimed by wild, untamed vegetation” (24-25). McCann’s description of Martin’s backyard hints at the presence of indigenous vegetation and suggests the bush; it reveals a suburban backyard that is not controlled and does not conform to suburban norms and ideals, thus symbolizing Martin’s radicalism.

Although Julian, unlike Martin, is not a radical, he does not meet the standards of behavior expected of a suburban male and refuses to conform to suburban ideals. His Aunt Lois makes fun of his pale complexion and urges him to spend more time in the sun. Julian’s cousin Danny confides that his father, the Silver Fox, thinks Julian is physically unfit and a negative influence: “These assumptions of healthy, Australian boyhood, against which I so manifestly failed, wormed their way into me without much resistance. I had a vision of myself skulking away into the darkness of my room like a cockroach, hiding from the sun, hiding from the vistas of health and vitality that populated the world beyond me” (28). Julian gives in to the expectations for a time and distances himself from Martin, whom Julian describes as “the one person more physically unfit for life than I was. He was uglier, more awkward and much worse at sport” (28).

Julian thinks of Australian suburban life in the late 1970s as “an organized culture of distraction” in which his uncle presides “over groups of revelers glued to the TV set, obsessed with epic Davis Cup ties, fifth sets that never ended, or the high drama of the centenary test match” (30). Julian recalls that Martin “was already living in a world that
was so much broader … In his midst everything else started to seem trivial, ephemeral or childish” (30). Martin is Julian’s window to the wider world and constantly introduces him to ideas and behaviors that he would not have encountered within the confines of his own relatively sheltered middle-class suburban existence. Towards the end of 1977, Julian and Martin start spending as much time as possible away from home, wandering the streets of Moorabbin. However, they find the “deserted” suburban streets “every bit as claustrophobic as the houses” they try to escape (36).

In one of the novel’s many anti-suburban passages, Julian describes Moorabbin as populated by “Red-brick dumps along the highway, [and] filthy snotty kids in the commission houses,” prompting “the intolerable feeling of being stuck in some sort of corpseworld – an intractable and obstinate suburban expanse that could survive any aspiration pitted against it” (36). Wetherell notes that here Julian recalls his view of Moorabbin in 1977, when he was eleven years old, and argues that at such an age “boredom with one’s environs is probably endemic, and neither driver’s licence nor wider opportunities have come along to lift it” (174-75). However, Wetherell points out that Julian’s “later impressions of the suburb are no more positive” and questions whether Moorabbin is “really as bad as it is described” in Subtopia, stating, “I live in the sandbelt myself, in an equally flat and featureless suburb only a few kilometers from Moorabbin, and had not, till I read Subtopia, considered that I might be living in corpseworld or near it” (175, 174). Jay Thompson, also a Melbourne resident, provides an alternative interpretation, writing that he finds McCann’s descriptions of suburbia “enthralling,” “because they really capture the sense of banality, repetition and emptiness that characterises many a suburban existence” (279). However, although Thompson clearly
subscribes to the anti-suburban intellectual tradition here, he later admits, “the portrait of suburban life offered in Subtopia might ultimately be too bleak” (original emphasis) (279).

McCann’s narrator occasionally slips into an academic tone and comments on suburbia in a manner more appropriate to an essay than a novel. During one of Julian’s diatribes against suburbia, he declares:

Events in suburbia seldom generate the dynamism that can propel us on to something else. Rather, they tend to stasis, like a boring, plotless movie in which the camera seems to limp from one moment to the next, without being able to establish any meaningful or vital connection between scenes. I guess this lack of dynamism is part of the point of the suburb. Despite the multitude of little traumas that cluster around it, suburban experience is exactly the opposite of historical experience, which is big on making connections, big on building narratives out of whatever events it can lay its hands on. The suburb is history at a standstill. (40-41)

Passages such as these, written in a more formal style than the rest of the novel, suggest to the reader that Julian’s views on suburbia are really McCann’s views. McCann certainly does not give the reader any reason to believe otherwise, and there are no passages celebrating suburbia to offset Julian’s constant negativity. Julian’s repeated description of suburbia as a “corpseworld” perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition, and given his knowledge of both the fiction and criticism of suburbia, McCann surely does so deliberately.
Martin is the first of the main characters to escape Moorabbin. At the end of 1977, his mother remarries and the re-configured family moves towards the city, into the inner suburb of Elwood, adjacent to Elsternwick, George Johnston’s childhood suburb and the setting for *My Brother Jack*. Martin’s mother Carol and her new husband Jeff purchase “a large but dilapidated Federation-style house” (41). Julian notes that within twenty years the Elwood house would be “worth a small fortune,” once Elwood became “another key location in the Antipodean fantasy of ‘cosmopolitan’ living,” but argues that “in the late seventies Elwood was just eccentric, a place that jarred against the suburban desire for neat, well-organised spaces” (42). Thus, Julian characterizes the move from Moorabbin into Elwood as a move out of suburbia into a more exciting and liberated space.

Martin’s house in Elwood is reminiscent of the Turleys’ Toorak mansion in *My Brother Jack*. When Julian first visits Martin’s Elwood house, he expresses a delight and enthusiasm for its difference to the suburban norm, echoing David’s sentiments regarding the Turleys’ mansion: “It was a wonderful, ramshackle place, quickly filling up with Carol’s flourishing penchant for *objets d’art* . . . bronze statuettes, tinted glass, antique wood, cut crystal and elaborate chandeliers . . . But it was a shambles as well. Martin left food all over the place. No one seemed to notice” (42). Martin’s Elwood house, just like the Turley mansion in *My Brother Jack*, Dante’s South Brisbane childhood home in *Johnno*, the Cloud Street house in Winton’s novel, and Kerry and Rachel’s Queenslander in *Steam Pigs*, serves as a signifier of cosmopolitan difference, in opposition to the brick-veneer “boxes” of suburbia. In *Subtopia* and all of the aforementioned novels, the larger, older home, usually located closer to the city centre, is presented as superior to the newer brick-veneer homes of outer suburbia.
Julian’s escape from suburbia begins when he starts attending Melbourne High in third form (ninth grade), “a boys-only school that was a longish train-ride away in South Yarra” (like Toorak, an exclusive inner suburb) (48). Once at Melbourne High, Julian begins hanging out with a new group of friends who are “all equally dislocated, all travelling in from equally far-flung suburbs” (48). After school, Julian and his friends meet in the city and watch movies or play video games (48). Thus, Julian spends most of his leisure time in the city, only returning to suburbia at night. However, Julian’s escape from suburbia is incomplete, and during the school holidays, he hangs out with Martin in Moorabbin. The pair find themselves back where they were three years earlier, “wandering through the empty streets” with their “furtive longings ... virtually crushed ... by the world of mute, inexpressive detail spreading out from the highway, ossified in the bitumen, the gutters, the little fences, the red-brick tedium” (51). Both Julian and Martin view Australian culture as inferior, derivative and oppressive. Julian is disgusted by the consumerism and hedonism that he sees as representative of Australian culture. Julian and Martin despise the Australian obsession with sport and Martin declares, “‘Australia is a fucking hole ... the most vacuous place on the planet’” (142).

Having noticed Julian reading Ibsen, Camus and Graham Greene, Julian’s father gives him a copy of My Brother Jack before he begins university. During the summer between high school and university, Julian reads The Brothers Karamazov instead of going to the beach, and looking back on that time, states, “Even then it was clear that reading these books had become a way of evading the narrowness of my surroundings, a refuge, a means of escape, a flightpath into a purely individualised world that sheltered me from the outside ... it was My Brother Jack and Johnston’s love affair with Greece
that consolidated my fantasy of flight and gave it tangible coordinates” (56). Julian's hopes of escape centre on Carlton and Fitzroy, inner suburbs which he associates with "cafes, bohemia, [and] counter-culture” (57). Julian enrolls at the University of Melbourne, in Carlton, and thus spends his days outside suburbia in one of the hubs of the counter-culture.

Walking through the city towards Flinders Street station during his first week of university, Julian reflects that he will soon “be back in the void of the suburbs, [amongst] miles of brick veneer, asbestos and scalloped roof-tiles spreading to the bay on one side, and to swampy, semi-rural wastelands and landfills on the other” (65). In a rail journey that echoes (in reverse) the passage in *My Brother Jack* where David takes the train into the city after learning of the murder of Jessica Wray, and contains some of *Subtopia's* most anti-suburban sentiments, Julian describes traveling past the railyards, the MCG, the platforms of Richmond station … Old factories, graffiti, the Rosella sign, sawtooth visions of industrial decay leading over the river to South Yarra. Then Toorak, Hawksburn, Armadale, Malvern, the Caulfield racecourse, shopping strips, speeding automobiles, one house after another … the ghosts of tired commuters dozing off with their newspapers and their paperback novels. Lassitude, boredom, a multitude of obstinate details crowding out thought at the arse-end of the working day, lonely wage-slaves trudging home to the sluggish rhythms of commerce, goods and services, professional intercourse, mass transport, furtive cravings, gross domestic product and a leisurely game of golf on the weekend … For a moment I felt lost, utterly lost, a fragile bit of biology in a huge system of roads and rail and random associations, about to vanish altogether
with the compulsive shuddering of the train, about to wake up on the other side of the darkened glass, a transparent reflection of myself. A ghost. (65-66)

In typical anti-suburban fashion, Julian associates the physical infrastructure of suburbia, capitalism, and industry with slavery, thwarted desires, disintegration, the loss of agency, and, ultimately, death. For Julian, a fulfilling, healthy and interesting life is impossible in suburbia. He constantly depicts capitalism and consumerism as a disease, conflating them with his fear of cancer, and repeatedly refers to suburbia as the “corpseworld.”

In an attempt to transcend what he perceives to be his mundane suburban existence, Julian develops a fascination with radicalism and terrorism. Subtopia incorporates radicals and terrorists from the 1970s as heroes and objects of desire for Julian. McCann’s depiction of radicalism and terrorism opposes the dominant rhetoric of post-9/11 Western culture, which overwhelmingly portrays terrorism as an evil activity predominantly conducted by Muslim, Middle-Eastern, anti-Western males. In contrast, McCann’s radicals and terrorists are European or of European descent, the majority are female, and none of them are motivated by religious extremism. McCann’s terrorists resist the dominant ideology, rather than trying to impose an ideology on others.

Julian is seduced by radicalism and terrorism during his adolescence. He recalls memories of “West German terrorists, women mostly,” whom he associates with a story he hears “about kidnappers in Europe cutting off the ear of a boy they were holding for ransom” (29). Over the next two decades, Julian becomes obsessed with half a dozen characters who are either radicals or terrorists, including Martin, Ulrike Meinhof, Ingrid Gutmann, Anja and Penny Gibson. Additionally, Julian continually fantasizes about terrorism, either in the form of large-scale terrorist attacks on Melbourne and New York,
or small-scale attacks that he perpetrates. Julian’s fascination with radicalism and terrorism is inherently anti-suburban; it is driven by a desire to transcend his suburban existence and transform himself into a person who decidedly not suburban, middle-class, passive, law-abiding and responsible. Moreover, as Sornig argues, Julian conflates his desire for transcendence through radicalism and terrorism with his sexual desires for Ulrike Meinhof, Ingrid, Penny, Anja and Martin (68).

Julian’s first contact with a radical occurs in 1977 when he meets Martin moments before they witness a car accident. McCann’s description of the accident could easily be that of a terrorist attack: “The sound of crushed metal and broken glass exploded through the lethargy of the afternoon, hit us like a shock wave, and then jangled away into eerie silence” (21). Martin’s reaction is to comment that the spectacle is “Just like a film” before proceeding to assist the victim, while Julian remains mute and idle (22). From the dramatic beginning of the friendship through to Martin’s death in Berlin nearly two decades later, Julian and Martin occupy opposite positions of passivity and activity. Pierce argues that Julian is drawn to Martin by his own “melancholy and obsessive” personality (1). Similarly, Sornig argues that Martin is Julian’s “romanticized, ghosted Other” and that their friendship gives Julian the opportunity to vicariously live dangerously without having to “move beyond his own conventionality and safety” (68).

McCann constructs Martin’s status as a radical through a series of actions that consistently contradict, oppose or actively resist cultural norms. Soon after they meet, Julian and Martin discuss military history while shooting toy tanks with an air rifle in Martin’s suburban backyard. Martin claims that the single biggest death toll in World War Two was inflicted by the Allied bombing of Dresden, adopting a position
sympathetic to the traditional enemy (26). Julian states that prior to meeting Martin, who shoots and melts toy U.S. Marines, he was unaware America could be the subject of animosity (26). Martin’s radical ideas and sympathies are constantly paired with real and threatened violence. When Julian’s cousin physically confronts Martin during a game of backyard cricket, Martin threatens to burn his father’s yacht (27). On another occasion, angry with Julian for ignoring him, Martin grabs a beer bottle, smashes the base against a gutter, and chases Julian with his improvised weapon across a car park (30). Martin goes so far as to imitate actual terrorist tactics when he makes a Molotov cocktail. Claiming that he is practicing to bomb the Silver Fox’s yacht, he ignites the weapon and hurls it against the back wall of a suburban milk bar, where it explodes into flames.

Julian and Martin’s paths diverge when Julian transfers to Melbourne High and Martin moves to Elwood. Once Julian begins university several years later, the two are reacquainted through mutual friends in St. Kilda, where Martin shares a flat with his German girlfriend, Anja, lives off the dole, and spends his time drinking and taking drugs. Julian is drawn to St. Kilda by the presence of political radicals, punks, goths, prostitutes and drug addicts, all of whom lend the community an aura of rebellion and counter-culture cache, in contrast to the middle-class restraint of Moorabbin. Julian admits that he hangs out in St. Kilda hoping to bump into Martin, “partly so that I could prove to myself that we were still friends, and partly because I knew I wanted to cross the line, the border between me and the delirious renunciation of that small, constricted self that was always so threatened by Martin’s nihilistic presence” (97-98). Julian perceives Martin’s radical lifestyle as a means of escaping his own boring conventionality, which he sees as a product of suburbia.
While drunk and stoned at a party during his first year at university, Julian sees a wanted poster for the West German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof and overhears another student explaining her significance. Julian soon declares he is “in love with the spectre of Ulrike Meinhof ... Grubby, secreted images of war, terror, prison and sex flickered through the darkness” (71). However, despite the seductiveness of the terrorist, Julian begins a relationship with Sally, a fellow student who is middle-class, suburban, responsible, and academically ambitious.\(^82\) After the party, Sally takes Julian back to her parents’ house in the upper-middle-class suburb of Malvern. Julian describes the house as understated and tasteful, lacking “the cluttered catastrophe of popular aesthetics ... found in the ‘burbs” (72). Sally’s family’s house is a study in “considered minimalism: polished wood, a dancing Shiva on the mantel, a decorative ceramic dish painted like an arabesque. There was something generous about the place as well: high ceilings, Persian rugs, deep comfortable couches” (72). The positive description of Sally’s home is an unusual departure within the novel, since it suggests that not all of suburbia deserves derision, while the cosmopolitan interior decorations and furnishings are reminiscent of both Martin’s Elwood house and Kerry and Rachel’s Queenslander in Steam Pigs.

In the morning, Julian encounters Sally’s mother reading Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch, and soon learns that she is writing a thesis at Monash University on “Hippies, feminism, [and] the counter-culture” (72). Julian is depressed by the thought of Sally’s mother writing a thesis on Greer “and something called ‘the counter-culture,’” since Greer “grew up in some bloody awful place on the highway, got out, exported her

\(^{82}\) During an interview with Michelle Griffin, McCann admits that Sally is the character in the novel most like him: “Anyone who reads the book and knows me will know that’s true. I was conscious of those two characters [Julian and Sally] relating aspects of my own experience but there’s no question the academically responsible character is the one that more reflects what I have done.”
talent, and never came back” (73). Julian claims that Greer’s life “repeated the great
tropes of Antipodean longing: education, exodus, envy” and proceeds to disparage her
and Clive James, two of Australia’s most famous expatriates, observing that James’
“unique genius seemed to consist of the fact that he lived in Britain” and quips that the
pair were probably “relieved to have escaped to the centre of an empire that had died half
a century earlier” (73). Julian’s attitude towards Greer is curious, since her escape from
suburbia and subsequent success abroad is precisely the trajectory he would like to follow
himself. This passage is perhaps an example of McCann using Julian to express some of
his own views, since Julian’s attitude here is inconsistent with the views he expresses
about suburbia and expatriation elsewhere in the novel.

When Julian recalls waiting at Malvern station after his first night at Sally’s, he
indulges in more anti-suburbanism, describing the Sunday timetable as “infrastructure
running down in half-hour blocks,” which he associates with “deserted stations, sparse,
vandalized carriages decked out in olive green and a pale, jaundiced yellow, housing-
commission mothers with swollen ankles and varicose veins hobbling about on budgets,
lugging their shopping back from obscure outposts of low-grade consumerism” (74).
When Julian arrives back in Moorabbin, he describes it as “another post-apocalyptic
morning. The shops and houses were still there, but the place made you imagine that a
hydrogen bomb had cleared the streets, leaving a remnant race of stunted, industrial types
that lived in burrows under the buckling cement pavement” (75). Wetherell argues that
this passage stands out from “the novel’s universally negative references to the suburb”
and “tends to make the reader think that both narrator and writer wish that a hydrogen

83 However, Greer-bashing is a favorite pastime of the Australian media, and Julian may be reflecting some
of the ideas about Greer circulating in the public sphere.
bomb would clear its streets ... McCann ... is all but calling for drastic action – drop the big one now!” (180). Wetherell notes that the anti-suburban passages in *Subtopia* make him laugh: “not, I suspect, in any way that the author or his narrator might wish to prompt in readers ... I can’t help thinking that Moorabbin will let this hysterically slung mud slide off its ample back – if it hits the target at all” (179). Wetherell makes two important points here: first, that the anti-suburbanism of the novel is so extreme at times that it is absurd; and second, that most of the residents of Moorabbin will never read the novel or care about the way their suburb is depicted.

 Julian’s constant conflation of cancer and consumerism pervades his negative depiction of the suburbs. On one occasion, he describes suburbia as “silent brick-veneer crags multiplying like rogue cells across the southern suburbs, a giant tumour composed of brick and asbestos cement, microscopic fibres ... wafting fatally about ... in great, invisible clouds, the petrol fumes and exhaust seeping into my liver, the electromagnetic fields of the overhead wires turning the cells of my body into sticky repositories for the countless carcinogens” (75). Julian imagines that the suburbs are literally killing him. While living in East St. Kilda, a drunk and stoned Julian lies on his bed and sees “images of carcinogens proliferating” as he imagines “dark, shaded groves ... being bulldozed, one after the other, to clear space for more sun-drenched brick-veneer and fibro subdivisions” (106). Julian’s visions of bulldozers destroying the natural environment recalls Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*, the work of suburban fiction most overtly acknowledged as an influence in *Subtopia*, and other works of suburban fiction that contain images of bulldozers razing the bush to make way for new suburbs, such as
White’s *Riders in the Chariot*, Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector*.

During his undergraduate years, Julian’s frequent companion is Sally’s high school classmate Penny Gibson, from whom he borrows the word “corpseworld” (81). Penny is famous for having sex with her literature professor, revels in her reputation as the “departmental vamp,” and hails from Brighton, “an affluent but very provincial suburb” (80, 79). Penny’s reputation as a radical largely rests upon her sexual escapades, her appearance – “Boots, torn fishnet stockings, moth-eaten jumpers and worn suede” (80) – her obsession with Nick Cave, and her penchant for hanging out in St. Kilda. Julian and Penny spend their weekends “watching junkies and prostitutes drifting along Fitzroy Street as if … [their] proximity to them could help … [them] get clear of the burdens of being so terminally middle-class” (81). The two drift apart as Julian becomes more studious and committed to Sally, while Penny becomes a heroin addict and a prostitute, eventually dying in St. Kilda of an overdose. Thus, it is life in the urban, alternative inner suburb that destroys Penny, rather than middle-class suburbia.

Although Julian is constantly attracted to radical ideas and individuals, and does not embrace suburban ideals, there is little to afford him the status of a radical, apart from “long, untidy hair … army pants, a tattered shirt” and a Polish solidarity badge (64). The solidarity badge impresses Sally on their first meeting, during which she touches it “as if it were a talisman” (62), and prompts Martin to scoff, “Fuck … You’re a radical” (61).

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84 McCann grew up in East Brighton.
85 Nick Cave is an Australian musician who has had a major international reputation for almost three decades. He became famous in the early eighties as the leader of *The Birthday Party*, and since 1984 has fronted Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, containing both Australian and German band members. Cave has been based in Melbourne, London, Berlin, Sao Paulo and now Brighton (UK). Like Peter Carey, Cave attended the prestigious Geelong Grammar School.
Julian refuses to join Martin in a protest against an American warship simply because he is politically apathetic; he studies diligently at university, completing an honors thesis; he continues to live at home in suburbia with his parents and sister; in short, apart from weekends in St. Kilda dabbling with drugs and alcohol, he lives a comfortable mainstream middle-class suburban life. Meanwhile, Martin stars as an axe-murderer in an amateur pornographic film; plays in a punk band; does not work or study; takes copious quantities of drugs; smokes and drinks to excess; sleeps most of the day; is known around St. Kilda as “The Mongrel”; and lives in a squalid flat with his pierced and dyed German girlfriend, one of his co-stars in the pornographic film.

Julian’s most radical action is to attempt to emulate Martin by going on the dole after completing his arts degree, and moving into a shared house in East St. Kilda with an architecture student who insists on being called Satan. Julian describes East St. Kilda as “almost David Meredith-My Brother Jack territory” and states that although the house does not have a name like “Avalon,” “it looked as if it might as well have” (102). Thus, Julian trades one version of suburbia for another, and one could argue that signing up for the dole after finishing an arts degree is a rite of passage and the expected course of action, rather than resistance to cultural norms, especially in the late 1980s. Moreover, Julian soon finds work in a warehouse, saves a few thousand dollars, and travels to London where he stays in an Earls Court doss house and works as a laborer, following a well-worn expatriate path. Even when Julian attempts to break out of his suburban middle class life, he does so in a conventional manner, a fact of which he is well aware: “The border – we were on one side of it, people like Sally and me, and these people, Penny … Anja … and Martin … were on the other … They were what I had imagined in my vision
of exploding bus stops and suburban terror. They were mutants. Free radicals breeding in
cells” (101-02). Moreover, Julian realizes that he will never be able to cross the border
and transcend his suburban roots.

After the mandatory stint in London, Julian travels to Berlin to see Martin who
has moved there with Anja and is now an unwilling father. In London, Julian heard
people rave “about the ‘Berlin scene’: Bowie and Iggy Pop, Nick Cave … graffiti on the
wall, the sniff of world war, Cold War and genocide” (131). In Berlin, Julian finds Martin
living a domestic life filled with dirty nappies and baby-bottles in a tiny flat purchased by
Anja’s father. In an attempt to resist a bourgeois existence, Martin keeps a mattress in a
squat near the Berlin Wall, where he indulges in drugs and escapes his responsibilities.
The squat lends Martin some radical credibility, especially as it is located in a
neighborhood containing “placards and posters for the PLO, the Autonomen and the
Anti-Apartheid movement … [and] A sparse assortment of punks, lay-about radicals
[and] loiterers” (140). Julian is impressed enough to claim that Martin, even as a father,
“was still really living on the fringes. Unwashed, a bit pongy, a riot waiting to happen”
(145). However, when Julian overstays his welcome and has to spend a night in the squat,
he admits that when faced with freezing temperatures and the threat of theft and violence
his “utopian fantasies of anarchist squalor [quickly] started to dissipate” (145). Despite
the seductiveness of the radical lifestyle, Julian values middle-class suburban comforts.

While staying with Martin in Berlin, Julian meets Ingrid Gutmann, who quickly
becomes his sexual partner and substitute for Ulrike Meinhof. As Sornig puts it, Ingrid is
the woman Julian “wishes to be the flesh on the ghost of Ulrike Meinhof” (4). Ingrid
establishes her radical credentials by claiming her father was an American soldier who
raped her when she visited him in suburban Maryland at the age of fifteen and that she and her former boyfriend were considering joining the Red Army Faction and attended Ulrike Meinhof’s funeral. On his first night in Ingrid’s bed, Julian fantasizes about “urban guerillas blasting bus stops” (150) and later admits that within less than twenty-four hours he has become intoxicated by the “confluence of sex and politics that [he] projects onto Ingrid” (151).

Believing that Ingrid is a radical involved in clandestine, possibly terrorist activities, Julian fabricates stories to impress her, claiming he torched his uncle’s car with kerosene and set off a cigar box full of gunpowder under a police car in rebellion against Australian suburbia, which he tells Ingrid is “a horrible world,” a “facade of sport, leisure and freedom concealing something lurking and ugly” (157). Julian believes he sees Ingrid pass a package to a woman in an East Berlin bookshop; when he questions her, she claims it is a detonator for a bomb (176, 184). After two claustrophobic months of sex and politics, Julian suspects Ingrid is mentally ill, investigates her past, and calls her sister to stage an intervention. When Ingrid’s sister Gabi and her husband Lars arrive, Lars tells Julian that people from the radical group Ingrid is involved with “killed people in Stockholm” (193). However, when Julian visits Ingrid a few years later, she denies involvement in any of the aforementioned activities.

In addition to his relationships, real and imagined, with radicals and terrorists, Julian repeatedly fantasizes about terrorist attacks. Julian’s erotic visions of terrorism begin in his youth soon after he questions his father about the Cuban missile crisis. Julian’s father, a closet radical, explains “the utopian vision behind the Russian revolution in a way that … [has Julian] momentarily prepared to call … [himself] a
communist. The hint of resignation in his voice conveyed a melancholic sense of lost opportunity and baffled idealism” (19). Returning home after the party at which he is seduced by the specter of Meinhof, Julian begins “to fantasize about conflict, crisis and struggle … a groggy vision of the bus stop outside the station exploding through the funereal calm of the morning. Shattered glass and twisted metal raining down on the pavement. Silence, then sirens, debris strewn across the street, some bleeding bodies bashed about in the wreckage” (76-77).

Julian’s fantasy is comprehensive enough to include the aftermath: “line-ups along the streets, boots kicking in doors in the dead of night, guns trained on naked bodies, face down, handcuffed on the floor” (77). Readers will see clear parallels between Julian’s imaginings and the erosion of civil liberties in Western societies since 9/11, also reflected in other recent Australian novels, such as Andrew McGahan’s Underground (2006) and Richard Flanagan’s The Unknown Terrorist (2006). However, Julian realizes that “the idea that an affluent society could be covertly fascist” is probably “insane,” since people are “happy in the suburbs, not oppressed” and thinks of the “backyard barbecue, the Hills hoist and the old shed” as “repositories of shared meaning” (77). This passage is one of the few in the novel that could be construed as presenting suburbia in a positive light.

Towards the end of Subtopia, when Julian lives with Sally in a suburb of New York City while she writes a doctoral dissertation, he despises the predictability and order of suburbia and yearns for “the filthy squat and the joyous, anarchic squalor of

86 McCann recently published an article dealing with both novels: “Professing the Popular: Political Fiction circa 2006.” Australian Literary Studies 23.2 (Oct. 2007): 43-57. In this essay, McCann argues, “Never before, it seems, has political writing critical of the government, its policies and a prevailing sense of neoconservative status quo appeared to be so attractive” (44).
Kreuzberg” (227). Disgusted by the rampant capitalism and excessive consumerism of the United States, Julian fantasizes about a radical strategist, “a Mao or a Lenin,” mobilizing the people in mass protests and riots that lead to “the heads of executives paraded on pikes” and angry mobs “charging through the streets” (233). The reality, however, is that Julian spends his days in Queens fighting depression and fears of cancer and trying to write prose in an International House Of Pancakes restaurant. He declares that he is not going to return to Australia, but will become an expatriate, “like Germaine and Clive, doing whatever it is that expats do when they aren’t gloating” (214). However, Julian soon hates American life, and later admits he had no idea why he was there, declaring the U.S. is “like a black hole, a centre of cultural and political gravity so intense that it sucks you in and crushes you” (227). When Sally is offered a position as a university lecturer in Melbourne, the couple returns to Australia without hesitation (240-41). Late in the novel, talking to Ingrid in Berlin, Julian sums up life in American suburbia as “‘Obesity and saturated fats’” (267).

Back in Melbourne, with Penny dead and Martin, Anja and Ingrid in Berlin, Julian finds himself without a radical foil and is unable to successfully reintegrate into Australian society. Julian and Sally rent a house in Carlton, where he is disgusted by “the cretinism of a society obsessed with the wonders of its leisured lifestyle” (244). Julian visits his parents in Moorabbin and describes returning to his home suburb as “like revisiting a hollow in myself, a time that I had repressed or forgotten, or a time that hadn’t really happened” (242). Consequently, he returns to Berlin to seek out Ingrid and Martin and make sense of his life. Ingrid has mellowed and put on weight due to prescription medications and Julian accepts the fact that she was never a radical or a
terrorist, but suffered from a mental illness. More significantly, Julian discovers that
Martin has been dead for two years, having developed a brain tumor, undergone surgery,
lost many of his mental faculties and motor skills, and committed suicide at the former
site of a concentration camp. Finally, Julian is forced to confront the fact that his
flirtations with radicalism and terrorism are illusory, that he will never achieve
transformation, and “Mild discomfort, drowsiness, drunkenness ... [and] depression ...
[are] as close to transformation as ... [he is] going to get” (239). After learning of
Martin’s death, Julian realizes that both he and Martin sought “transformation,
metamorphosis, [and] negation”; the difference between them was that Martin was
willing “to demolish things if they didn’t measure up, and finally he was ready to
demolish himself” (10), whereas Julian was unwilling to be an actor rather than an
observer.

Despite the fact that Julian’s quest for transcendence through radicalism and
terrorism ends in failure, and at the conclusion of the novel he settles down to a
predictable, comfortable middle-class life with Sally in the inner-suburb of Carlton, the
novel promotes radicalism and rejects mainstream Australian culture. Although McCann
does not present radicals and terrorists who succeed in their quest, he depicts the ideals,
characteristics and actions of Meinhof, Martin, Penny and Ingrid as more exciting,
appealing and worthy of emulation than capitalism, consumerism and suburban life.
However, the novel is also simultaneously conservative in its overwhelmingly negative
treatment of suburbia, and like Malouf’s *Johnno*, Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Lucashenko’s
*Steam Pigs*, serves to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction.
Although *Steam Pigs* and *Subtopia* are set in different times and places, and the former is a novel with a female Indigenous protagonist written by a female Indigenous author while the later utilizes a white male protagonist and is written by a white male author, the novels share a number of important similarities. First, *Steam Pigs* and *Subtopia* are two of the few novels published in the past ten years that take suburbia as a primary setting; second, both feature young protagonists who reject suburbia; third, both novels contain a great deal of innovative content and provocative ideas within the confines of an inherently conservative structure; fourth, they both provide overwhelmingly and often disparaging depictions of suburbia; and fifth, both novels deliver sharp criticisms of mainstream Australian society. In my final two chapters, I address novels by Gerald Murnane and Peter Carey, two Australian writers with markedly different audiences and careers who have both produced innovative novels set in suburbia that reject the anti-suburban tradition and treat suburbia as a site for experimentation and intense engagement with both personal and social issues.
CHAPTER SIX


While the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction established by George Johnston has been perpetuated by prominent contemporary authors such as Tim Winton and David Malouf with the help of lesser-known writers like Melissa Lucashenko and A.L. McCann, the postmodern writer Gerald Murnane has eschewed mainstream literary traditions, creating unique works of suburban fiction. Murnane’s second and fourth works of fiction, *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976) and *Landscape with Landscape* (1985), are predominantly set in the suburbs of Melbourne and demonstrate the remarkable creative possibilities for suburban fiction that rejects or ignores the anti-suburban tradition.

Murnane’s biography, critical reputation, influences and aversion to travel all contribute to his unique place within Australian literature and shape his engagement with suburbia.

Paul Genoni notes that the biographical details of Murnane’s life are often reflected in the lives of his narrators and protagonists (294), while Imre Salusinszky argues that Murnane’s fiction remains “securely anchored in the details of his own life, and of suburban Melbourne” (Gerald Murnane 2). Murnane was born in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg in 1939. His family moved to Bendigo in 1944, then to the Western District of Victoria in 1948, returning to the Melbourne suburbs in 1949, where Murnane

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87 Critics widely consider Murnane to be a postmodern writer. See Birns (“Indefinite” 48), Bartoloni (122), Anderson (83), Braun-Bau (48) and Genoni (293). However, Murnane does not like the label, and in a conversation with Imre Salusinszky declared, “I swear I don’t even know the meaning of that fucking expression post-modern!” (“Newcastle” 39).
has lived continuously for the past fifty-nine years. Murnane matriculated from De La Salle College in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern in 1956. Between February and May of 1957, Murnane studied for the priesthood in Sydney; this three-month period represents his longest absence from Melbourne’s suburbs between 1949 and the present (Braun-Bau 44). Murnane has lived in the same house in the northeastern Melbourne suburb of Macleod for over thirty years (Salusinszky, “Gerald Murnane” 234). Although Murnane was raised Catholic and briefly trained for the priesthood, he stopped attending church when he was nineteen. He returned to the Catholic Church for a few years after his marriage. Murnane has stated that his wife is also an ex-Catholic and his family are not practicing Catholics (Baker 202, 204). Nevertheless, Catholicism plays a crucial role in Murnane’s first two novels, *Tamarisk Row* (1974) and *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976), and features in *Landscape with Landscape* (1985). Murnane does not usually mention his training for the priesthood in interviews and usually leaves his three-month residency in Sydney out of accounts of his travels.

Unlike his contemporaries David Malouf, Peter Carey and Thomas Keneally, Murnane has won few awards. Murnane won the FAW Barbara Ramsden Award for the Book of the Year in 1990 for *Velvet Waters*, and won the Patrick White Award in 1999, which is presented to writers whose body of work has not received significant recognition. In 2007, Murnane received a New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award (Blackwell 1). In February 2008, Murnane received the Australia Council for the Arts’ writers’ emeritus award, which recognizes the achievements of writers over sixty-five “who have made an outstanding contribution to the field and created an acclaimed body of work” (“Critically” 1). The fact that Murnane has won just one prize for an individual

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88 One of Murnane's brothers is a priest in the Dominican Order (Baker 201).
work, but three career achievement awards, is indicative of his critical reputation, which has grown slowly since the publication of his debut novel in 1974. Salusinszky’s essay “On Gerald Murnane,” the first work of criticism on Murnane in an academic journal, did not appear until 1986. Salusinszky quickly established himself as Australia’s leading Murnane critic, publishing a dozen works on Murnane between 1986 and 2004.

Murnane firmly established his reputation with his third novel, *The Plains* (1982), which continues to receive more critical attention than his other works. Murnane’s work is perceived as difficult and has never sold in large numbers (Genoni 293). When Murnane won the Patrick White Award in 1999, none of his books were in print in Australia ("Gerald Murnane: Adult"). In 1986, Salusinszky declared that Murnane’s writing “is difficult, uncompromising, and simultaneously personal and intellectual” ("On Gerald Murnane" 518). In his 1993 monograph, Salusinszky argues that Murnane’s “exclusively personal set of meditations and images ... will establish his fiction as one of the finest and darkest achievements in the English literature of the last part of the twentieth century” (*Gerald Murnane* 103-04). Writing in 2004, Salusinszky claims Murnane is “widely regarded as one of the most unusual and original Australian writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries,” declaring that Murnane “has probably aroused as much serious scholarly interest overseas as any living Australian prose writer” ("Gerald Murnane" 232, 237, 239). However, a search of the MLA

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89 Bibliographic information in this and the preceding paragraph is from the AustLit database: http://www.austlit.edu.au. Search conducted March 24, 2008. *The Plains* has been the subject of fifty-four works of criticism to date and has been published twice in the United States, by George Braziller in 1985 and New Issues in 2003; reissued in Australia by Penguin in 1984, McPhee Gribble in 1990, and Text in 2000; and translated into Swedish in 2005.

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bibliography reveals that Salusinszky’s latter claim is highly exaggerated. Despite the small body of criticism on Murnane’s work, he was a contender for the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature (Hibberd 1). The continued rise of Murnane’s critical reputation is evidenced by the publication in February 2008 of a new edition of Tamarisk Row, and Murnane’s appearance, in March 2008, at the Adelaide Festival’s Writers’ Week on a program featuring Peter Carey, Ian McEwan and David Malouf (“Gerald Murnane” Adelaide Festival).

Murnane’s unusual writing style and subject matter may have developed in part because of his diverse literary influences. Murnane has said that reading Joyce’s Ulysses “turned him from a would-be poet into a novelist”; he also cites Kerouac, Proust, Emily Bronte, Hardy, Calvino, Borges, Gunther Grass, Raymond Carver and the Austrian philosopher and psychologist Robert Musil as influences. Genoni argues that Murnane has clearly “read very widely” but has “denied knowledge of the theory or practice of postmodernism, which has often been used to frame discussion of his fiction” (293).

Murnane’s novel Inland (1988) reveals that he has read White’s The Solid Mandala, and thus is familiar with at least one previous work of Australian suburban fiction. In Inland, Murnane’s narrator mentions a quotation from the French poet Paul Eluard, “There is

90 The MLA database lists just seventeen works about Murnane, whereas there are 103 works of scholarship listed concerning David Malouf and 104 works about Peter Carey. Search conducted March 17, 2008.

91 Kerouac features prominently in Landscape with Landscape, and although Kerouac and Murnane are markedly different writers with radically different life experiences, Murnane claims a deep connection to Kerouac: “when I was twenty-one, and working as a primary school teacher … at the weekends I would try to live what I thought was the way Jack Kerouac would have lived … Kerouac has had a strange and deep influence on me. Even to this day if I see a new book on him I have to buy it and read it. I think of Jack at least once every day of my life … Because I think in a silly way that he is my missing part” (Baker 215). When Baker asks if Murnane means “the expansive, travelling part,” he replies in the affirmative (215).

92 See Salusinszky (Gerald Murnane 1); Baker (216); Braun-Bau (43, 48); Genoni (293) and Salusinszky (“Newcastle” 30). Critics cite Murnane’s literary precursors and influences as Borges, Calvino, Beckett, Camus, Kafka, Sartre, Emily Bronte, Samuel Butler, Hardy, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov (Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane 2, 27; Anderson 85; Genoni 293; Zawacki 2-4).
another world but it is in this one,” but declares he found the quotation in White’s book (100, 101), where it serves as an epigraph. 93

Murnane is famous for spending most of his life in Melbourne’s suburbs and rarely traveling. He has “never flown in an airplane” and has not traveled outside of Australia; when asked if he would ever travel overseas, Murnane declares that such travel is “Completely out of the question” since he cannot “relax or feel at home even in a strange suburb of Melbourne” (Salusinszky, “Gerald Murnane” 234; Baker 208). However, Murnane’s “legendary” dislike of travel (Salusinszky, “Gerald Murnane” 234) has been distorted and exaggerated. In fact, Murnane has traveled much more than his reputation suggests. A 1987 interview with Murnane revealed that he had been to Sydney twice and once to Adelaide, as well as into New South Wales and South Australia in his youth, in addition to visiting Bendigo every ten years (Baker 193, 208). In a 1992 interview, Murnane reveals that he spent three months of 1957 living in Sydney and that he has “been away from Melbourne a bit more than people know. My wife and I went to Sydney for two days last year [1991] ... I’ve been twice briefly to Adelaide and to Tasmania” (Braun-Bau 44). Murnane spent two weeks in Newcastle in 1990 (Salusinszky, “Newcastle” 25) and returned in 2001. In 2007, he traveled to Sydney to receive an award (Blackwell 1), and he attended the Adelaide Festival in 2008. Thus, in addition to travels within Victoria, Murnane has left his home state at least ten times.

Nevertheless, Murnane clearly dislikes travel and is remarkably rooted to his home suburb. Murnane declares that when he travels to an unfamiliar location, he is “overcome, or overwhelmed, or even plain confused” (Baker 193). Murnane insists that his aversion to travel and discomfort in unfamiliar locales is “not a pose ... It’s my way

93 I am indebted to page 112 of Paolo Bartoloni’s article on Calvino and Murnane for this point.
of thinking about the world. I do a lot of walking around Melbourne. I don’t own a car” (Baker 194). Murnane spends much of his time thinking about other places, but travel makes him “numb ... the years are passing, and I still stay in my suburb of Melbourne” (Braun-Bau 44). Murnane’s unusual relationship with travel and his fascination with maps and foreign locales are mirrored by the narrators in Landscape with Landscape, and, to a lesser extent, A Lifetime on Clouds; his deep and intensely personal relationship with Melbourne’s suburbs, where he has lived for almost sixty years, is a prominent feature of both works.

**A Lifetime on Clouds: Suburban Adolescent Fantasies**

Murnane’s second novel is set in the fictional Melbourne outer suburb of Accrington in 1953 and 1954, when the protagonist, Adrian Sherd, is fifteen and sixteen. However, Adrian’s numerous fantasies take place in the United States, Tasmania, Victoria’s Western District, and several real and imagined Melbourne suburbs. In addition to being a study of suburban life in the 1950s, A Lifetime on Clouds is a novel about adolescence, masturbation, Catholicism, fantasies and landscapes. Nicholas Birns notes that ever since its publication, A Lifetime of Clouds has been compared to Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (“Do Not” 2) due its confluence of adolescence, Catholicism and sexuality. However, Murnane’s novel does not include “the achievement of sexual maturity through sexual experience,” which Birns identifies as “a traditional motif of the novel of male adolescence” (“Do Not” 4). In fact, the closest Adrian ever

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94 Murnane’s wife owns a car, but he does not drive, since it makes him “irritable and nervous” (Baker 209).
95 Accrington is located five miles east of the real suburb of Caulfield (27), which makes it a substitute for Mount Waverley, Waverley or Glen Waverley.
comes to a sexual experience with another person is the moment when Denise McNamara’s leg brushes against his during mass.

Salusinszky argues that *A Lifetime on Clouds* is Murnane’s funniest and “most accessible” novel, but despite the comedy and satire, it is “an uncompromising and courageous book”; it is not an “attempt to ‘come to terms with’ or ‘salvage some meaning from’ a Catholic schooling in the early to mid-1950s: it summons that schooling up from the past in order to spit it out whole” (“That Hilarious” 295). Salusinszky describes the novel as a “documentary account of a lost subculture” and “a marvellous recreation of the atmosphere of Australian Catholicism in the 1950s” (“That Hilarious” 295; Gerald Murnane 27, 26). Salusinszky claims that *A Lifetime on Clouds* is Murnane’s “most under-rated and least studied book,” arguing that it is far more than a story about teenage sexual obsession (“That Hilarious” 294). Murnane’s examination of suburbia, sexual fantasies and Catholicism in *A Lifetime on Clouds* illustrates the remarkable creative possibilities for suburban fiction that rejects the anti-suburban tradition and uses suburbia as the setting for fictional experimentation.

*A Lifetime on Clouds* contains numerous descriptions of Melbourne’s suburbs. In fact, almost all of the physical action of the novel takes place in suburbia, with Adrian only leaving Melbourne’s suburbs once, when he travels to his uncle’s farm in the Western District of Victoria. Genoni argues that Murnane’s fiction “is obsessively concerned with ‘landscape,’ ‘place,’ ‘space,’ ‘time,’ and ‘maps’” (294); thus, the novel’s suburban setting is entirely consistent with the rest of Murnane’s oeuvre, even those works set on the imaginary plains of “Inner Australia,” the United States and Hungary. While the suburbs and the plains are different in many ways, both locations allow
Murnane to pursue his obsession with physical surroundings, space and maps, as well as to examine the effects of time on place. In *The New Diversity*, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman suggest that Adrian’s “Catholic experience of the repressive 1950s is linked to the monotony of an outer eastern suburb from which he escapes in a torrent of daydreaming” (105). However, Adrian’s daydreams and nocturnal fantasies are not driven by a desire to escape suburbia; rather, they are driven by sexual desire. Adrian’s sexual fantasies are usually set outside suburbia, in the United States, because that is where the objects of his desire, the American film stars, reside.

Moreover, Adrian does not wish to escape suburbia physically, and the dominant, extended fantasy of the novel centers on his imaginary relationship with Denise McNamara, a Catholic schoolgirl who resides in his suburb, attends his parish church, and travels to and from school on the same suburban commuter train as Adrian. Salusinszky argues that Murnane’s imagination requires “an intensity of the normal, and few things could be more intensely normal, or hold more promise of hidden vistas, than a city whose streets fall into an easy grid” (Salusinszky, “On Gerald Murnane” 519-520). Thus, Murnane’s grounding in an “intensely normal” Melbourne suburb allows him and his protagonist to construct incredible flights of fancy.

Adrian attends St. Carthage’s College in the fictional suburb of Swindon, which is located in the inner eastern suburbs. In order to get home from school, Adrian must walk half a mile along the tramline from his school to Swindon railway station, then travel five miles by train to Accrington station, before walking a mile along the main road to his street (9). Adrian’s home suburb, Accrington, like other newly constructed outer

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96 Adrian’s commute to and from school is quite typical in Melbourne: children attending private schools or exclusive government schools have been traversing Melbourne’s suburbs every school day for many
suburbs, has few paved roads or footpaths. On Adrian’s walk home from the railway station along a dirt path beside the main road, he passes a number of factories before reaching his street, Riviera Grove, which Murnane’s third person narrator describes as “a chain of waterholes between clumps of manuka and wattle scrub” (9). Builders and deliverymen drive their trucks “over the low scrub, looking for a safe route,” but the only residents of the street who can afford a car know better and park on the main road (9).

Murnane’s description of the partially developed outer suburb, based on the suburb where he grew up, contains parallels to the new outer suburbs Winton describes in *Cloudstreet* and “Aquifer.” Murnane’s description of indigenous vegetation and waterholes and his naming of the street Riviera combine to emphasize the continued presence of the bush and its ongoing destruction. Naming is of crucial importance in Murnane’s work: the street name “Riviera” is similar to “Riverina,” the name of a fertile agricultural region in south-western New South Wales that is bordered on the south by the Murray river (which forms the border between New South Wales and Victoria) and has close cultural ties with Victoria. Moreover, the “Grove” in the street name echoes the Beverly Grove in Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*.

Adrian’s family’s house is bordered on one side by a “dense stand of tea-tree scrub thirty feet tall” and on the other by the wooden frame of a partially-constructed house, which stands in front of a “fibro-cement bungalow, twenty feet by ten, where the New Australian Andy Horvath lived with his wife and small son and mother-in-law” (9). Thus, the location of Adrian’s outer suburban home literally situates it in the midst of two decades via various modes and combinations of public transport, such as trams, trains and buses. A person visiting Melbourne during the school year who boards a tram or suburban commuter train in the morning or mid-afternoon will encounter hordes of schoolchildren of various ages wearing the uniforms of dozens of different schools.
of the most important and commonly addressed issues in Australian suburban fiction: environmental degradation and immigration. The remnants of the bush are next-door to the Sherds’ house, and thus the suburb and the bush are intertwined. The Sherds’ house is a “two-year-old double-fronted weatherboard, painted cream with dark green trimmings” (9). A lawn bordered by geraniums and pelargoniums occupies the front yard, but the backyard consists almost entirely of “native grass and watsonia lillies” (9). The backyard contains a fowl-run paralleling the back fence, a garden shed, and a weatherboard lavatory, which is painted cream and dark green to match the house (9).

Adrian’s neat, typical suburban home and front yard contrasts with the thick bush on one side and the partially constructed house of the immigrants on the other, which may symbolize their partial integration into Australian society. The native grass and vegetation in the backyard serve as a reminder of how recently the quarter-acre block was bushland, and how quickly it could revert to that state.

On a typical Sunday afternoon, Adrian’s father drags a plank back and forth across the backyard in an attempt to level the soil before sowing it with lawn seed, thus continuing the process of suburbanization and the subjugation of the indigenous vegetation (48). Meanwhile, the Hungarian immigrants next door and a group of their friends are engaging in “some kind of party in the bungalow behind the Horvath’s half-built house” (48). The Hungarians have been “singing foreign songs” all afternoon and keep returning to one particular song: “Adrian had heard it three or four times already. The way they sang the chorus made the hair prickle on the back of his neck. It was sad and savage and hopeless” (48). Adrian presses his ear against a hole in the fence and hears “the separate voices of each man and woman trying to pick up the song again …

97 Watsonia is the name of a suburb adjacent to Macleod, Murnane’s home suburb.
making noises like sobs, as though they couldn’t sing for crying” (49). This brief episode powerfully highlights the struggle of immigrants to adapt to a new environment and culture far from their homeland, demonstrates the diversity of suburbia, and reveals Adrian’s compassion for the Hungarians and their homesickness.

Adrian occasionally explores the bush next to his house, where he observes possums’ and bull-ants’ nests: “like a scientist ... he kept a diary describing the ants’ habits and drew maps to show how far they travelled from their nest” (10-11). One hot afternoon, Adrian sits in the garden shed with the door open, staring “at the listless branches of the wattle scrub over the side fence ... The only sounds around him were the clicking of insects and the crackling of seedpods on the vacant block next door” (79). Murnane presents the sounds of the bush pervading the suburb, again emphasizing the interconnectedness of the bush and outer suburbia: Adrian is simultaneously in suburbia and the bush. If Adrian pushes through the bush to the other side of the lot, he comes up against the Gaffney’s side fence. The narrator notes that the Sherds know almost nothing about their neighbors in Riviera Grove, who are all “what Adrian’s parents called young couples, with two or three small children” (11). The fact that the street is full of young parents and small children emphasizes the newness of the suburb and lack of an established community.

The interior of the Sherds’ house contains “three bedrooms, a lounge, a kitchen, a bathroom and a laundry. The kitchen floor was covered with linoleum. All the other floors were polished boards. The lounge-room had an open fireplace, two armchairs and a couch of faded floral-patterned velvet, and a small bookcase” (10). Although Adrian’s working-class suburban home is modest, the open fireplace and wooden floors are
features that contemporary readers may be more likely to associate with middle-class comfort and affluence. When Adrian returns home from school each day, he is required to take off his school uniform to prevent wear and tear; he changes into his "only other clothes ... the shirt and trousers and jumper that had been his previous school uniform but were now too patched for school" (10). Adrian's lack of clothing signifies his family's thrift, low income and working-class status. The presence of factories and the fact that only one family on Adrian's street can afford a car signals the working-class character of the suburb. Adrian's family does not own a car and rides the bus to church on Sundays (22). The occupation of Adrian's father is not disclosed, however, the narrator states that he was formerly a prison warder (84), a working-class occupation.

On a typical evening in the Sherds' suburban home, Adrian's father goes to bed early with a book, while Adrian's mother knits by the kitchen stove (12). Television has not yet arrived in Australia, so Adrian and his brothers spend their evenings doing homework and playing board games in a house so quiet that the family can clearly hear trains passing along the railway line, a mile away (12). The sound of a car or truck is rarely heard on Riviera Grove or nearby streets (12). Adrian always completes his homework on time and is astonished by his classmates who fail to complete their work and make excuses, claiming that they had gone out in the evening, forgotten the time while listening to the radio, been ordered by their parents to talk with visitors, or been sent to bed early because their parents were throwing a party (12). In the Sherds' two years in Accrington, "they had almost never gone out after dark" and Adrian cannot recall any visitors in the evening (12). Adrian's classmates who have activities to pursue other than homework in the evenings reside in suburbs closer to Swindon, suburbs "with
made roads and footpaths and front gardens full of shrubs. The suburbs had dignified names ... Adrian imagines the houses in these suburbs full of merry laughter every night of the week” (12-13). Murnane uses a combination of real and imagined names for Melbourne suburbs, although the names are almost exclusively English and conjure peaceful images.98

Birns argues that Adrian is “clearly an authorial surrogate” (“Do Not” 2); his contention is supported by Murnane’s admission in an interview that he identifies closely with Adrian, especially his isolation and fantasy life (Baker 200). Murnane states, “My isolation started in adolescence ... We were completely cut off as teenagers. Outside of school hours there was nothing ... this was the outer suburbs of Melbourne in the 50s, and we lived from books, radio programs and dreams. School work took the place of socialising” (Baker 200). Adrian’s primary activity outside of schoolwork is masturbation. Adrian’s fixation on sex pervades his consciousness to such an extent that when he is not imagining himself engaging in sex, he wonders about the sex lives of other people and the possibilities for suburban sex. After examining his immediate neighborhood, Adrian decides that “In all the backyards around Riviera Grove there was no place where a couple could even sunbathe together unobserved ... from what Adrian heard of their conversations in the local bus, it seemed they had no time for fun. The men worked on their houses and gardens ... The women were often sick” (16).

98 An examination of the names of Melbourne’s suburbs reveals that the majority of the inner and middle-belt suburbs have English names, such as Kew, Kensington, Richmond, Collingwood and Camberwell, while few suburbs have Indigenous names. Newer, outer suburbs are much more likely to be given Indigenous names, such as Dandenong, Warrandyte and Kurunjang, reflecting White Australia’s changing relationship with Indigenous cultures. For more on the use of Indigenous place names, see: Furphy, Sam. “Aboriginal House Names and Settler Australian Identity.” *Journal of Australian Studies* 72 (2002): 59-68, 267-68.
When Adrian contemplates Melbourne’s suburbs, and thinks about the sexual possibilities therein, he divides Melbourne “into three regions – slums, garden suburbs and outer suburbs” (16). On Adrian’s mental map, the slums include “all the inner suburbs where the houses were joined together and had no front gardens. East Melbourne, Richmond, Carlton – Adrian was not at all curious about the people who lived in these slums. They were criminals or dirty or poor, and he couldn’t bear to think of their pale, grubby skin naked” (16). Although Adrian’s perception of the inner suburbs reveals misconceptions and prejudices, he does not conform to the view of the slums as being the source of vitality and authenticity, and thus superior to middle-class suburbia, which is traditionally espoused by anti-suburban intellectuals. Adrian’s prejudices are not anti-suburban; they are classist and elitist.

The garden suburbs, in Adrian’s conception, form “a great arc around the east and southeast of Melbourne. Swindon … was in the heart of them, and most of the boys at his school lived in leafy streets. The people of the garden suburbs had full-grown trees brushing against their windows” (16). Adrian envies the residents of the garden suburbs, since he imagines that “the houses and gardens in these suburbs … [are] ideal for sexual games,” although Adrian doubts that they are used for that purpose, since the residents of the garden suburbs are “too dignified and serious” (16-17). It is the outer suburbs that Adrian knows best: “Whenever he tried to imagine the city of Melbourne as a whole, he saw it shaped like a great star with the outer suburbs its distinctive arms. Their miles of pinkish-brown tiled roofs reached far out into the farmlands and market gardens and bush or scrub as a sign that the modern age had come to Australia” (17). Rather than depicting
the outer suburbs as isolated, repetitive and boring, a common trope in suburban novels, Murnane presents the outer suburbs as symbols of modernity and progress.

When the newspapers refer to a typical Melbourne family, Adrian envisions “their white or cream weatherboard house in a treeless yard surrounded by fences of neatly sawn palings” (17). Adrian thinks of the women who reside in the outer suburbs as “not beautiful (although occasionally one was described as attractive or vivacious). They wore dressing gowns all morning, and frilly aprons over their clothes for the rest of the day. They wore their hair in curlers under scarves knotted above the forehead” (17). Adrian takes a long bike ride through the suburbs in an attempt to abstain from masturbation and finds that there are “temptations even in the bleakest suburbs. Sometimes he saw the backs of a woman’s thighs as she bent forward in her garden, or the shapes of her breasts bouncing under her sweater as she pushed a mower. When this happened he slowed down and waited for a glimpse of the woman’s face. It was nearly always so plain that he was glad to forget all about her” (22). In Adrian’s mind, the suburban women are unable to compete with the American film stars that feature in his fantasies. However, the perceived plainness of the suburban women is a comment on Adrian’s distorted ideas of beauty and the power of American cultural influence, rather than a criticism of suburbia.

Adrian occasionally encounters non-Catholic teenagers from more affluent suburbs and is intimidated by their confidence and worldliness. On days when Adrian takes the tram from school to Swindon station rather than walking, he finds the tram “crowded with boys from Eastern Hill Grammar School and Canterbury Ladies’ College. Adrian knew that these schools were two of the oldest and wealthiest in Melbourne. He felt very ignorant not even knowing where they were among the miles of garden suburbs
beyond Swindon" (53). In the second half of the novel, once Adrian begins his imaginary relationship with Denise and attempts to live more purely, he finds a new group of friends at school who are "obviously in the state of grace" (90), unlike his previous group of friends, Michael Cornthwaite, Stan Seskis and Terry O’Mullane, who are self-described "sex addicts" and meet at lunch-time to tell dirty jokes, discuss the sex appeal of film stars and report the details of their previous evening’s masturbation (5).

Adrian’s new friends live in garden suburbs and travel home on trams: “They talked a lot about the Junction … Adrian eventually discovered that this was Camberwell Junction but he was not much wiser, since he had never been there” (90).^99 The stories Adrian’s new friends tell often go over Adrian’s head, since “the people or the places in them were known only to the Camberwell boys” (91-92). Thus, Adrian’s status as a working-class resident of an outer suburb excludes him from the geographical, social and cultural knowledge necessary for one to enter the world of the middle-class garden suburbs.

Adrian’s ignorance of the garden suburbs is demonstrated again late in the novel when Adrian’s class participates in a retreat at a monastery located “in a garden suburb a few miles from Swindon … he stood at his upstairs window and looked across the huge lawns to the tall front fence and couldn’t work out the direction of Swindon or Accrington” (121). Adrian knows the name of the street and the suburb in which the monastery is located, but he has never visited the suburb before and “might have walked for miles from the front gate of the monastery before he came to some tramline or railway station that could give him his bearings” (122). Near the conclusion of the novel, while

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^99 Eastern Hill Grammar School and Canterbury Ladies’ College are both fictional schools; however, they are thinly veiled references to Melbourne Grammar School and Presbyterian Ladies’ College.

^100 Camberwell is an expensive eastern suburb of Melbourne usually associated with the upper-middle class and leafy, tree-lined streets. Camberwell Junction is the intersection of Camberwell, Burke and Riversdale roads and the commercial and social locus of the suburb.
riding the tram to Swindon, Adrian gazes “at the enormous houses along the tramline,” wondering, “who else beside doctors and dentists and solicitors could be wealthy enough to live in such places. In all his life he had never been inside the front gate of any house like them” (138). Due to Adrian’s class, and to a lesser extent, his religion, he is denied knowledge of vast swathes of suburbia.

Although Adrian usually envies the residents of the garden suburbs (138), towards the end of the novel he believes Catholic rumors and propaganda about communism and “the end of the world,” and thus “almost” pities the residents of the garden suburbs:

“While hundreds of millions of Chinese and Russians were preparing for a Third World War, the people of Melbourne’s garden suburbs were going about their business as though there was nothing to worry about. They were thinking of wall-to-wall carpets and radiograms and washing machines” (138). The suggestion of mindless consumerism in the final sentence of this passage is about the closest Murnane’s novel ever comes to expressing anti-suburban sentiments. However, readers of the novel are well aware that it is Adrian who is deluded, rather than the residents of the garden suburbs. As Adrian’s tram climbs a hill, he looks back “at the miles of dark-red roofs and grey-green treetops … he whispered into the breeze blowing past the tram that they were all doomed. And he saw the end of the world like grey rain bearing down on suburb after suburb” (139). The absurdity of Adrian’s vision of apocalypse is emphasized with great humor by Murnane when he writes of Adrian envisioning “the people in their last agony crying out that if only they could have had a Catholic secondary education they might have seen it coming” (139). Murnane conveys much of the humor of the novel similarly, through the absurd thoughts of the protagonist.
Adrian’s sexual fantasies constitute a great deal of the novel’s content, which begins with Adrian “driving a station wagon towards a lonely beach in Florida” accompanied by three young women, Jayne, Marilyn and Susan (3). Adrian and Jayne swim naked, and soon Adrian finds himself gazing upon the naked bodies of Marilyn and Susan, before having sex with Marilyn while the other women watch (4-5). It is not until the third page of the novel that the reader learns they have been reading the sexual fantasy of a fifteen-year-old Catholic schoolboy, when the narrator states: “Next morning Adrian Sherd was sitting in the Form Four classroom in St Carthage’s College in Swindon, a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne” (5). Throughout the novel, Murnane makes many such unmarked shifts between Adrian’s present reality and his fantasies, which become more and more elaborate and often contain fantasies within fantasies and fantastical “histories” of masturbation, religion and civilization.

Genoni argues that *A Lifetime on Clouds* develops a recurring theme in Murnane’s fiction, “the coupling of the search for the ideal landscape with the search for the ideal woman” (297). During the first half of the novel, Adrian’s sexual fantasies feature a series of American film stars in a variety of American landscapes, such as beaches and plains. In the second half of the novel, Adrian engages in an extended fantasy covering a number of years of his imagined marriage to Denise McNamara, in which he places himself and Denise in a variety of Australian landscapes. While Murnane’s novel almost exclusively depicts women as sexual objects, readers should remember that Murnane writes from the perspective of a sex-crazed teenage boy. Salusinszky argues that Murnane always “writes from a male position” with “great honesty,” which “means that
he writes a great deal about the conditioning of males, as children and as adolescents” (Gerald Murnane 30; “That Hilarious” 296).

Although Adrian’s sexual fantasies are usually set in America, they are launched in his suburban backyard. Adrian keeps a model railway in the garden shed (10). In the evenings, after finishing his homework, Adrian sets up his model railway track, which overlays a penciled outline of the United States. When the train stops after four or five laps around the track, Adrian makes a mental note of its location, such as Florida or Michigan, and uses it as the setting for that night’s sexual fantasies (13). Even though the map of the United States is “crudely drawn” and the proportions distorted, “Each few inches of railway track gave access to some picturesque scene from American films or magazines … Nearly every night Adrian made an American journey … usually he went in search of American women … He had seen their pictures in Australian newspapers and magazines. Some of them he had even watched in films” (13). Adrian uses “the whole of the U.S.A. for his love-life” (8) and associates America with beautiful film stars, liberated women, and casual sex, as opposed to the sheltered, predictable reality of his working-class Catholic existence.

In his article, “Indefinite Desires: Love and the Search for Truth in the Fiction of Gerald Murnane,” Birns argues that Murnane presents America “as a fantastic locale of sexual fulfillment and unconstrained imagination, as opposed to the repressive Cold War Catholic milieu shrouding the Australia of its teenage protagonist” (49-50). Birns highlights the anomalous nature of Murnane’s text, pointing out that Anglophone writers have rarely “dared to represent America,” despite “the bravado of the post-colonial project” (“Indefinite” 50). Anticipating the objections of feminist scholars, Birns notes
that "Murnane's seeming idealization of women, his perpetuation of the Petrarchan stereotype of the perfect yet remote beloved, obviously calls his work into question from a feminist perspective" ("Indefinite" 50). Birns argues, however, that Murnane's work "may be compatible with feminism, in both a simple way and on a more sophisticated level," since the author's "view of women is a stance that deliberately marks out the limits of its applicability. Rather than mounting a pretentious plunge into a Lawrentian omphalos of sexual otherness, Murnane retains a certain veil of mystery that is as much an index of cognitive self-discipline as it is of patriarchal mystification" ("Indefinite" 50). Indeed, Murnane's satire continually highlights the absurdity of Adrian's conception of women and his complete lack of understanding of them; his inexperience and idealization of women is linked to his idealization of American spaces.

Murnane emphasizes the dominance of American culture in 1950s Australian suburbia by repeatedly depicting Adrian gathering images for his sexual fantasies from various media outlets. After setting the table for dinner, Adrian reads the Argus newspaper and searches the front pages

for the cheesecake picture ... It was usually a photograph of a young woman in bathers leaning far forward and smiling at the camera. If the woman was an American film star he studied her carefully. He was always looking for photogenic starlets to play small roles in his American adventures. If she was only a young Australian woman he read the caption ... and spent a few minutes trying to work out the size and shape of her breasts. Then he folded up the paper and forgot about her. He wanted no Melbourne typists and telephonists on his American journeys. He would feel uncomfortable if he saw on the train one
morning some woman who had shared his American secrets only the night before. (11)

In the evenings after dinner, Adrian turns on the wireless and listens to the hit tunes for half an hour. While listening to the radio, Adrian pretends to be busy doing something else, since he believes that if his parents know he is listening to the words they might turn the radio off or ban him from listening to the program (11-12).

Adrian's imagined sexual adventures become "a little more outrageous" (15) each night and he eventually concludes that the "kind of sexual activity" he prefers is "not common in real life": "Even after watching an American film, Adrian still thought he might have been a very rare kind of sex maniac" (18). Adrian reads books by authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas and Ion L. Idriess, but does not expect to find any proof that men and women behaved "as he and his women friends did in America" (18). However, "an innocent-looking library book eventually proved to Adrian that at least some adults enjoyed the pleasures that he devised on his American journeys" (18). In a book by Idriess, Adrian finds "a picture of a naked man lolling on the ground against a backdrop of tropical vegetation while his eight wives ... waited to do his bidding. The man was Parajoult, King of the Blue Mud Bay tribe in the Northern Territory. Although he and his wives were Aborigines, there was a look in his eye that cheered Adrian" (18). Adrian muses that his fellow suburbanites might consider

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101 Ion L. Idriess (1889-1979) was a best-selling Australian author who wrote adventures and historical novels such as *The Red Chief: As Told by the Last of His Tribe* (1953), *Madman's Island* (1927), *Headhunters of the Coral Sea* (1940), and *Nemarluk, King of the Wilds* (1951).
him crazy if they knew about his dreams of orgies “beside some beach or trout stream in America,” but decides that “King Parajoulta would probably have understood” (18).

Later in the novel, while thinking about how masturbation has changed the course of history, Adrian decides that “Not just the things that might have happened, but many important events that actually happened were missing from Australian history books” (58). Although Adrian is specifically thinking about masturbation, the larger point is obvious to Murnane’s readers. On the following page, Adrian thinks, “Of course the Aborigines had been in Australia for centuries before the white men, but no one would ever know their history. They had lived a carefree bestial existence. Some of them, like King Parajoulta of Blue Mud Bay with his eight wives, showed signs of imagination. But without books or films they had no inspiration to do unusual deeds” (59). Although Murnane uses Adrian’s teenage ignorance and narrow 1950s worldview to highlight omissions in Australian history and distorted perceptions of Australia’s Indigenous people, he does not address issues of Indigenous ownership, land rights or belonging in *A Lifetime on Clouds*.

Adrian’s sexual fantasies and his perceptions and experience of suburbia are inextricably intertwined with Catholicism. Like Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Adrian, a former altar boy, is continually concerned about sin, guilt, salvation and the rules and restrictions of Catholicism (14, 6). Adrian and his mother and brothers often visit his devout spinster aunt, who prays daily that he will

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102 Parajoulta appears to be a fictional character, however, Blue Mud Bay is located in the Northern Territory, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, and was the subject of a Native Title ruling in 2005, in which the Federal government’s National Native Title Tribunal recognized the Yolngu people’s native title rights to the area (“Traditional Rights”).

103 However, Murnane addresses Indigenous issues in a remarkable fashion in his short story “Land Deal,” which presents the arrival of European settlers in the area now known as Melbourne from the point of view of the Indigenous inhabitants.
become a priest (39). Since all of Adrian’s thoughts and energies are focused on sexual fantasies and he commits only one kind of mortal sin, he has no need to examine his conscience before going to confession: “All he had to do before confession was to work out his total for the month ... Yet he could never bring himself to confess his total” (19).

When a priest lectures Adrian’s class about the dangers of the secular press, Adrian is certain that the priest is referring to the Argus, “which was delivered to the Sherds’ house every morning because Mr Sherd said it was the best paper for racing and football” (61). Adrian is terrified that his fellow Catholics will shut down the Argus or prevent it from printing suggestive pictures, since he depends on the newspaper “to introduce him to new faces and breasts and legs” (62). After Adrian begins his imaginary relationship with Denise McNamara, he becomes extremely devout and imagines himself as a model Catholic husband and father.

During the retreat at the suburban monastery, Adrian enjoys “feeling cut off from the world” and being “hidden for a few days in one of the best suburbs of Melbourne for the purpose of looking into his soul and making sure he was on the right path” (122). Adrian often reflects upon his former self and tries to determine “why he had turned ... from a normal Catholic boy in a decent household to a sex-crazed satyr rampaging across America ... he was inclined to blame American films,” despite the fact that he has never seen his favorite stars in a film, since he is only allowed to view “five or six films a year,” half of which are Disney films, and the remainder are selected by his mother because they are “classified ‘For General Exhibition’ and recommended for children” (129). Adrian begins to suspect that the “supposedly harmless films might have started him on his year-long orgy of lust” (129), since they “introduced him to a kind of woman
he never came across in Australia — the attractive young woman in her twenties who had no boyfriend but travelled around waiting for the right man to fall in love with her and begin courting her” (132). Here Adrian thinks of his suburban existence as devoid of temptations; the unsavory influences come from outside suburbia.

When a priest visits St. Carthage’s near the end of the novel and gives a speech designed to recruit boys into the priesthood, Adrian expresses an interest in talking privately about a possible vocation (149). He tells himself that he has “just taken the most dramatic step of his life” and is “almost certain” that he possesses “a vocation to the priesthood” (149, 151). Launching into another extended fantasy, Adrian images himself serving a parish in the western suburbs of Melbourne, where he delivers fiery sermons to shake his parishioners out of their complacency (152). In Adrian’s priesthood fantasy, he quickly rises through the ranks to become the private chaplain to the Archbishop of Melbourne (154). After the Archbishop is elected to the College of Cardinals and the Pope dies, Adrian accompanies the Archbishop to Rome, and advises him on how to cast the deciding vote in the election of the new Pope (154-55).

While Adrian’s imaginary future self is in Rome, he thinks of Melbourne far away and its “great sprawling suburbs [spreading] from the idly slapping water of Port Philip Bay to the moist leafy hillsides of the Dandenong Ranges. But under the night sky with its fiercely blazing Southern Cross, the city was not at peace” (155), since thousands of young Catholic men masturbate while fantasizing about young Catholic women who “could have inspired the passionate young men to reform their wasted lives if only they had met and understood each other” (155). Adrian’s imagined possibility of reform is
inspired by the purifying effects he experiences because of his imaginary relationship with Denise McNamara, which takes up most of the second part of the novel.

During mass one Sunday in his local church, the golden stockings of a young woman brush against Adrian’s knee as she approaches the communion rail. The young woman turns out to be a girl in “the uniform of the Academy of Mount Carmel, in the suburb of Richmond” (72). Looking at the girl, Adrian thinks that her face is “angelic” and decides she possesses “the kind of beauty that could inspire a man to do the impossible. He turned towards the altar and put his head in his hands. Slowly and dramatically he whispered a vow that would change his life, ‘For her sake I will leave America forever’” (72). While riding his bike home after his encounter with the angelic girl, Adrian sings “a current hit song. It was called Earth Angel. He sang the words slowly and mournfully like a man pleading with a woman to end his long years of misery” (73). Adrian ceases to fantasize about orgies with American women and makes Denise the new object of his obsession. In bed the following night, Adrian thinks of Denise and shelters “in the aura of purity that surrounded her like an enormous halo. In that zone of sanctity no thought of sin would trouble him” (73). He resolves to go to confession the following Sunday “and rid himself for the last time of the sin that had threatened to enslave him,” and to spend every afternoon for the rest of the school year catching a different train from Swindon to Accrington in an attempt to “meet up with his Earth Angel on her way home” (73). Adrian figures that once he knows which train Denise catches, he will be able to catch her train every day (73).

On the last Monday of the school year, Adrian’s friend Stan Seskis proposes a competition for the holidays: “All of them, Seskis, Comthwaite, O’Mullane and Sherd,
would keep a careful count of how many times they did it. They would be on their honour not to cheat, since they all lived in different suburbs and had no way of checking on each other” (73). Adrian decides not to tell his friends he has given up masturbation, so he agrees to rule-up the scorecards and believes he will be able to keep his blank, since “The women who had tempted him to sin in the past were only images in photographs. The woman who was going to save him now was a real flesh-and-blood creature. She lived in his own suburb … For too long he had been led astray by dreams of America. He was about to begin a new life in the real world of Australia” (74). Salusinszky argues that “the greatest irony inheres in the fact that what is presented as a turning away from ‘mere images’ towards a ‘flesh-and-blood creature,’ from ‘dreams of America’ towards a ‘real world,’ will become the final, decisive retreat into a fantastic dream-world” (“That Hilarious” 296).

During the last weeks of 1953, Adrian catches a different train home each afternoon and searches in every compartment of every carriage “for the girl in the Mount Carmel uniform,” but is unable find her. Adrian realizes that he has “to endure the seven weeks of the summer holidays with only the memory of their one meeting in Our Lady of Good Counsel’s Church to sustain him. But he swore to look for her each Sunday at mass and to go on searching the trains in 1954” (77). When Adrian’s mother informs her sons that they will not be taking their annual family holiday to her brother-in-law’s farm at Orford, Adrian takes the news calmly, since “he was secretly pleased to be spending January in the suburb where his Earth Angel lived” (77-78). Adrian spends the holidays looking for Denise at mass and riding his bike around the suburb for hours hoping to find her (78). Adrian decides that the way to keep his nocturnal adventures “pure and sinless”
is to “take his Earth Angel with him” and in his fantasy proposes marriage to Denise, who accepts, of course (80).

Once the 1954 school year starts, Adrian continues searching the trains for his Earth Angel: “Two nights later he walked into a second-class non-smoking compartment of the 4.22 p.m. from Swindon and saw her. The face he had worshipped for nearly two months was half-hidden under a dome-shaped beige hat – his Earth Angel was absorbed in a book. If she loved literature they had something in common already” (81). In an attempt to get Denise’s attention, Adrian stands a few feet away and takes a book out of his bag entitled *The Poet’s Highway*, which contains “the most beautiful poem he had ever read – *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” (81). As the train rounds a bend, Adrian pretends to lose his balance and leans over “until the page with the poem was no more than a foot from his Earth Angel’s face. He saw her look up as he swung towards her. He couldn’t bring himself to meet her eyes, but he hoped she read the title of the poem” (82). Adrian spends the next few minutes staring at the poem and moving his lips, pretending to learn it by heart, and “Out of the corner of his eye … [sees] her watching him with some interest” (82). Adrian puts his anthology back in his bag at the last station before Accrington, since “He knew it was unusual for a boy to like poetry and he dreaded her thinking he was queer or unmanly,” and spends the rest of the journey reading the *Sporting Globe* (82).

Adrian travels in Denise’s compartment for the next two weeks, and since she does not change compartments, he decides she must be interested in him (82). In bed at night, Adrian is reunited with Denise, “not the girl … but the twenty-year-old woman who was already his fiancé. He spent a long time each night telling her his life story”
Denise continues to sit in the same seat throughout February, and sometimes glances at Adrian when he enters the carriage: “When this happened he always looked politely away. He was going to introduce himself to her at the right time” (84). On an evening when all the seats in the compartment are occupied, Adrian stands above Denise’s seat and take out an exercise book, which he pretends to read, and holds in a manner so that the front cover is “almost in front of her eyes” (85). Since Adrian spent half an hour during school going over the letters, the writing on the cover is “large and bold … It read[s]:

Adrian Maurice Sherd (Age 16)
Form V
St Carthage’s College, Swindon” (85).

Denise looks at the book, and then lowers her eyes.

Denise glances at Adrian’s writing twice more during the following minutes, then takes out her own exercise book, pretends to read from it, then holds it “in front of her with her own name facing him … He read the delicate handwriting:

Denise McNamara
Form IV
Academy of Mount Carmel, Richmond” (85).

Apart from the brush of legs during mass, the exchange of names is the closest Adrian and Denise ever come to interacting, assuming that Denise actually reads the writing on Adrian’s exercise book (and we cannot be certain that she does). Salusinszky argues that Adrian and Denise “come close to exchanging … a pair of signifiers emptied of content” and describes the signifiers as “emptied twice over,” since “they are mere tags, labels,
names” and readers “never know for sure whether Denise has any intention of revealing her name to Adrian here” (original emphasis) (“That Hilarious” 299).

However, the information displayed on the covers of the exercise books (name, age, and educational and religious affiliation) is crucial in terms of establishing identity and compatibility, and thus serves an important function, regardless of whether or not Denise reads Adrian’s cover or intends to reveal her identifying information to Adrian. Once Adrian’s knows Denise’s name, he is able to acquire more information about her. Adrian gets used to referring to his crush as “Denise,” rather than “Earth Angel,” and knowing her name makes it “much easier to talk to her in bed at night, although he still hadn’t spoken to her on the train” (85). Armed with Denise’s name, Adrian searches a directory in a public telephone box for McNamaras in Accrington. He finds two listings for McNamara: I.A. and K.J. Since Adrian knows “how to tell Catholic names from non-Catholic,” he assumes the K.J. stands for Kevin John and decides that K.J., who resides at 24 Cumberland Road, must be Denise’s father (86). Adrian looks up Cumberland Road in a street directory and memorizes its location (86).

Each night Adrian walks out of Accrington station “a few paces behind Denise,” looks towards Cumberland Road, and finds there is “nothing to see except rows of white or cream weatherboard houses, but just knowing that her own house was somewhere among them made his stomach tighten” (86). Adrian yearns for a glimpse of Denise’s home and envies “the people who could stroll freely past it every day while he had to keep well away. If Denise saw him in her street she would think he was much too forward in his wooing. The only way to see her house was to sneak down Cumberland Road late at night, perhaps in some sort of disguise” (87). At school, Adrian avoids his
former friends and thanks God that they travel home on different trains (89). When Adrian fantasizes about his honeymoon with Denise, he spreads the imagined twelve days of the Tasmanian honeymoon out over several months of nocturnal fantasies (96).

The narrator reveals that Adrian’s knowledge of Victoria is limited to the western suburb “where he had grown up and gone to primary school,” Accrington, the southeastern suburbs he passes though on his way to and from school, and “the landscape on either side of the railway line between Melbourne and Colac and a few miles of farmland around his uncle’s property at Orford” (105). The only trips Adrian has taken outside Melbourne are the “few brief holidays he had spent on his uncle’s farm at Orford, near Colac, in the Western District of Victoria” (58). Adrian decides that none of the places he knows, whether suburbs or rural landscapes, will serve as “a fitting backdrop for the scenes of his married life,” and thus draws on places he knows of that are “worthy settings for a great love story,” since they are “landscapes so different from the suburbs of his childhood” that against their backdrop “even the trivial events of his married life” will “seem momentous” (105). Adrian fantasizes about being a husband who can “forget all those Sundays when he had come home from mass with nothing to do but climb the solitary wattle tree in the backyard and look across rows of other backyards and wait for the six o’clock Hit Parade in the evening” (105). The depiction here of suburbia as a boring site devoid of interesting activities is one of the few negative depictions of suburbia in the novel and can be interpreted as a commentaty on the routineness of family life.

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104 Orford is indeed a town in the Western District of Victoria, but it is nowhere near Colac; in fact, it is 160 kilometers west of Colac.
While attempting to find an appropriate location in which to live out his fantasy marriage to Denise, Adrian remembers photographs of Victorian landscapes mounted in the compartments of the country trains he had taken to the Western District (105-106). In his fantasy marriage, Adrian tells Denise that they will “make their home in a valley beside a waterfall at Lorne or on a hillside overlooking Camperdown ... or best of all, in the trees above a bend in the road near Hepburn Springs” (106). As the September holidays approach, Adrian’s mother informs him that he deserves a rest and has arranged for him to spend a week on his uncle’s farm (112). While Adrian is at Orford, his uncle takes him and his cousins “to visit a place called Mary’s Mount ... [in] the steep timbered hills of the Otway Ranges” (113). According to Adrian’s uncle, Mary’s Mount is a Catholic community comprised of “‘modern saints’ who have returned ‘to the medieval idea of monasticism ... They bought nearly 600 acres of bush with only two cleared paddocks and they’re turning it into a farm to supply them with all their needs. Except for books and clothes they share almost everything in common’” (113-114).

Adrian’s uncle expresses wonder at the prevalence of “‘trashy books and films’” in the city and “‘the spread of Communism,’” declaring, “‘The only safe place to bring up a family nowadays is somewhere like Mary’s Mount ... If anything can save Australia the move back to the land can do it ... We haven’t got much time left. The experts reckon by 1970 at the latest the whole of Asia will have gone Communist. We need a population of at least 30 to 40 million to defend ourselves’” (114). Both Adrian and his uncle fail to realize that the residents of Mary’s Mount are essentially communists, adding to the comedy of the episode. Inspired by his visit to Mary’s Mount, Adrian revises the narrative of his fantasy marriage to Denise and has them plan a move from Hepburn.
Springs to “a Catholic rural co-operative called Our Lady of the Ranges, deep in the Otways” (117).

Eventually Adrian tires of his imaginary marriage to Denise, since “the married life of the Sherds was becoming too remote from the daily life of the young Adrian Sherd. Mrs Denise Sherd was a wonderful wife, but perhaps a boy in Form Five needed someone nearer his own age” (140). Adrian begins fantasizing about Denise the schoolgirl, rather than Denise the young woman, and derives “more pleasure from hearing the schoolgirl Denise talk about her likes and dislikes and hobbies than he had once got from imagining her as his wife. He chatted to her every night for nearly two months” (141). After talking to the priest about a possible vocation in the priesthood, Adrian decides to end his fantasy relationship. Rather than catching Denise’s train as usual, he goes into the Swindon church and prays until he knows he has missed Denise’s train (151).

At the conclusion of the novel, Adrian decides he has “spent too much time in unreal conjectures ... His dreams had spanned a lifetime. He had spent a lifetime on clouds. Now was the time to think of his real future” (156). Adrian proceeds to imagine himself a “humble parish priest” in a Melbourne suburb. He fantasizes about telling a teenage boy who has confessed to masturbation that he should “find a good Catholic girl and make her the object of your dreams. And when you’re tempted to commit this disgusting sin, ask yourself what she would think if she could see you”” (156). The next parishioner who enters the confessional is a teenage girl “in a convent uniform” who states that she does not have a confession to make but seeks advice about a teenage boy in the uniform of a Catholic college who has been staring at her for weeks on the
afternoon train (156). "Father" Sherd advises the girl not to encourage the boy, but rather to "sit modestly," keep her eyes on her reading and not meet his eye (156). Salusinszky argues that by the end of the novel, Adrian’s “imagination has carried him away from sensual enjoyment,” and that, at the novel’s conclusion, Adrian “is not moving towards new vistas”; rather, “he is a bigger mug than ever, having accepted that his yearnings for guilt-free sexual love were nothing more than ‘impossible dreams’” (“That Hilarious” 294-95).

Murnane does not depict Adrian’s residence in suburbia as the cause of his sexual and religious fantasies. Rather, it is Adrian’s Catholicism and strict Catholic education that prompt his misguided imaginings. Although there are a few passages in *A Lifetime on Clouds* that can be interpreted as negative depictions of suburbia; there are no blatantly, incontrovertibly anti-suburban passages, such as those in Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*, Malouf’s *Johnno*, Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* and McCann’s *Subtopia*. *A Lifetime on Clouds* demonstrates some of the numerous possibilities for fiction that utilizes suburbia as a setting and rejects the anti-suburban tradition. Moreover, *A Lifetime on Clouds* is perhaps the first Australian novel set in suburbia since White’s *The Solid Mandala* that is not anti-suburban.

*Landscape with Landscape: Imagining, Traversing and Investigating Suburbia*

In his fourth book, *Landscape with Landscape*, Murnane continues his explorations of suburbia, demonstrating once again the enormous variety of creative possibilities for fiction that utilizes suburbia as a setting and rejects the anti-suburban tradition. Salusinszky argues that *Landscape with Landscape* contains “some of Murnane’s best writing” and claims that it “is clearly full of bits and pieces of ...
[Murnane’s] life, as well as bits and pieces of lives he might have led” (“On Gerald Murnane” 525). However, Murnane’s fictional experiments in Landscape with Landscape are even more radical than in A Lifetime on Clouds, since he not only investigates a range of suburban settings, he also conducts experiments with genre, abandoning the novel as a form and utilizing six versions of an unnamed first person narrator. Murnane’s innovative use of fictional techniques in Landscape with Landscape has led to debates regarding whether the text is a novel or a collection of stories. The cover of the Penguin edition uses the terms “stories” and “fiction,” but does not label the text either a collection of short stories or a novel. The text is comprised of six pieces of prose fiction, each beginning on a new page with an italicized title. The text does not contain a table of contents, and thus the reader is unaware that the first piece, “Landscape with Freckled Woman,” is a self-contained piece of fiction until finishing it and encountering the next piece.

Niall Lucy argues that the lack of a table of contents is a sign that Landscape with Landscape is “not a collection of short stories”; he considers referring to the “stories” as “chapters,” but acknowledges that “this is not a very satisfying description of Murnane’s text either, since it invokes a set of … assumptions about novels that the text declines to fulfill” (104). Genoni argues that even though Landscape with Landscape is comprised of “separate stories,” the text “can be approached as a novel” (298). Likewise, Helen Daniel describes the text as “six stories … [that] make up a novel” (Liars 329). In the last section of the book, “Landscape with Artist,” Murnane’s narrator directly addresses the issue, stating, “I had considered again one of the problems that had kept me from showing my manuscripts to a publisher. I tried to decide whether they were a collection of short
stories or whether I could combine them and unify them to make them a single novel … [I] told myself that … I would … devise a new form of prose fiction – neither short story nor novel” (218). Thus, the words of one of the narrators of Landscape with Landscape provide the answer to questions regarding its genre.\(^{105}\)

Although the six pieces in Landscape with Landscape can be read as separate entities, the pieces are all connected, as the narrator of each piece refers to the existence of the next piece in the book, which he claims to have written. Thus, the narrator of the first piece, “Landscape with Freckled Woman,” states that his “first story, Sipping the Essence,” will “almost certainly be published” (22); four pages later, readers of Landscape with Landscape encounter a piece entitled “Sipping the Essence.” The pattern of the narrator of the present piece naming the following piece continues until the sixth piece in the book, “Landscape with Artist,” which refers back to “Landscape with Freckled Woman,” which the narrator claims to be carrying in his backpack (267). Lucy suggests that the terms “‘First’ and ‘last’ … need to be placed in inverted commas, because the sequence … isn’t linear but circles back on itself” (104). Daniel contends that each piece “opens out of its predecessor … in a strange loop which is never ending” (Liars 328). Salusinszky describes the six pieces of fiction as fitting “into each other like Chinese boxes” and argues that Murnane’s use of an unnamed narrator in all six pieces who is “a young, or youngish, man living in Melbourne and trying (without conspicuous success) to become a published writer, suggests that the book has an allegorical relationship to Murnane’s life in the 1960s and early 1970s” (Gerald Murnane 58).

Indeed, the six narrators of Landscape with Landscape share numerous correspondences

\(^{105}\) Henceforth, I shall refer to the text as a work of prose fiction containing six pieces.
with Murnane himself, so much so that one is tempted to conclude that the narrators are simply all versions of Murnane.  

Daniel argues that the setting for Landscape with Landscape is on one level the “real places and suburbs” of Melbourne, such as Fitzroy, Brunswick and Carlton. However, “across the face of Melbourne from the 1950s to the 1980s,” Murnane overlays “another city and another level … a prismatic image of Melbourne … a private city with suburbs and districts spaced according to his own private coordinates, a Melbourne of his own in the crevices and interstices of the real city” (Liars 329). Rather than viewing suburbia as an unworthy site for fiction or a location to mock, Murnane perceives suburbia as the location in which limitless manifestations and permutations of life can be endlessly imagined, revised and re-imagined. Landscape with Landscape demonstrates that suburbia contains an infinite number of stories for fiction writers to utilize.

The first piece in Landscape with Landscape, “Landscape with Freckled Woman,” takes place in 1975, and focuses on an unnamed narrator who sits in a suburban committee meeting where he is the only male among nine women (1). He has been persuaded to join the committee and serve as treasurer just hours earlier and knows none of the women, although they all live in his suburb (1). The narrator wants each woman to wonder, once she learns he is a writer, whether he has been observing her (1). When the president of the committee introduces the narrator, and states that he is available any time because he is a writer who works at home and is “hard at work on a book … [that] might turn out to be about a suburb very like” their own, he is annoyed because he fears the  

106 The narrator of “Landscape with Freckled Woman” imagines himself telling a story about a young man “trying to finish his first novel before he reached the age of thirty. It was the novel of his childhood. He had been born in a northern suburb of Melbourne. His parents had taken him inland to Bendigo at the age of five and moved back to Melbourne four years later. He had lived in Melbourne ever since” (17). This passage corresponds almost exactly to the facts of Murnane’s life.
women may have been presented with a false version of him. The narrator wonders whether the women on the committee see him as “a man whose eye . . . [has] ranged widely over the world but now chose[s] to scrutinise their quiet streets . . . or [as] a man who . . . [has] failed somewhat in the world at large” and now seeks to “learn from them what they saw beyond their kitchen windows all day or in the greyness of their television tubes late at night” (3). The narrator desires the approval of the suburban women, but reveals his sexism by assuming that they stay at home rather than work, watch a lot of television, and view films “every evening” (1).

During the meeting, the narrator finds himself “staring at two freckles low on the neck of one of the committee women” (4), prompting him to recall his history with freckled women. He states that ten years earlier, when he was about to marry, he made preparations to burn his collection of pictures of women, but “had hesitated” over his favorite pictures, since “the freckled women had always seemed peculiarly . . . [his] own” (4). The narrator then proceeds to indulge in a fantasy in which the freckled woman at the meeting approaches him afterwards and asks him what kind of writer he is and where he finds his subjects (6), and he answers by telling a long story about his history as a writer, referring to himself as “the young man.” The majority of the text of “Landscape with Freckled Woman” is comprised of the fantasy that the narrator tells the freckled woman; the physical action of the story consists solely of the narrator sitting in a meeting.

The story that the narrator imagines himself telling the freckled woman focuses on a young man who wants to be a writer and believes a writer needs “no more than a landscape of his own” (8). In 1960, the young man rents a room in a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, later revealed to be Malvern (11), and walks every Sunday to a major
intersection, where he stands “for five minutes or so beside the traffic-lights, pretending
to wait for someone but actually watching for any car that had a young man as driver and
a young woman as its only passenger” (8). When the young man sees a car containing a
young couple, he imagines their story. In the couple’s story, the residents of Melbourne’s
suburbs are depicted as constantly looking “east or south-east” when they think about
“travelling towards the pleasant places that waited all week on the edges of their
thoughts” (8). Mount Dandenong, on the eastern edge of Melbourne’s suburbs, serves as
“a not-too-distant goal” (8). Closer to the city, there are “gentler folds of hills,” of which
“the furthest” look “like true countryside from a distance,” while the closest are “already
marked out with rows of newly built houses” where the young couple dream of living (8-9).
In the fantasy within the fantasy, the young couples of Melbourne dream of residing
in the newest outposts of a suburbia that spreads towards the horizon.

The young man spends his Sunday afternoons alone in his room, “reading and
writing and trying to define his landscape” (9). Eventually, he decides that the
southeastern suburbs are “distracting him from his landscape” and resolves “to live in a
suburb of Melbourne that offered nothing to the eye: a suburb from which the writer
could see only what he himself devised. And he fixed on an inner suburb” (10). In 1960,
the young man “had never heard of anyone wanting to settle in an inner suburb,” since
they were considered slums (10). Young couples “were expected to buy blocks of land in
new suburbs,” although some newlyweds lived in rented flats “in tree-lined streets” of
South Yarra or Hawthorn “while they saved for their newly built houses far away to the
east” (10). After searching “the true slums north of the city,” the young man chooses “a
suburb almost bare of trees, where front doors were an arm’s length from the footpath
and walls of factories kept whole neighbourhoods in shadow all day” (10). The young man rents a room in “a single-fronted house in Argyle Street, Fitzroy” (10).

As Murnane once was, the young man in the narrator’s story is a schoolteacher who aspires to be a writer (11). The young man’s friend who helps him move asks if he knows what he is doing, prompting the young man to decide that his friend is “only one more of the thousands who knew nothing of true landscapes because they had grown up in the belt of neat suburbs between Port Phillip Bay and Mount Dandenong” (11). Since the young man is “too tired to rebuke” his friend, and “a little alarmed that the man might go back to his bayside suburb thinking the young man’s mind had given way,” he tells his friend that he has moved to Fitzroy in order to “write about reality – about the sort of people in the kitchen downstairs; people who lived lives of elemental passion unhindered by the conventions of the suburbs by the sea” (11). Here Murnane draws on anti-suburban ideas about the slums and the working-class; however, his narrators do not subscribe to notions of working-class vitality and superiority, or promote them. Rather, the ideas are used as an excuse to justify a decision that seems strange to a middle-class suburbanite, who is presented as a member of a class bound by convention.

The young man spends three months living in Fitzroy, and although he continues to teach in a primary school in a south-eastern suburb, he spends most of his free time alone in his room, seeking to “disorder his senses,” since he has “read a little about Arthur Rimbaud” (11, 12). After a dispute with “the woman who seemed to be the chief tenant of the house,” the young man decides he must leave Fitzroy and dreams of moving to a room above a warehouse or shop in “the central business district … He saw the central city as a blank space from which the true patterns of the suburbs would be visible”
However, he is unable to find a room in the city and has to "settle for a block of flats about a mile from the city, in St. Kilda Road" (14).

Murnane uses his story within a story to address the issue of the gentrification of the inner suburbs. The young man in the narrator's story notices "people from the outer suburbs finding their way into the inner parts of Melbourne" and speculates that he may have accidentally "been aware years beforehand of the prevailing mood of the late 1960s. Perhaps, blundering into Fitzroy in 1960 ... he had been something of a pioneer" (16). The young man gradually comes to realize that "what he had thought was the fixed shape of Melbourne was changing" (17). Many of the "shabby houses" in the inner suburbs are now occupied by "teachers and lecturers and ... business and professional couples. On his walks through suburbs where he had once felt safely alone ... he saw the trails and outposts of the people ... who were going to change their surroundings" (17). Thus, Murnane reveals the evolving nature of individual suburbs and suburbia as a whole.

Around the time that the gentrification of the inner suburbs becomes apparent, the young man marries and has to decide where to buy a house (17). As part of a married couple, he finds himself attending social gatherings in newly gentrified terrace houses in the inner suburbs and sees "how the people in them had shaped their surroundings to suit themselves" (17). The young man and his wife live in "a cream-brick block of flats" in the inner suburb of Brunswick (18). During a party in 1970, he comes to realize that "the inner suburbs had become part of a far-reaching landscape such as he had once wanted to write about" (18-19). The young man persuades his wife "to buy a house in the last place left for him, the one place that the dreamers of the new Victoria had disregarded ... the narrow belt of newer suburbs where all the houses were said to look the same" (19). He
works on his writing in a brick veneer house in a room with a window that looks out upon
the window of the neighboring house and thinks of his street as "a narrow valley,"
assuring himself that "someone looking from the highest point in Carlton across the
northern suburbs would see nothing of his insignificant hollow in the land" (19).
Murnane's narrator deliberately chooses to dwell in precisely the kind of house and
suburb that George Johnston's narrator violently rejects in My Brother Jack.

The narrator recalls telling the president of the committee on the telephone that
after writing two novels he has "now turned to the short story" (22). When the president
had asked if the narrator's work had been published, he told her that his "first story,
Sipping the Essence, would almost certainly be published" before he finished his work
with the committee (22). The narrator is convinced that "the president's foolish words of
introduction would have persuaded" the freckled woman that he is "searching her suburb
for characters in some work of fiction" (23). At the conclusion of "Landscape with
Freckled Woman," the narrator imagines himself "writing at last about the real world,"
which contains "streets with prunus trees on their nature-strips and ... houses with
photinias and Japanese maples in their front gardens and camellias by their front porches"
(24), presenting suburbia as the most authentic setting for fiction.

The second piece in Landscape with Landscape, "Sipping the Essence," begins in
Sorrento, at the southern tip of the Mornington Peninsula, where the narrator and three of
his friends, all approximately twenty years old, rent a holiday flat and plan "to have a
wild party on New Year's Eve, the last day of the 1950s" (27). The unnamed narrator
believes that he does "not belong in Victoria" and that his "peculiar hopes" can "only be
fulfilled ... in the far sunlight of Queensland" which he only knows "from pictures in

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magazines” (29). Of the three other young men on the holiday, the narrator is closest to Kelvin Durkin, who is the “only person” the narrator knows who reads *Time* and is aware of Nabokov and Kerouac (30). The narrator feels an affinity with Durkin, since they each need “a certain setting” in order to be themselves (33). Each Friday night in 1959, the narrator walked “two miles across the suburbs” to hang out with Durkin, who would try to interest the narrator in jazz records (35). The narrator read to Durkin from Kerouac’s *On the Road*, even though Durkin’s reading was limited to “the reviews in *Time*” and “short fiction in ... *Esquire*” (35). The narrator believes that Kerouac’s “blend of poetry and craziness would one day take over the world,” leading to the recognition of his own talents (35).

On New Year’s Eve, two of the narrator’s friends attend a dance and return with three girls, two of whom have already paired-off with the narrator’s friends, so the remaining girl, Carolyn, spends the night talking with the narrator and Durkin (34). Back in Melbourne’s suburbs in the first weeks of 1960, the narrator yearns to call Carolyn and ask her out. The narrator states that he “wanted urgently to explain” himself “to a young woman,” but is afraid to ask one out and perceives the act as “an absurd ritual of the suburbs” (39). Every day the narrator enters a phone booth intending to call Carolyn, but quickly thinks of reasons to avoid calling, such as his lack of a car (41). Another excuse the narrator devises to avoid calling Carolyn is his idea that “every young woman of the suburbs” hopes to marry her boyfriend, and thus it would be unfair to go out with Carolyn since he plans to quit his job and “hitch-hike up and down the eastern States of Australia” for the remainder of his life (41). Such narrow and often-sexist views of suburban women are typical of the six male narrators in *Landscape with Landscape*.  

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Eventually the narrator tires of “staring at the map of Carolyn’s suburb” and moving his “finger up and down the long straight lines of its streets ... wondering where exactly was ... the home of the only woman in Melbourne who had listened to ... [him] and understood” (41). When the narrator finally calls Carolyn, she informs him that she has just purchased a Morris Minor and can take them anywhere (42). As Carolyn arrives at the narrator’s suburban home for their first date, he tells himself that he is “a bastard” because he has “tricked a good-natured girl from a respectable family into spending Saturday night with a man who wanted to tell her that the only good in life was poetic pleasure before he fled to the back roads of Queensland and mocked the conventional domestic life she was dreaming of” (42). However, within moments of sitting down beside her, he begins to see “quite a different future” (42, 43). The narrator foresees himself “staying in Melbourne and writing an epic poem set in an imagined Queensland ... going out with Carolyn every night for a year; proposing marriage, becoming engaged, marrying, and making” a home in the suburbs (44).

However, rather than leading to marriage, the narrator’s relationship with Carolyn only lasts a few weeks and she is soon dating Durkin. The narrator resolves that Melbourne’s suburbs will become for him what “the entire United States had been for Kerouac ... There seemed space enough in Melbourne for a solitary to travel for years out of sight of those who huddled together” (49). The narrator begins drinking heavily six afternoons per week, having decided that alcohol can show him all he needs to see, and continues to write poetry, which he submits to magazines under a pseudonym (59). He remains friends with Durkin, but Carolyn does not approve of his drinking and insists he be kept away from alcohol before the wedding ceremony; the narrator bitterly dismisses
her as “a timid bitch from the bayside suburbs, terrified of anything unconventional, who
had smiled and listened to … [his] ravings two years before for the same reason that she
had spread her legs for Durkin and half a dozen men before him: because she would have
tried any means of fulfilling her lifelong ambition to appear as a radiant bride on a sunny
Saturday at her local Anglican church” (59). In this passage, which stands out as the most
misogynistic in the book, the narrator conflates Carolyn’s disapproval of his drinking
with her suburban middle-class upbringing and unfairly characterizes her as solely
motivated by the desire to have a public wedding.

A few years later, after the narrator and his girlfriend visit the Durkins at their
“contemporary-style timber house in the cheapest subdivision in Mount Eliza,” his
girlfriend confides to him that “she considered Carolyn an empty-headed, stuck-up bitch”
(61). When the narrator learns that Carolyn does not think his girlfriend is his intellectual
equal, he marries her to spite Carolyn (61). Once the narrator is married, he and his wife
rarely visit the Durkins, since they live in suburbs on opposite sides of the city and his
wife has no interest in seeing Carolyn (62). When the narrator and the Durkins are in
their mid-thirties, the narrator and his wife are invited to a farewell party for the Durkins,
who are selling everything and moving to northern New South Wales (63). In one of the
numerous echoes of Murnane’s own life in *Landscape with Landscape*, the narrator states
that he and his wife have “never left Melbourne” and the narrator claims that at “the age
of forty” he has “been no further north than Bendigo,” where he “had lived for four years
as a child” (66). Twenty years after the holiday at Sorrento, the narrator receives a letter
from Durkin stating that “Carolyn had left him” (66). When Durkin comes to visit, the
narrator informs him that he now writes prose instead of poetry and has “finished a story
about the New Australians, the men from Queensland who had set out for Paraguay to found a country of dreams ... *The Battle of Acosta Nu*” (69).

Salusinszky argues that “The Battle of Acosta Nu” is one of “the two best pieces in the book” and the text’s “brilliant centerpiece” (*Gerald Murnane* 64; “On Gerald Murnane” 525). The narrator states in the first sentence that he is standing in Melbourne; however, the reader soon discovers that the narrator is not referring to Melbourne, Australia, but to another Melbourne, located in Paraguay. Murnane prefaces the piece with an excerpt of a letter from one of the settlers who founded the socialist New Australia colony in Paraguay in 1893. Murnane uses the New Australia settlement in Paraguay as the backdrop and basis for his narrator’s personal history (Birns, “Gerald Murnane” 79); the narrator believes he is a descendant of the original Australian settlers (Salusinszky, “On Gerald Murnane” 525). Salusinszky points out that the setting of the piece “sounds not at all like Paraguay, but very much like the same neck of the woods in which we find all of the adult versions of the narrator in *Landscape with Landscape*” (*Gerald Murnane* 65). The narrator lives in a huge city of sprawling suburbs that utilizes trams for public transportation, and the Paraguayan landscape is described as if it is Australia, with “bush” containing “listless ironbarks” and “bare flinty soil” (74, 80, 98).

When the narrator stands on a hill “northeast of Melbourne” and looks “across the folds of suburbs towards the Kinglake Ranges,” he “almost” believes he is “in Australia after all” (71). The narrator’s primary goal is to solidify his identity as an Australian and to imbue Australian identity in his son: “I only wanted to feel in touch with my own past; to be assured that a theme persisted through my confused and fragmented story” (72). As a younger man, the narrator engaged in a quest to find “someone of Australian ancestry
among the females of Paraguay,” while acknowledging that there is only an “impossibly remote” chance of meeting an Australian woman in his suburb (72). The narrator’s search for identity, longing for a true home, and desire to establish a permanent relationship with a specific place, combine to make “The Battle of Acosta Nu” a synthesis of national and autobiographical themes (Birns, “Gerald Murnane” 79).

As a young man, the narrator lives a life remarkably similar to that of the suburban narrators of the other pieces in Landscape with Landscape, spending Saturday evenings “at the home of a married couple” (73). The narrator has a habit of arriving at the couples’ house with a six-pack of beer, sitting down in front of the television, and planning to spend a quiet night with the couple who tolerate him “as some sort of foreigner” (73). However, the husband usually informs the narrator that they have been invited to a party and he must come with them (73). At the parties, “made hopeful by the beer,” the narrator rushes “into supposing … [he] had finally met a female of … [his] own generation who was at least partly Australian” (73). Having left the party alone, he would be left to wonder “which suburb of … [their] huge city had swallowed her” (74).

Believing that he needs to keep his true identity a secret, the narrator avoids social gatherings, rarely leaves his house, and adopts “the dress and manners of one of the obscure classes of Paraguayans,” reading and making notes about Australia in his free time (76). One of the narrator’s friends suspects he is mentally ill and persuades him to see a doctor. The narrator informs the doctor that according to Paraguayan science, he is mentally ill, but he is in fact “one of a handful of Australians still surviving years after … [their] grandparents had arrived in Paraguay” (80). The narrator explains to the doctor that “the settlement had failed because … the Australians had foolishly abandoned the
true source of their culture, the land of Australia itself” (80). As the narrator talks to the doctor, he comes to understand, “more clearly than ever before, the peculiar dilemma of the Australian exiles ... [who] yearned for Australia but ... dared not travel towards it for fear of finding it different entirely from ... [their] families’ scant traditions and ... [their] own later conjectures” (80-81).

The narrator’s son contracts a rare form of blood poisoning and dies in hospital, after which the narrator declares, “I was finished with Paraguay. My only link with that country was broken forever. Already I could see the bare room in an inner suburb of Melbourne where I would spend the rest of my life alone, reading and writing” (120). When the narrator leaves the hospital after his son’s death, he walks “beside a busy road that ... [leads] into the centre of Melbourne” and sees ahead of him “the empty spaces of a park” he had “sometimes stared at” from his “son’s hospital room,” which has “no formal lawns and paths, only a roughly mown paddock with scattered native trees” (120, 121). While walking in the park, the narrator remembers his son’s last hours and kneels down to gather a “handful of dust and grass and fallen leaves and scraps of twigs” (121). After standing up and flinging the soil away, the narrator perceives the soil all around him to have changed: “It was the soil that my son had died on. He had died in that place and he had died fighting. He had fought because he loved his land insanely. And the land he loved was Paraguay. He had died for Paraguay. He was a Paraguayan” (121).

After his epiphany, the narrator decides that if his son is Paraguayan, then he is too: “And if he and I were Paraguaysans, then the people in cars and trams passing a suburban park ... must have been Australians ... They were the exiles and I was the man who had come to his senses after all and stood, sure at last of his whereabouts, in his
native land — in Paraguay, the country he had thought for years was only a place he had
read about it” (122). Salusinszky argues “we can be sure” that “The Battle of Acosta Nu,”
“is physically set in suburban Melbourne,” and claims that when the narrator walks from
his son’s hospital bed to an adjoining park, “we know that the hospital is the Royal
Children’s Hospital, and the park is Royal Park” (Gerald Murnane 66; “On Gerald
Murnane” 526). However, Salusinszky claims that “The Battle of Acosta Nu” has
“precious little to do with either of the real places called Australia or Paraguay,” arguing
that the narrator “has a severe case of solipsism” and that solipsism is “Murnane’s great
subject ... a force which imposes itself on all his books” (Gerald Murnane 66; “On
Gerald Murnane” 526).

Murnane’s fantastic explorations of suburbia continue in “A Quieter Place than
Clun.” The piece begins with the narrator describing what was for “twenty-three years ... the most important event” of his life, which occurred “on a basketball court behind a
Catholic church in an outer south-eastern suburb of Melbourne” (123). In his youth, the
narrator joined a basketball team in a Catholic young men’s league because he believed it
would provide him with the opportunity to meet Catholic girls. He endured “long trips by
train to distant suburbs,” where he sat on the bench anticipating the end-of-season social
gathering (124). However, when arrangements are made for the bus trip to Mount Donna
Buang, where a picnic will be held with the girls, the narrator watches his team-mates
order pairs of tickets and realizes he has been wasting his time, since the young Catholic
men and women are already paired-off (123, 124).

However, the narrator’s realization that the desirable young women are already
taken is not the most important event of his life. Rather, the crucial event is his utterance
on the basketball court of the phrase “literary landscape,” which he says as though he is “naming” his “lost homeland” and announcing his destination: “I decided that ... I would devote my life to poetic emotion rather than philosophy or theology. From that moment I was much less anxious about my Catholic soul and much less interested in golden pagan skin. I felt myself filling up with all the branching greenness of the English literature I was going to read” (133, 135). For the narrator, the study of literature is not just a transformative path to a more fulfilling life, but a process by which literature literally colonizes the body. In the narrator’s case, his Australian body is colonized by English literature in a highly allegorical manner. The narrator decides to “indulge in pleasures” that are “morally neutral,” since in literary landscapes he can neither save nor lose his soul (135).

The narrator travels from the suburbs into the city to visit bookshops on Saturday mornings. One day an attractive young woman brushes past him and takes “a small book from a shelf in Standard Authors” (130). The narrator believes the young woman took “one of Thomas Hardy’s novels, almost certainly The Woodlanders,” so he buys a copy (130). The book has a “soothing dark-green” cover, and when the narrator returns home, instead of reading the novel he stares at the cover and imagines “the woman somewhere in Melbourne reading at that very moment the words behind the dark-green” (130). The narrator develops a habit of spending hours in the bookstore every Saturday morning, but never sees the young woman again; however, each week he purchases another of the green-covered editions of Hardy, eventually acquiring the entire set (130). While searching “for books that would extend the zone of green between ... [himself] and ... [his] surroundings,” the narrator discovers A.E. Housman’s A Shropshire Lad, and
describes the morning when he purchases it as “almost as decisive … as the evening on
the basketball court” (136). The narrator’s discovery of English literature causes him to
be “reconciled” to his life “at last” (137). The weather is no longer able to change his
mood, since “greenness” has “filled up all the spaces inside” him and he has found a way
to “live continually in a landscape of literature” (137).107

As a young man living in “the third bedroom of a suburban house twelve miles
south-east of the city of Melbourne,” the narrator resolves “to live as Housman had lived”
(138, 141). He reads poetry on the train and recites it as he walks to the State
Government offices (141). At work, the narrator overhears his colleague Warwick
Whitbread describing his weekend, which consists of working in the garden on Saturdays
and taking his family to the Mornington Peninsula or the Dandenongs on Sundays (146).
The narrator declares that he “felt a keen pity for Whitbread and his kind,” as he
perceives their struggle “to grow lawns and shrubs” and habit of visiting “scenic spots
beyond Melbourne” as proof that “even they felt an obscure yearning for landscapes”
(146). While the narrator may be misguided to interpret suburban gardening as evidence
of a yearning for landscapes, the visits to scenic locales outside the city can certainly be
plausibly interpreted as evidence of a yearning to engage with the natural environment.

The narrator indulges in suburban rituals of his own, taking regular Sunday walks.
The route of the narrator’s regular walk takes him past the house of a poor police officer,
whom he sees every Sunday “in overalls and a frayed police shirt, pushing a rusty hand-
mower over his swampy lawn or pulling weeds from flower-beds edged with scraps of

107 In an article published in March 2008, Murnane writes that when he was in his twenties he “committed
to memory all the poems of A.E. Housman in order to save … [himself] from having what was called in
those days a nervous breakdown” and read Thomas Hardy’s novels “in order to keep … [himself] from
falling back into the religious beliefs of … [his] childhood” (“Save Us” 15).
broken roof-tiles" (147). The narrator always walks slowly past the policeman's house, hoping to see the wife "push open the front door with the torn fly-wire and show herself," since he is "affected" by her face and thinks of her "as a type of all the attractive young matrons of Melbourne who looked out on straggling gardens late on Sunday afternoons" (147). The narrator spends his evenings and weekends "reading, writing drafts of poems, and studying maps and photographs of landscapes, mostly English" (151). The narrator's fascination with English landscapes is the product of his immersion in English literature, and serves as a reminder of the deep, pervasive influence of English culture on Australia.

When the narrator is twenty-one, he enrolls in a course that will qualify him to work as a primary school teacher. He declares that teaching does not interest him, and states that his motivation for becoming a teacher is to "get away from Melbourne and into a new landscape" (151). While undertaking the course, the narrator studies "lists of remote schools and large-scale maps of Victoria," trying to decide where he will spend his teaching career (151). The narrator envisions himself spending forty years drinking "every afternoon between four and six o-clock with stolid working-men in a small town whose tree-lined main street trailed away into gently undulating grasslands" (151). His daily drinking session will be followed by a solitary meal in a local cafe, after which he will walk to his "self-contained bungalow behind the house of a silent elderly couple," where he will sip beer and write, pursuing his "lifelong task of writing poetry" (151). After studying maps of Victoria, the narrator decides that the town of Casterton in the far west of the state is the location where he can turn his fantasy into reality (152).

However, when the narrator completes his teaching course and appointments are announced, he finds that he will not be leaving Melbourne, but will be teaching in
Frankston, “the last of the suburbs that followed the south-eastern curve of Port Phillip Bay” (152). However, the narrator finds that he is able to adapt his Casterton-fantasy to the suburban setting in Frankston and carry out his “plans for living as an unknown poet” (152). He rents a sleepout in a suburban backyard and drinks every afternoon at a hotel, where he drinks with three other teachers and becomes an alcoholic (152, 153). The narrator retains his habit of visiting bookstores on Saturday mornings and buys Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (156). Although Jung’s book does not make much sense to the narrator, he is “taken by the coloured mandalas in the illustrations” and resolves to write and live “by the light of … [his] mandala. In its glow, any detail of the world might seem significant” (156, 158). Murnane’s reference to Jung’s text and the narrator’s fascination with mandalas clearly alludes to White’s *The Solid Mandala*, which Murnane refers to directly in his novel *Inland*, and is the Australian suburban novel with which Murnane’s work shares most in common.109

The narrator’s encounter with Jung and discovery of his mandala leads him to resolve to “write only prose in future,” since “a poem seemed a stunted, greenish thing compared with a huge, tangled, many-coloured novel” (157). While living in Frankston, the narrator reads a review of Gunter Grass’ *The Tin Drum* and decides that the novel is “a message” to his “nervous system from the teeming, glowing world outside” (157-58). He keeps the review but does not actually read the novel, declaring, “It was enough for me to know that a German with a resonant, evocative name had written a book to prove that everything in the world was worth looking at and touching. In any case, I had to

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108 Frankston is no longer the last of the suburbs stretching southeast along the Port Philip Bay shore of the Mornington Peninsula. The suburbs now stretch uninterrupted for fifty kilometers from Frankston all the way to Sorrento, which was once a somewhat isolated holiday town at the tip of the peninsula.

109 *Landscape with Landscape* and *The Solid Mandala* both examine the role of the artist in society, feature aspiring artists living isolated lives in suburbia, and engage with spirituality.
begin my notes for a novel that would do for Melbourne what Grass had done for
Danzig” (158).

As part of his project to write a novel about Melbourne in the same vein as The
Tin Drum, the narrator applies for positions in inner suburban schools. As a result, in
1963 he lives in Carlton while teaching in Richmond (158). The narrator’s room in
Carlton is sub-let to him by a man he calls “the Danziger,” whom he met during the
summer holidays while “walking from one hotel to another around the edge of the city,
buying a pot of beer in each and looking around for a circle of drinkers who seemed like
characters from The Tin Drum, whose clothes and gestures and words derived from
elaborate mandalas” (158). After drinking together from midday until early evening, the
Danziger takes the narrator home and makes him repeat to his wife his plans for his novel
about Melbourne, explaining, “the characters would squeeze boils, and vomit, and smash
windows with their voices. The Danziger told his wife to tidy their spare room, and …
[the narrator] moved in with [his] clothes and books next day” (158-59).

Once in residence at the Danziger’s house, the narrator purchases a copy of The
Tin Drum and spends the evenings reading aloud from it to the Danziger and his wife
(159). After the three finish the novel, “the Danziger, who considered himself a
philosopher and an atheist,” reads Bertrand Russell’s History of Western Philosophy to
his wife and the narrator (159). In an echo of “The Battle of Acosta Nu,” on Saturday
nights the Danziger and his wife go to parties in the suburbs, urging the narrator to
accompany them and “bring back a woman to their house”; however, the narrator always
finds himself riding home from the parties “in a taxi with just the Danziger and his wife”
(159). Eventually, the narrator strikes up a friendship with the art teacher at his school,
talking with her for a month before asking her to accompany him to the horse races (161). After a successful afternoon together, the art teacher invites the narrator to her flat in Balwyn, where they talk and drink until after midnight (161). However, a lasting relationship fails to develop.

In the final years of his twenties, the narrator becomes a statewide relieving teacher, “at the disposal of the Education Department,” and spends “months at a time” teaching in “country schools whose head-teachers had resigned suddenly or had nervous break-downs” (163). He finds himself living a version of his Casterton-fantasy “in country hotels with only a suitcase of clothes and a pad of blank pages as ... possessions” (163). The narrator is occasionally assigned to a large school in a provincial city or a Melbourne suburb, where the male teachers “would defer a little” to him during their weekly drinking sessions, because he “was a man who had not been trapped by marriage (as they affected to think they had been) and was not burdened with mortgage payments and lawn-mowing and home handyman jobs” (165). Although Murnane presents suburban life as restrictive in this scene, his use of an unreliable narrator makes it difficult to determine whether the men really feel constrained by suburban life, or if that is simply the narrator’s interpretation of their situation.

When the narrator is thirty-four, a magazine publishes “a story” he wrote entitled Charlie Alcock’s Cock (which, of course, is the name of the next piece in Landscape with Landscape); he describes the piece as having “begun as a section in the huge novel I had not even half-finished. It was a mostly imaginary story about a man I might have been if things had gone differently with me” (166). The narrator’s description of his story also

110 According to Murnane, his third novel, The Plains, begun as “part of a chapter in a much larger book which was never published and almost certainly never will be, a novel called The Only Adam” (Baker 195).
serves as an apt description of all six pieces in *Landscape with Landscape*, which can be read as six versions of Murnane’s life. Now that he is a published author, the narrator applies for jobs where he believes he might encounter “literary people,” and receives an appointment as “an assistant publications officer with the Department of Main Roads” (166). He works in a city office and lives in a flat in South Yarra, “in the cheaper quarter south of the Toorak Road post office” (167). The narrator is successful in finding “literary people,” as a senior colleague who has published a collection of poems invites him to a gathering at his house, located “in one of the better parts of South Yarra” (167).

The narrator tells the colleague and his guests he has moved to South Yarra because he has learned that he belongs “on the margins of things” and wants to “live as a tenant in a suburb of mostly transient people” (167). He declares that the “sound of the Dandenong trains at night” brings his childhood as close as he wants it, and the “wind from the sea” is sometimes enough to warn him “away from the bayside suburbs, where … [he] had once spent two miserable years” (167). The narrator concludes that his place is “Melbourne and its hinterland to the north and west,” stating, “I had never been anywhere else; my hair was turning grey and I had never crossed the borders of the State of Victoria” (169). Murnane’s repeated use of narrators who have never left Melbourne or Victoria has surely contributed to the exaggerated accounts of his aversion to travel.

The fifth piece in *Landscape with Landscape*, “Charlie Alcock’s Cock,” is the only one in which Murnane devotes a considerable portion of the narrative to the narrator’s childhood; the other five pieces focus on their narrator’s lives after secondary school. The narrator spends the first ten years of his life “in a suburb of Melbourne so quiet” that he believes people could not survive “on the far side of their trimmed privet
hedges unless their wardrobes were stuffed” with secret, mysterious items, “a world that poked up into Melbourne in the dark corners of bedrooms and the shadowy spaces under fruit-trees and behind fowl sheds in backyards wholly hidden from the street” (172). The narrator is convinced that suburbia hides a secret world that he can access if only he can figure out how. Often on Sunday afternoons, during the late 1940s, the narrator’s mother takes him on long tram trips to visit aunts and great-aunts (172, 174). The aunt that the narrator and his mother visit most often lives in Hawthorn, and every month the narrator and his mother get off the tram at “the corner of Riversdale and Glenferrie Roads” and walk down narrow side-streets to the narrator’s aunt’s house (173).

During his visits to his aunt’s house, the narrator sometimes takes his young male cousin for a walk (174). The narrator pauses “at points among the half-dozen streets in the north-eastern right angle between the Glenferrie Road and Riversdale Road tramlines,” and waits for his cousin to tell him “something that would cure” his “strange unhappiness as the afternoon turned to evening and the houses and yards still gave nothing away” (174). While walking the quiet suburban streets, the narrator yearns “to hear what a woman or a girl might cry out in a backyard … when she forgot for the moment that her side fence adjoined the street with the strange name and the dark hedge” (174). On a quiet street, the narrator and his cousin kneel “in the very middle of the deserted roadway” and place their “heads against an iron grating to hear the trickling and gurgling of unseen sluggish water on some unthinkable route” (174). All around him, the narrator perceives places and knowledge to which he is denied access.

Trams and tramlines fascinate the narrator, since they promise access to unknown suburbs. The northern suburb where the narrator lives during his childhood developed
around a tram terminus (174). All the trams that the narrator saw in his suburb were "either arriving from the city or setting out for the city along the same straight route. But Hawthorn, east of Melbourne, was crossed by more than one tramline" (174). The narrator thinks of Hawthorn as superior to his own suburb because the presence of numerous tramlines signals the possibility of access to a greater number of destinations and the secrets they may contain. He derives pleasure from reading the destination signs on the front of the trams: "ST KILDA BEACH, KEW COTHAM ROAD, BURWOOD, WATTLE PARK ELGAR ROAD" (175). Although the narrator has not been to any of the places on the signs, he associates the names with "open spaces and trees," and thinks of the trams "as bound for some quarter of an immense, park-like landscape" (175).

When the narrator’s family has to sell their house, the narrator and his mother move in with his aunt and cousins in Hawthorn while the narrator’s father looks for a new home (175). The narrator finds Hawthorn remarkably quiet at night, since cars rarely pass in the street, but the trams run regularly: "The night was so quiet that I could hear the pairs and pairs of steel wheels bumping over the right-angled crossing at Glenferrie and Riversdale Roads. When a tram gathered speed I tried to decide which route it was following" (176). Lying in bed listening to the trams, the narrator thinks about his favorite street, the Boulevard, which is the only street he has seen in Hawthorn that curves and does "not fit neatly in the commonplace grid surrounding it" (176). The narrator prefers the Boulevard to straight streets, and "sometimes feared that the streets wherever he goes will be “too simply arranged to lead to the mystery that hung over certain afternoons” (176). He imagines "streets riddled with strange by-ways and short cuts needing years to explore," and hopes to hear in his "sleep the sounds of trams"
multiplied, the patterns of their routes made more complex, and all their destinations called into question" (176). For the narrator, the suburban infrastructure represents endless possibilities for exploration and the discovery of secret knowledge; this notion contrasts markedly with anti-suburban depictions of suburbia as conformist, repetitive and shallow.

The narrator's older female cousins occasionally invite him to go for walks around the suburb with them and show him their favorite sites, including a cage of canaries, "a greenhouse full of orchids," and a "house they called the Hollywood mansion," where the narrator stands at the gate and stares at "water-lilies in an ornamental pond" and agrees that a beautiful goldfish is visible (177). The narrator's cousins call the sights they show him "treats," but he believes he is being tricked, that his cousins want him to believe they have shown him "everything worth seeing in their suburb" (177). The narrator suspects that his cousins want him "to see no more than a child should see" and suppose that he knows "nothing about the insides of wardrobes or the dark spaces undermining their house and their suburb" (177-78). The narrator yearns to know what his female cousins talk about when they stand on the street corner in the mornings "waiting for the tram to take them far to the east along Riversdale Road to one of those suburbs where the dark-green of hedges seemed to meet in the middle of the roadway" (178). Envisioning himself the keeper of secret knowledge, the narrator imagines himself walking with his female cousins during the evening "in the Boulevard, following its gradual curve," and stopping them before they could see what lay beyond the curve, "describing all they should expect ahead of them" (178-79).
As part of his quest to discover and share secret knowledge, the narrator takes his young male cousin beneath the lemon tree in the backyard, tells him they are “being shut out of the best places around” them, exposes his penis, then encourages his cousin to do the same, wanting them to sit there until he “began to share the urge ... to explore some part of the elaborate network of the places just out of ... reach” (180). However, all the young boy wants to do is grip the narrator’s penis and ask him what he calls it; the narrator tells his cousin that it is called a “cock,” and the cousin begins repeating the word aloud, then chanting and shouting it (180-81). The narrator’s aunt hears her son, resulting in the narrator being on the receiving end of both his mother and aunt’s wrath (182). In the aftermath, the narrator and his family leave Hawthorn and move into a house “in an outer suburb among sandy paddocks and factories built of galvanized-iron and cement-sheet,” which is located “a mile from the railway station and ten miles by train from Hawthorn,” making Sunday visits to the Hawthorn relatives “rare events” (182). When the narrator is fourteen, he begins attending school in Hawthorn, and a year later his young male cousin begins attending the same school (182).

After the narrator finishes school and begins working in a government department, he learns that his male cousin plans to become a priest (188). A couple of years later, the cousin finishes school and enters the seminary, and the narrator leaves home to live in rented rooms near Hawthorn (189, 192). The narrator meets his first girlfriend at work when he is “only a few years short of thirty” (194), and begins taking her regularly to visit his cousin at the seminary (195). After the cousin is ordained as a priest and presides over his first mass, his family holds a party at the house in Hawthorn, which has been renovated and contains new rooms “where the back lawn had been,”
although the lemon tree still stands (199-200). The narrator thinks of himself and his cousin as having taken divergent paths, the cousin making “his way towards an idea of God” while the narrator searched “for a certain suburb in a Melbourne of dreams” (201). The narrator admits that from his “earliest years ... [he] had hoped to find an actual place where the mystery would reveal itself: a suburb at the end of an unmapped tramline, a street bordered with hedges and curving in on itself like a pathway in a maze, even a corner of a backyard or a cupboard in a room made somber by the sunlight of late afternoon” (197-98). All his life, the narrator has sought to discover the secrets of suburbia.

Once the narrator and his girlfriend marry, the cousin visits “once a month from his parish in the western suburbs” (203). The narrator believes that as a married man he sees “clearly at last,” and that he once searched for “Shadowy landscapes interwoven among actual streets and suburbs” solely because he “was baffled by the strangeness of females, having no sister and not even a girl-cousin” of his “own age who might have sat under her lemon tree” with him (203). During the late 1960s, in the third year of their marriage, the narrator and his wife purchase their own house “in an outer suburb” and within five years have a son and a daughter (204, 208). The narrator’s cousin, who has developed “a considerable reputation as a marriage counselor,” holds a position in a diocesan office arranging “conferences for married couples” (207-08). The narrator no longer considers himself happily married, but “could not have explained why” (209).

When the narrator considers leaving his family, he does not think of other women; rather, he has begun to envy the life of his priest-cousin (209). The narrator is not interested in his cousin’s religion, but would like to live as his cousin does “in a building
... clearly different from the suburban houses around it” (209). The narrator begins studying Melbourne’s presbyteries and each weekend inspects five or six he has selected from the telephone directory (209). Although the narrator has “come to despise the Catholic religion,” he admires “the sites and structures and surroundings of the homes of Catholic priests” and declares, “I could have wished for a presbytery in every street of every suburb: a place to vary the repetitive pattern of houses of married couples, to hint at other patterns” (210). Eventually the narrator informs his wife that he is leaving his family in order to “live as a single man in a building that would seem not a part of the suburb around it,” where he will work on his writing, which has “developed” to the point where he is on his “way to finishing what later … [becomes his] first published piece of fiction: *Landscape With Artist*, a story about a man who had travelled backwards and forwards over his territory” (214).

“Landscape with Artist,” the final piece in *Landscape with Landscape*, is “a hilarious satire on the bohemians who gathered in the semirural Melbourne suburb of Eltham in the 1960s and 1970s” (Salusinszky, “Gerald Murnane” 236). The narrator begins his story in 1970 by stating that he is “in the backyard of … [his] three-bedroom house in the City of Heidelberg, on a gentle slope that … [he] insist[s] is the first of the foothills of the Kinglake Ranges” (217). The narrator has chosen his house, where he intends to live “for the next twenty years, because it is near enough to half-way between the centre of Melbourne and the district of Harp Gully” (217). Whenever he is “half-

111 The City of Heidelberg was a local government area that was abolished in 1994 and contained the suburbs of Macleod (where Murnane lives) and Heidelberg, Heidelberg Heights, Heidelberg West, Ivanhoe, Ivanhoe East, Rosanna, Viewbank and Yallambie. Heidelberg is well known as the location of the Heidelberg School, which consisted of a group of painters including Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, who painted in Heidelberg during the 1880s and 1890s and remain among Australia’s most revered artists. In “Landscape with Artist,” Murnane clearly alludes to the painters of the Heidelberg School, who are famous for their landscapes.
drunk,” the narrator tells his wife and friends that he belongs at Harp Gully, unfolds his favorite map, and points to the line he has “plotted from the inner northern suburb where ... [he] was born to the outer north-eastern suburb where ... [he] now live[s]” (217). He explains that the line represents his lifelong movement in a “north-east direction at an average velocity of 0.75 kilometres per year” and moves his finger across the map to show where he should be by the age of fifty (217).

The narrator states that he is currently stationary in his suburban house because his wife wants their children “to have what she calls a good education,” but he intends to “catch up again with the projection of the graph” of his life by 1990 and “settle at Harp Gully, on a dry and stony hillside in the rain-shadow of the Kinglake Ranges” (217). The action of “Landscape with Artist” shifts between events that take place in 1960, 1970 and 1980, with the narrator making a number of trips between Melbourne’s suburbs and Harp Gully. In 1960, the narrator sits “on the back veranda of a weatherboard cottage on a hilltop in the district of Harp Gully,” where, from the rooftop, he would be able to see in the south-west, “on the hills around Heidelberg, the outer edge of what journalists call the suburban sprawl” (219). The narrator has read On the Road twice and carries the book everywhere he goes (220). He drinks wine instead of beer as part of his “program for imitating Jack Kerouac” and believes “that of all young men in Australia,” he is “the closest in spirit to Kerouac” (220).

The narrator describes two main groups that he is involved with, the scrags and the artists. The scrags are bearded young men who “are the nearest Australian equivalent to the Beats of the USA. The best of them are dedicated to feeling the qualities of particular places and moments” (220). The narrator tries to think of the scrags as distinct
from the artists, whom he thinks of as “nothing but pretenders,” but admits that he is probably the only person who cares about the “distinction between scrag and artists,” since the “two groups mix freely” and many young men with “wild hair and paint-spattered trousers would regard … [themselves] as both artist and scrag” (220, 221). The narrator considers himself a scrag, but envies the “self-styled artists,” amongst whom he is “never comfortable,” since he thinks of himself as a writer (221).

Despite seeing himself as a writer, the narrator feels that nothing he sees around him belongs in his writing (221). He describes his writing as “landscapes of the mind,” which are “a sort of prose-poem made by arranging words from a private collection” he has compiled (221). When the narrator reads Dylan Thomas’ poetry for the first time, he believes that he “devised quite independently, at the age of twenty-one, a way of writing at least comparable to his” (222). Despite his literary ambitions, the narrator does not know any writers, his closest contact with them being the photographs he sees of writers “each week in the book review pages of Time” (223). The narrator plans to “give up” his “school-teaching job and move to Harp Gully” once his “writing is being published regularly” (227). He lives in a “bare room” in the inner suburb of Fitzroy, writing “until long after midnight” on weeknights (236).

During a visit to Harp Gully in 1960, the narrator’s friend, the Existentialist, encourages him to bring one of the young female teachers from his school up to Harp Gully for the weekend (227). However, even when he is drunk, the narrator “cannot imagine” himself “approaching a young woman from the suburbs” and does not think that he “could persuade such a woman to give up her hopes of marriage and a house and garden just to consort with a man of the road, even if he was a published writer” (227).
Like the narrators of “Landscape with Freckled Woman” and “Sipping the Essence,” the narrator of “Landscape with Artist” mistakenly believes that all suburban women desire marriage and a house and garden above all else.

During the same year, the narrator finds himself drinking “in a hotel lounge in a northern suburb of Melbourne” with some fellow teachers from his primary school (235). It is the first time the narrator has drank with the other teachers, since he usually takes a tram into the city to drink with scrags (235). In an obvious allusion to “Landscape with Freckled Woman,” he finds himself seated next to a young woman with “freckles low on her throat,” and finds the suburban hotel lounge a “warm and pleasant place,” and when “the sun outside shines between the spring showers,” he sees “a rich yellow glow all around” him and decides that the bar “represents the comfortable refuge” he “might have found in the suburbs if ... [he] had not been called to a life on the road” (235-36). The narrator reveals his misogynistic and narrow views of suburban life again when he thinks of the freckled young woman as representative of “all those small-minded but not ungenerous females who might have been content to do the dishes at night and sit in front of the television set and keep ... [him] supplied with cold bottles” of beer while he writes in his room (236). During a train journey home from Harp Gully a few days later, the narrator writes “a draft of a letter” to the freckled young woman, claiming that he is writing “beneath a tree somewhere between Harp Gully and Melbourne” and that he wants to spend his “time in future sipping quiet beers with a sane young woman like herself for company” (266).

In 1980, the narrator, who has recently left his family, takes his twelve-year-old son on a weekend expedition by train to Harp Gully, where they stay with an artist; it is
his "first night away from Melbourne" since moving out of his family home (228). The narrator, who now describes himself as "an alcoholic failed writer," meets a woman at the artist’s home and obtains her address before she leaves, telling her that he wants to "send her a copy of the best thing" he has "written in twenty years as an unpublished writer of fiction," and that the main character in it "is only an imagined version" of himself (264). "Landscape with Artist" concludes with the narrator traveling home to the suburbs. During the journey, he states, "I ask myself what lies behind me. If I mean to answer my question literally, I might mention a photocopied typescript of a piece of fiction called *Landscape With Freckled Woman.* (It lies in the pack on my shoulders)" (267).

The narrator imagines the artist painting a landscape that includes the narrator walking away; in the painting the figure walking away is "planning to write a piece of fiction" which describes the view of him in more detail. However, the narrator declares that he has "read enough to know that such fiction would seem nowadays merely modish, that my self-conscious narrator would seem only a figure of artifice and not a means of telling the truth. And so I decide never to write such a story. And I keep to my decision" (267). Murnane’s narrator’s discussion of fictional techniques here provides an excellent example of why critics refer to him as a postmodernist and reveals a strong understanding of contemporary fiction and criticism, despite Murnane’s claims that he lacks knowledge of postmodernism.

Critics of Murnane’s work pay significant attention to his narrative technique and praise him highly for his experimentation. Paolo Bartoloni suggests that Murnane’s "refusal to conform to conventional narratives by ... stripping his fiction of names, dialogues and clear plots" testifies "to an uncompromised search for a medium through
which metaphysical and philosophical preoccupations can be firmly engaged” (115).

Likewise, Lucy emphasizes Murnane’s unique style and technique in deeming *Landscape with Landscape* “one of Australian fiction’s most beautiful lies,” and arguing that the text “retains its innocence” and is “untainted by trans-Atlantic irony” (105). While acknowledging the importance of Murnane’s style and narrative technique, Genoni posits that the critical emphasis on Murnane’s style “risks submerging consideration of his place within the broader sweep of Australian literature,” arguing that analysis of Murnane’s work often overlooks “the extent to which he embeds his quest for self-discovery in images that convey a rich range of meaning associated with being ‘Australian’” (302).

Indeed, Murnane’s descriptions of suburbia include numerous details that emphasize the Australianness of his work. Genoni argues that while Murnane “may not consciously write as part of a national literature, his intensely personal fictions paradoxically mobilize issues of nationhood as effectively as those of his contemporaries who have self-consciously mined the seams of the postcolonial state” (302).

Although *A Lifetime on Clouds* deals with religion intensively and briefly engages with immigration and environmental degradation, Murnane’s engagements with suburbia are for the most part intensely personal. He does not address in any detail many of the common topics in Australian suburban fiction, such as immigration, environmental degradation, Indigenous ownership, non-indigenous belonging, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, or expatriation. In fact, the only common topics in suburban fiction that he addresses are religion and the role of the artist in society, both of which were first addressed in this context by Patrick White. Nevertheless, Murnane’s repeated utilization of suburbia as the setting and subject of his unique fictional experimentations
demonstrate the remarkable possibilities open to writers who reject the anti-suburban tradition. Murnane is certainly not the only Australian writer to reject the anti-suburban tradition, although he may be the most unique. My next chapter examines two novels by Peter Carey, arguably the contemporary Australian writer with the greatest international reputation and readership, which utilize suburbia as a setting and engage closely with a variety of pressing social issues.
CHAPTER SEVEN


While David Malouf and Tim Winton have both written anti-suburban novels and perpetuated the anti-suburban tradition, Peter Carey is the first highly prominent living Australian author to reject the anti-suburban tradition and write novels that address the complexity of suburban life. Malouf and Winton are the only contemporary Australian novelists with national and international reputations comparable to Carey’s. Although Malouf and Winton have both won numerous national and international awards and been short-listed for the Booker Prize, neither of them have won it, unlike Carey, who is one of only two authors who have won the Booker Prize twice, the other being the South African J.M. Coetzee, now an Australian resident and citizen. Carey has been described as “Australia’s greatest living writer” (Verghis 15), and, as Carolyn Bliss notes, “is generally acknowledged” as one of “the Anglophone world’s most accomplished and important writers” (“Peter Carey” 283).

Carey was born in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, in 1943. He was educated at the prestigious Geelong Grammar School before attending Monash University, where he dropped out after a year of studying chemistry and began working in advertising. Carey was exposed to literature by colleagues in a Melbourne advertising agency, and began writing fiction in the early 1960s. Carey established his reputation in the 1970s with two collections of short fiction, The Fat Man in History (1974) and War Crimes (1979). Carey’s highly experimental and original short stories are unlike any previous Australian
fiction (Hassall, “Peter Carey” 54). Craig Munro, the former University of Queensland
Press editor, describes Carey as “the most spectacular talent to emerge in the 1970s”
(Qtd. in Gelder and Salzman 15). Carey’s first published novel, Bliss (1981), won two
major awards in Australia, the Miles Franklin Award and the New South Wales Premier’s
Literary Award, and was runner-up for the National Book Council Award. Hassall notes
that Bliss “consolidated Carey’s growing Australian and international reputation as one of
the most exciting and imaginative of contemporary writers” (Dancing 64). Carey’s
second published novel, Illywhacker (1985), was short-listed for the Booker Prize and
won five major Australian awards, establishing Carey “as a novelist of international
stature”; his “spectacular rise to fame reached its apogee in 1988,” when his third
published novel, Oscar and Lucinda, won the Booker Prize (Hassall, Dancing 3).

In 1993, Oscar and Lucinda was “judged the second best, after Salman Rushdie’s
Midnight’s Children, of the then 25 Booker Prize winners” (Hassall, Dancing xix). In the
same year, Graeme Turner described Carey’s “level of visibility” as “exceptional,” and
argues that he was “a national figure” by the end of the 1980s (“Nationalising” 132).
Carey has published seven novels and three other books since Oscar and Lucinda and
won numerous awards; as a result, his reputation has grown to the point that he is among
the most renowned living Anglophone writers, part of an elite group including Salman
Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee and Ian McEwan. It seems that the Nobel Prize is the only
accolade left for Carey to receive. Fellow Australian novelist Nicholas Jose argues that
Carey represents Australia “on the literary map, as Margaret Atwood represents Canada
and Salman Rushdie India,” declares that he has watched Carey’s “brilliant career with
appreciation and pride,” and characterizes Carey as “a dare-devil, a dealer, an

112 Carey wrote five unpublished novels before publishing his two collections of short fiction.
investigator, a spin-doctor, a phantom, an opportunist – a literary Houdini” (140, 141, 137).

Carey moved to New York in 1989, where he has continued to live for almost two decades, while writing almost exclusively about Australia. Carey hates the term “expatriate” and prefers to be referred to as “a writer living overseas” (Verghis 16). Carey’s literary influences include Borges, Barthelme, Vonnegut, Marquez, Robbe-Grillet, Faulkner, Kerouac, Joyce and Nabakov (Daniel, Liars 152). He has cited Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude as a major early influence and a “beautiful, fantastic, perfect book” (Woodcock 7). Given Carey’s international reputation and influential stature, his engagements with suburbia carry more weight than those of any other contemporary Australian novelist and have the potential to shape both reader’s attitudes and future engagements with suburbia by writers. While Murnane uses suburbia as a setting for remarkable, highly personal fictional experiments, Carey utilizes suburbia to directly engage pressing issues in contemporary Australian society, including the effects of capitalism, consumerism and American imperialism; incest, child sexual abuse and domestic violence; sexuality and family relationships; immigration; environmental degradation; and both organized and petty crime.

**Bliss: Life and Death in Mt. Pleasant**

Between 1977 and 1981, Carey lived in a commune near Yandina in southern Queensland. While living in the commune, Carey wrote fiction and continued to work in

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113 In a 2006 interview, Carey stated, “I don’t feel at all like an expatriate. I can read the Sydney Morning Herald in a second [via the internet] ... I have e-mail, I talk to my friends, everybody travels. It’s not like we’re weeping as the ship leaves the wharf and we’re never going to see our home again” (Jones 139).

114 Antonella Riem Natale notes that the title of Carey’s novel connects it with Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Bliss” (341), while Teresa Dovey claims, “the title of the novel ... is surely taken from Katherine Mansfield’s story of the same name” (201). However, Carey has stated that his preferred title for the novel was Waiting for the Barbarians (Nielsen 70); J.M. Coetzee’s novel Waiting for the Barbarians was published the year before Bliss.
advertising, spending one week per month in Sydney. *Bliss* was written in the commune, which, along with the advertising industry, plays a major role in the novel (Daniel, *Liars* 151; Hassall, “Peter Carey” 54, *Dancing* xvi). Describing the publication of *Bliss* in 1981, Jose declares, “It was addressed to the world we lived in and was an immediate hit: bright, zesty and atmospheric; a classic piece of contemporary fiction … people argued about it around dinner tables” (143). Despite the awards and positive popular and critical reception, some reviewers of the novel “were disconcerted by the change of genre,” since they had pigeonholed Carey as a short fiction writer, were not aware that he had written five unpublished novels, and did not know that “his ambition had always been to succeed as a novelist” (Hassall, “Peter Carey” 55).  

The settings Carey utilizes in *Bliss* play crucial roles in the construction of meaning and the development of themes; however, critics have paid little attention to the specific settings of the novel, especially the suburban setting, other than the pastoral setting of the commune in the final thirty-page section, which comprises just ten percent of the text. Carey does not specifically name the nation, states, or city in which the action of *Bliss* take place; moreover, the only specifically named locations in which the novel’s action occurs are the commune at Bog Onion Road and Harry Joy’s suburban home at 25 Palm Avenue, Mt. Pleasant (60). Nevertheless, critics agree that *Bliss* is set in

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115 In a 2006 interview with Radhika Jones for *The Paris Review*, Carey reveals that he had not intended to write a novel at the time, but did so due to market forces: “... my agent told me that it would be easier to sell the stories if I said I was writing a novel. So I said, Sure. But of course I just wanted to sell the stories. I had no intention of writing a novel ... Then I started to worry about it, and I thought about this failed short story about this complacent bourgeois who thinks he’s died and gone to hell and hasn’t” (127).

116 The “Pleasant” in Mt. Pleasant serves to convey Harry’s conception of life in suburbia before his heart attack. There is a Mt. Pleasant in Wollongong, a city south of Sydney, and a Mt. Pleasant in Ballarat, a city west of Melbourne. Carey may have borrowed the name from one of these real suburbs.
Australia. Hassall argues that *Bliss* is “recognisably Australian,” and while the setting is “resolutely non-specific,” he sees it as “a deliberate conflation of Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville and Cairns” (*Dancing* 72). Jose declares that *Bliss* is “Set in a magical zone on the north coast of New South Wales” and that the characters are “small-time late-twentieth-century Australians” (145, 144). Theodore Sheckels notes that *Bliss* is “set in Australia in the 1960s or 1970s” and claims that it is difficult to precisely locate both the time and place of the novel, since “there are only a few clues that point to the Australian setting” (89).

However, the novel actually contains numerous clues to its Australian setting, including place names, the names of vegetation, descriptions of architecture, and references to colonialism, England and America. For example, the novel contains many references to vegetation found in the Australian sub-tropics, including flame trees, jacarandas, mangoes, bananas, bougainvillea, poinciana, pawpaws, mangroves, lantana bushes, avocados and papaya. On several occasions, references to the weather, seasons and specific dates definitively place the setting of the novel in a subtropical latitude in the Southern Hemisphere, where winters are like European summers, there are wet and dry seasons, rather than four distinct seasons, and September marks the end of winter (30, 59, 225, 255, 267). The Australian setting of the novel is made abundantly clear in the final section of the novel, set in the commune at Bog Onion Road, which contains references

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117 See Sheckels (89), Hassall (“Peter Carey” 55; *Dancing* 72), Jose (145), Gelder and Salzman (124). Ryan-Fazilleau (78), and Turner (“American” 436).
118 Sue Ryan-Fazilleau argues that *Bliss* includes “numerous linguistic, onomastic and environmental details [that] suggest, to the Australian reader at least, that … [the novel] is set in Australia” (78).
119 See pages 12, 23, 25, 59, 92, 102, 172 and 225.
to rainforests, cyclones, yellow box and eucalypt trees, and repeated mentions of “the bush” (277, 295, 296).

Sheckels points out that if the primary setting of the novel is located in New South Wales, “then the ecotopia [Bog Onion Road] must be somewhere up in Queensland” (89). Sheckels’ contention is supported by the text, especially the scene in which Harry pursues Honey Barbara after she runs away from Palm Avenue. Harry finds Honey “one hundred miles up Highway One” and drives her the further 400 miles north to Bog Onion Road (248). Highway One is the coastal highway that circumnavigates Australia, and serves as the most direct route between Sydney and Brisbane. On their way to Bog Onion Road, Harry and Honey drive “through Sunday traffic past giant fiberglass pineapples and bananas” (249). Here, Carey alludes to two well-known tourist attractions, the Big Pineapple near Nambour in Queensland and the Big Banana at Coffs Harbour in New South Wales. The Big Pineapple is less than ten miles from Yandina, where Carey lived from 1977 to 1981. The Big Banana is just over three hundred miles south of Yandina. Thus, if Bog Onion Road is based on Yandina, then Harry’s fictional hometown would lie somewhere between Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour in northern New South Wales.

Although those critics who have paid attention to the novel’s setting have largely focused their attention on the pastoral bush setting of the final section, the majority of the novel’s action takes place in an unnamed coastal city and one of its suburbs, Mt. Pleasant, where the protagonist Harry Joy lives with his wife Bettina and children Lucy and David. The unnamed urban area is referred to as both a town and a city, and neither its

120 Although the phase “the bush” is also used in Africa, there are numerous details in Bliss that indicate definitively that the novel is not set in Africa.
population nor the number of square miles it covers are specified. However, there are a number of clues in the novel suggesting that the city is quite large, such as the presence of a freeway (236), ships moored in the river (47), numerous suburbs (102), “factory-lined streets” (188), traffic reports on the radio (261), crowded city streets (249), a Hilton hotel, and neon signs atop “glossy, black-windowed” buildings in the city center (79).

When Honey Barbara angrily gets out of Harry and Bettina’s Jaguar at a busy intersection in the city (186), she walks streets lined with used-car yards and warehouses and through department stores and a fish market (204). She climbs “above the coastal plain” to the top of Mount Sugar Loaf, and walks “the unnamed streets … where the unemployed, hippies, junkies, and even the respectable poor lived amongst the smell of unsewered drains, half-buried shit, uncollected garbage, jasmine, honeysuckle and frangipani” (204). In the city square, Honey finds a phone box and telephone directory, and locates Harry’s house in Palm Avenue; she finds a street directory in the square and discovers that she is three miles from Harry’s suburban home (205).

The novel opens with Harry dying of a heart attack on his suburban front lawn and having an out-of-body experience, rising high above his suburb. From his vantage point, Harry sees a “blue jeweled bay eating into what had once been a coastal swamp … [a] long meandering brown river … quiet streets and long boulevards planted with mangoes, palms, flame trees, jacarandas, and bordered by antiquated villas in their own grounds, nobly proportioned mansions erected by ship-owners, sea captains and vice-governors” (11-12). This description of the city indicates that the setting is sub-tropical and contains evidence of colonialism, capitalism, urban development, and alteration of the natural environment. The city is described as being “on the outposts of the American
Empire," and Harry conducts “his business more or less in the American style, although with not quite the degree of seriousness the Americans liked. Telexes which began their journeys in Chicago, Detroit or New York found their way to him up river, where he interpreted these requests in a manner which ... suited local conditions” (13). The depiction of the city as an outpost of “the American Empire” alludes to the late-twentieth-century American dominance of Australian culture and commerce, and the description of messages from the centre of the empire reaching Harry “up river” on the margins, where he acts according to “local conditions” echoes the situation and behavior of Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Harry’s wife Bettina hates her hometown and dreams of moving to New York. She hates her city’s “wide colonial verandahs, its slow muddy river, its sleepy streets, its small-town pretentions. She loathed the perpetual Sunday afternoons, the ugly people, the inelegant bars and frumpy little frocks. Here, marooned on the edge of the Empire, she had spent ten years waiting for Harry’s promise that they would go to New York” (24). After his heart attack, Harry convalesces in the local hospital awaiting surgery. The hospital is located beside the river in an “old building” with verandahs that are “smothered in bougainvillea and surrounded by big old flame trees, frangipanis and mangoes” and banana trees (23, 25). However, Bettina sees “no charm” in a building and grounds that many would describe as peaceful and beautiful (23). In another episode, Bettina looks out the window of a restaurant and wonders “if she might, this once, see someone particularly elegant or glamorous walk past, someone with some damn style, but she was rewarded with the same stream of heavy, dowdy, frumpy-looking people who she had always despised” (63). Harry does not share his wife’s hatred of the city and its
residents, and frequents a restaurant called Milano’s, which he considers his “favourite
place in the world” (65). After Harry’s heart bypass surgery, his “second death,” he
wakes up believing that he has gone to Hell, and comes to think of Milano’s as “a
sanctuary … where one could momentarily forget the tribulations and terrors of the
unknown continent” (65, 68), making a blatant allusion to the European settlers’ fears of
Australia.

Although more that half of the action of Bliss takes place in the fictional suburb of
Mt. Pleasant, the vast majority of the scholarship on the novel fails to address Carey’s
engagement with suburbia. Unlike Johnston, Malouf, Winton, Lucashenko, McCann and
others, Carey does not depict suburbia in an overwhelmingly negative manner. In fact,
Bliss does not contain any explicitly anti-suburban passages, although Bettina expresses
disgust with suburbia and its residents on a couple of occasions. While visiting Harry at
the hospital, she fantasizes about picking up the nurses “by their necks” and shaking them
“for their dreary ambitions and their dreary lives … They went back to the suburbs and
had families” (26). On another occasion, while arguing with her daughter Lucy, Bettina
declares, “‘You are going to be a social worker and you’ll just get your degree and end up
with a line of children and a house in the suburbs’” (102). However, most of Bettina’s
hatred is directed at other people in general, rather than suburbia or suburbanites
specifically. Moreover, since Bettina is a suburban wife and mother with thwarted
ambitions, her hatred of other suburbanites may well be a manifestation of self-loathing.

Bliss contains many negative depictions of the society in which it is set, but the
negativity is aimed either at the city or at capitalism, rather than suburbia. Obviously,
suburbia is part of the capitalist system and an extension of the city, but Carey does not
single out suburbia for direct criticism. In fact, the word “suburbia” does not even appear in the novel. The fact that Carey does not follow the anti-suburban tradition and attack suburbia, even though his suburban characters engage in negative behaviors, including infidelity and incest, suggests that he takes suburbia seriously as the site in which most Australian lives are lived, and the scene in which a great variety of complex human activities take place. Of all the criticism on Bliss, only one article addresses suburbia in any detail. Interestingly, the article in question, “Utopia in Peter Carey’s Bliss,” by Don Fletcher, is by a political scientist, not a literary critic, and did not appear until 2007. However, Fletcher’s analysis is quite superficial and does not acknowledge the complexities of suburbia or Carey’s ambivalent representation of suburbia. Fletcher reads suburbia as a “site of consumption,” labels Harry a “happy consumer,” and focuses on Harry’s fondness for silk shirts and fine wine, which tempt him on his return to suburbia after his family commit him to a mental institution (41).

On the first page of the novel, Harry Joy dies of a heart attack “in the middle of ... [his] green suburban lawn” (11). Harry’s “first death” lasts for nine minutes before his heart is restarted by electric shock and he is bought back to life (12). Carey presents Harry looking down on his body from “a certain height above the lawn,” noticing that the lawn is “very, very green, [and] composed of broad-leaved tropical grasses, each blade thrillingly clear,” and wonders “why everyone else had forsaken it for the verandah” (11). Harry and his family live in a middle-class “straight-laced suburb where people brought home alcohol in special little cases ... The children, what few there were, all had clean nails and in many houses they still said grace” (34, 193-94). Hassall argues that Harry’s first death “is presented as a fall from a primal, albeit suburban, innocence” (Dancing
Before his heart attack, Harry lives a happy, naïve life in suburbia: “he thought himself happy, and why shouldn’t he? He had a wife who loved him, children who gave no trouble, an advertising agency which provided a good enough living for a man with an almost aristocratic disdain for mercantile success” (13). In his monograph Peter Carey, Bruce Woodcock argues that Harry’s existence before his “first death” was “structured around his own self-satisfaction and complacency” (44). It is not until after Harry’s surgery that he comes to realize that his family is dysfunctional and he has a distorted view of his life.

However, Harry begins questioning the value of his life before undergoing surgery, when he writes a farewell note to his family and prints the address as “Bettina and Lucy and David Joy, 25 Palm Avenue, Mt Pleasant” (49). He thinks of “His whole world” as being “contained in those ten words ... It seemed nothing, a life so pitiful and thin that it was an insult to whoever made him. It was not so much that he had achieved nothing, but that he had seen nothing, remembered nothing. A series of politenesses, lunches, hangovers, dirty plates and glasses, food trodden into carpets, spilt wines” (49-50). Harry reaches “the sour realization that he had made a fool of himself and done things he hadn’t meant to” (50). However, Harry’s loss of innocence, new awareness of his family’s problems, and realization of his past errors are by no means specific criticisms of suburban life; rather, they are more broadly applicable to the life of any person in any time or place who has failed to pay enough attention to their daily existence.

After his successful heart surgery, Harry becomes convinced that he has died and is in “Hell” (52). During his convalescence in Palm Avenue, Harry conducts “tests” and
writes observations in spiral-bound notebooks, which he keeps locked in ammunition boxes in the garage: “Harry Joy is running checks. He is comparing his life (termed ‘life’ in the books) with his other life, that is the days and years before he entered the operating room” (55). Having become disgusted with his family’s behavior, Harry leaves his family and retreats “to a suite on the twenty-first floor of the Hilton” (115). At the hotel, Harry lives lavishly, spending a small fortune on food, alcohol and the prostitute Honey Barbara, who lives for the majority of each year in a commune at Bog Onion Road, where she was born and raised. Harry’s family and his American business partner Joel, who is having an affair with Bettina, contrive to have Harry committed to a mental institution. After Harry is released, he and Honey both take up residence at Palm Avenue, as do Bettina’s lover Joel and Lucy’s boyfriend Ken. The narrator reveals that the neighbors are aware that “something decadent” is going on, but the “only firm sign” they have is Ken’s “great derelict Cadillac parked in the middle of the once neat lawn. Around this Cadillac they had watched Lucy and her new boyfriend dance with wrenches and electric drills, but they did not see that as the problem, more as a symbol” (193). Here, and on a few other occasions, Carey alludes to the surveillance activities of the neighbors and the ways in which the Joy family and their lovers deviate from suburban norms. However, the text focuses most closely on the activities of the central characters in the house and yard, rather than on the manner in which other suburbanites perceive those activities.

While living with his family and their companions in Palm Avenue, Harry marvels “at the richness and variety of life in Hell” (197). Suburbia is never presented in Bliss as a boring or repressive environment. Despite her hatred of capitalism and
consumerism and her belief in the superiority of rural life, Honey Barbara develops “a
taste for expensive wine” and gets “sucked into the madness which took place around the
dining table at Palm Avenue” (225). Much to the alarm of her “silent Victorian heart,”
Honey starts to “enjoy the life” in suburbia, uses salt in her cooking against her principles
in order to please the others, complains “triumphantly about her hangovers,” and even
enjoys the “shouting and arguing which would have been considered boorish at home”
(226). Interesting, life in the commune is more polite and reserved than life in middle-
class suburbia, and on several occasions, Honey is described as having “Victorian”
morals (213, 226), despite her drug use and annual season of prostitution in the city.
Honey thinks of the residents of Palm Avenue as more alive than her companions in the
commune, who spend much of their time “sitting back zonked out on dope asking each
other questions about their gardens” (226).

Although Carey gives Harry’s suburb a name and indicates that it is middle-class
and conservative, he does not describe Mt. Pleasant in any detail. However, Harry’s
house at 25 Palm Avenue is described extensively. The Joy home is “an old planter’s
house, designed to cool off quickly in the evening ... built on high stilts so that air
circulated beneath the floor and the walls were only clad on one side, the inside, so that
the uprights and cross-bracings became a decorative element to the exterior walls” (223).
The house has “high-ceilinged rooms,” wide verandahs in the front and back, and is
described as “charming” and “expensive but not of the first rank” (58, 59, 92, 103, 257).
Although the term does not appear in the text, the house is a Queenslander, similar to that
owned by Kerry and Rachel in Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs*. The garden is also described in
detail; it contains flowerbeds, “honeysuckle and frangipani,” a “hammock stretched from
the red flaming poinciana to the side fence” and “pawpaws on the tree outside the kitchen window” (58, 59, 92). The narrator describes the air in Harry’s backyard as “so fragrant that … one could have imagined that the grass was perfumed” (59). The backyard is “thick and glossy with the luxurious semi-tropical vegetation people fly half-way round the world for” (59). Harry’s suburban garden is depicted as a sub-tropical paradise, in stark contrast to the unappealing suburban gardens in the novels by Johnston, Lucashenko and McCann.

The interior of the Joys’ house signals the family’s affluence and middle-class taste. The dining table, which serves as the focal point for much of the action of the suburban sections of the novel, is “Georgian, made from English Ash and imported by a sea captain from a certain Percy Lewis Esq.” (102). Not only does the antique English Ash dining table represent affluence and solidity, it also functions as a reminder and evidence of English colonialism. The narrator reveals that before Harry’s heart attack and surgery, Bettina was “fastidious about the house,” since she possessed a “strong streak of very-small-town politeness and a serious concern for what the neighbours thought, although she would have violently denied it” (62). During Harry’s convalescence, Bettina leaves “pictures to hang crooked” and “floors unswept” (62). Harry had always preferred that the house and garden be kept neat; he liked “the grass trim, the floors polished, the magazines in their rack” (191). However, after returning from the mental institution, he is pleased to see the house “in disarray … At least there was some external sign of change … There were empty tins everywhere and, on the front lawn, an ancient Cadillac with a crumpled tail fin … The back garden was high with weeds” (191).
When Harry is released from the mental institution after Bettina makes a deal with Harry and pays off the management, he decides that he can no longer live in suburbia (207). However, he quickly changes his mind, realizing that his suburban home provides security and sanctuary (207). When Honey arrives at Palm Avenue, she declares that she will stay for three months and do all the cooking (209). She discards the food in the Joys’ kitchen, intending to replace it with healthier alternatives (211). Honey takes food extremely seriously and divides “the world into people who … [eat] shit and people who … [eat] good food” (214). Not only does Honey change the Joys’ eating habits, she physically alters their house and garden. In order to plant a vegetable garden, she takes to “the back lawn with a spade,” transforming “it into something useful” (255). She starts a compost heap, mulches with spoilt hay, and purchases “seedlings from Garry at the Zen Inn” (225). Inside the house, Honey changes the bedroom she shares with Harry by painting “the frames of the three windows three different colours” and beginning a mural above the bed depicting a scene from the commune at Bog Onion Road (229). In an attempt to “make the bedroom a peaceful place,” she furnishes it with cushions and candles, burns incense, and installs wind chimes on the verandah, where she performs Tai Chi (230).

A number of critics, including Nicholas Jose and Helen Daniel, view Harry Joy as an everyman representative of the average Australian. Jose describes Harry as “one of us, a local Hamlet, crawling between heaven and earth, a middling man in the middle of his existence” (146). Daniel argues that Harry is “a familiar figure … a Good Bloke, a conventional family man, living in a conventional house and style, in a conventional job. He is blind to the faults in others and to the injustices of the world which is surely
conventional too” (*Liars* 159). Following Jose and Daniel’s line of reasoning, one may conclude that Carey uses suburbia as the primary setting for the novel because it is the location where the average Australian life is lived. Despite his representativeness, Harry, according to Hassall, is a “complex and compelling” character “who is both a loser and a winner” (*Dancing* 63). Early in the novel, before Harry’s enlightenment and transformation, the narrator describes him as a thirty-nine-year-old who believes what he reads in the newspapers, “someone of note but not of importance, occupying a social position below the Managing Director of the town’s largest store and even the General Manager of the canning factory” (13). Harry’s “great talent in life” is to be “a Good Bloke” (13). He can enter a room and everybody is “happy to have him, even if all he ever” does is smile, since he projects the aura of being “intelligent enough to be critical,” yet never criticizes (13).

Harry enjoys a reputation as “something of a story-teller,” is popular with women, lets “himself be seduced” by them, and accepts “their praises without embarrassment” (13, 14). The narrator declares that Harry is “not particularly intelligent, not particularly successful, not particularly handsome and not particularly rich. Yet there was about him this feeling that he belonged to an elite” (14). Harry does not read books, but acquires his skill as a storyteller from his father Vance, who was “born in New York State and had traveled the world” (38, 19). Although Vance was born in America, the text never refers to him as an American, and he is described as having an “English middle-class accent” (21). Despite running a fairly successful advertising agency, Harry is not ambitious. The narrator describes Harry’s business as a “slightly decrepit … old boat drifting with the current down a slow muddy river” (24). Harry gets out of the boat “every now and then”
and pushes “it away from the bank,” but has no desire to compete at a high level (24). In an interview with Philip Nielsen, Carey states that “Harry is a fool” who “basically reacts to things that happen. It becomes more and more apparent that he is an extraordinarily passive character in many respects and it is the women that have the drive and the ideas. I like Bettina, she is a much more interesting character than Harry is and she has got more passion, more drive” (69).

Harry’s wife Bettina is in many ways his opposite. While he is easygoing, humorous, passive and popular, she is ambitious, serious, active and abrasive. Jose describes her as “one of Carey’s great tough unscrupulous women” (139). The women whom Harry has affairs with “could never understand how he had married Bettina, who always seemed to speak badly of everyone and everything” (14). Bettina is also unfaithful, although she does so “less cleanly … less gracefully” than Harry (14). Bettina is loud and coarse “and her aggressions, normally so well hidden beneath a pancake make-up of niceness, cracked and broke on the third martini. Her choice of lovers was never good, limited as she was to men who were prepared to be unfaithful with the wife of a Good Bloke” (14). Bettina seeks “power and success, not vicariously, not through a lover or a husband, but directly, for herself alone” (18). Bettina is well aware of her own nature, and states: “I was never a sweet little wifey. I was a hard ambitious bitch” (184).

Since her adolescence, Bettina has dreamed of moving to New York and becoming a “hot-shot” in the advertising industry: “And while she waited she became more American than the Americans. She supported their wars, saw their movies, bought their products, despised their enemies … She believed in the benevolence of their companies, the triumph of their astronauts, the law of the market-place and the twin
threats of Communism and the second-rate” (100). As part of her New York dream, Bettina cultivates Americans, reads their magazines, saves money and deposits it “in a special account” (25). Although Harry has vaguely promised to sell the business at some indeterminate time in the future, Bettina fantasizes about Harry quietly dying in his sleep so that she will be free to move to New York (25). Bettina’s daughter Lucy, a communist for most of the novel, is irritated by her mother’s “elitist attitudes” and asks her, “‘What’s the matter with being ordinary? … Why do you want to be special?’” (102). Bettina replies, “‘I couldn’t bear to be second rate’” (102). Honey Barbara thinks of Bettina as “a witch: powdered, smooth, white-skinned, dressed in black” (209-10).

Harry meets Honey Barbara while residing in the Hilton suite; when he calls an escort agency for a prostitute, she is sent to his room. Honey is “tall and straight … [and] from instant to instant, severely plain then astonishingly beautiful, and her most beautiful and obvious feature was her very large, almost impossibly large, brown eyes” (126). Honey tells Harry that she is a “‘gifted amateur,’” which is not strictly true, since prostitution is “her one commercial talent and once a year, for two months, she came down to the city and signed up with the Executive Escort Agency. She felt as ambivalent about it as she felt about the city itself, sometimes looking back on it with nostalgia and forgetting that daily life was normally spent in fear and homesickness” (129). Honey earns three hundred dollars per “trick,” which goes a long way in the commune at Bog Onion Road, where it is “enough to live on for six weeks … a roof. A water tank. A stove … thirty avocado trees. Half a horse” (129). Harry becomes Honey’s regular client, and she visits his suite each morning (133).
Honey has come down to the city with Damian, a fellow resident of the commune, who is responsible for selling the commune’s annual crop of marijuana. Honey worries about Damian, who is “immersing himself in a whole lot of city shit ... eating Kentucky Frieds and Big Macs ... soon he would be covered with poisonous fat from cancered chickens and Big Macs” (133). Although Honey views the city as the source of innumerable poisons, “each year when the wet ended she found herself looking forward to it again,” having forgotten the “dreadful fear she felt in the city. She remembered the bars and restaurants and movies and even the junk food seemed tasty in her memory” (135). While living in the commune, Honey forgets “how damn miserable” the city-dwellers “looked and how dirty the air was and most of all ... the anger. They seemed knotted in anger, and the whole of the city seemed like it was about to uncoil itself in a paroxysm of fury” (135). Honey thinks of the city as “a force, half machine, half human, exuding poisons” (135). As Harry’s relationship with Honey develops, he comes to think of her as “an expert on fear, poison and city life” (175). The negative descriptions of the city conveyed through Honey and other characters are not accompanied by negative depictions of the suburbs. If one reads Bliss as an attack by Carey on the built environment, it is important to acknowledge that it is the city, rather than the suburbs, which bears the brunt of the criticism.

Like Patrick White and Gerald Murnane, Carey uses suburbia as a setting in which to examine issues concerning religion and spirituality. Daniels notes that at the beginning of the novel, “Carey sets up the double notions that are our landmarks ... Life and death, pleasure and pain, Heaven and Hell, bliss and punishment” (Liars 159). Daniel goes on to argue that Bliss “explores the existential horror lying just below the surface of
the ordinary life of a Good Bloke,” and describes Bliss as “a post-Christian fable” that “opens with a gathering of myths … of innocence and purity … that no longer hold” (Liars 161, 160). Likewise, Hassall describes Bliss as “a religious allegory,” albeit one that is situated “in a late-twentieth-century, post-Christian outpost of the ‘American Empire’” (Dancing 72).

Ryan-Fazilleau also notes the frequent use of binaries that Daniel identifies, arguing that Carey “plays on the binary opposition between heaven and hell that is part of” the Western tradition “and also an element of the Australian heritage” in that Australia, “since the beginning of white settlement … has regularly been described as either a hell on earth (for convicts) or a heaven on earth ( … ‘working man’s paradise,’ ‘lucky country’)” (78). According to Ryan-Fazilleau, before Harry’s heart attack and operation, he “lived in an illusory Garden of Eden surrounded by his loving family” (79). Hassall argues that the Australian “setting is particularly appropriate,” since for the European inhabitants, the nation began “as a hell on earth for transported convicts, and the imagery of hellish imprisonment has figured large in its literature and its cultural self-images … the other dominant myth of Australia has been as a paradise, a new world, a virgin continent” (Dancing 72). John Eustace argues that Harry’s “desire to understand the world in terms of a binary between good and evil … arises from a desire to absolve himself of responsibility for an oblivious, immoral life and for the vice of his family” (111).

As Harry lies in hospital after his heart attack awaiting surgery, he contemplates death, but is less concerned about dying than about where he will go after he dies (23). While in hospital, Harry asks Bettina if she believes in God; she does not answer his
question, but the narrator provides her thoughts: “If she had been religious she would have believed in Satan and would have found him, in her terms, ‘generally less boring.’ But religion represented all the goody-goody two-shoes and she found it embarrassing even to talk about” (28). Harry reveals to Bettina that he had an out-of-body experience during the heart attack, and declares that it is “a warning ... I saw Heaven and Hell. There is a Heaven. There is a Hell” (28-29). However, once Harry is out of the hospital after his operation, he decides that the Hell he finds himself in “is not the childish Hell of the Christian Bible with its flames. Here ... they planned more subtle things” (56). Harry does not return to the Christian church in which he was raised and does not adopt any religion during the remainder of his lifetime. However, he determines to be “Good” and attempts to live a moral life. Ryan-Fazilleau argues that even though Harry’s ordeals in the hospital and mental institution have taught him to recognize “the difference between Good and Evil, he still cannot muster the necessary force of character to give up his decadent world and face the rigours of the lifestyle in Honey Barbara’s hippie community at Bog Onion Road” (80), where he has promised to go with her.

One of the central themes of Carey’s investigation of suburbia, both in Bliss and The Tax Inspector, is that of dysfunctional families. Before Harry’s heart attack and surgery, he “was never heard to criticize anyone ... He exhibited a blindness towards the faults of people and the injustices of the world” (14). Harry’s blindness prevents him from seeing the dysfunctional relationships and behaviors within his family. Harry’s seventeen-year-old son David is a drug dealer, and Harry’s fifteen-year-old daughter Lucy engages in an incestuous relationship with her brother, performing oral sex on him in exchange for marijuana (36). After a scene in which Lucy performs fellatio on David,
the narrator states that Harry has “never seen his family as you, dear reader, have now been privileged to” (37). Harry’s marriage is also dysfunctional; not only do Harry and Bettina both have affairs, but his refusal to allow her to join his advertising agency is the source of great contention. Early in the novel, Harry is “not sorry” that he had not allowed Bettina to join the business, since he “had offered her enough money to start a little boutique instead” (48). Harry tells Bettina that he did not let her into the business because she did not have the necessary experience, “But the truth was … [that] he did not want his wife around the office undermining his dignity” (49). The narrator reveals that Harry and Bettina have been arguing about whether or not she could join the business for more than five years before his heart attack, that “Bettina had been deeply offended by his refusal,” and that “It was a rejection more painful than any she had ever experienced and she could not forgive him for it” (100).

After Harry returns home from the hospital believing he is in hell, he observes his family as if for the first time and begins to see and understand the magnitude of the problems. Harry detaches himself from his family and withholds “his vast, blind, uncritical love” (57). Finding their love unreciprocated for the first time, Harry’s family punish him “with a fury that puzzled them and left them guilty and shaken, offering apologies that could not be accepted, the rejection of which, in turn, produced greater hurts, ripped scar tissue before it was healed, and ended in scenes of such emotion and frenzy that the neighbours turned off their lights and came out into their gardens” (57). Harry’s family no longer see “light in Harry’s eyes, and got from him no talk, no story, no smile. Depression spread like an insidious fungus through the whole family” (57). Harry sits immobile in his chair “while inexplicable things” happen around him (58).
Eventually, Harry’s family decide to ignore him and he finds himself isolated and alone, prowling the lawn, haunting the garage, and staring at the television (61).

As part of his observations and “tests,” Harry pretends to board a flight for a business trip, and then leaves the plane at the last moment, returning home to climb a tree beside his house and conduct a “Final Test” (107). While in the tree, Harry sees his wife having an affair with his business partner and his daughter performing oral sex on his son (110). After his “Final Test,” Harry curses his family and checks in to the Hilton (112, 115). Graham Huggan notes that Harry “sees his whole world fall apart; his illusions of ‘success’ and ‘goodness’ are completely, devastatingly, shattered. No indignity is spared him” (Peter Carey 6). Likewise, Hassall argues that Harry’s “fall into the nightmare world of Experience involves a major deconstruction of the stories he has been telling himself about his business and his family” (Dancing 73). While residing in the Hilton, Harry learns that the products of one of his major clients, Krappe Chemicals, cause cancer, and decides, as part of his new commitment to being good, to drop their business, which is worth two million dollars per year (123). Harry’s unilateral decision to fire his agency’s biggest client, combined with his excessive spending, lead his family to have him committed to a mental institution, as mentioned previously. Commenting on Harry’s family’s decision to institutionalize him, Hassall argues that while “they could live with Harry as a Good Bloke, they cannot tolerate his newfound knowledge of their true natures, and his enthusiasm for Goodness, which is not at all the same as being a good bloke” (Dancing 73).

Before Harry is committed, Honey tells him that she should take him home to Bog Onion Road with her, but declares: “you wouldn’t like it: mud and leeches … no
electricity, no silk shirts’” (143). However, Harry promises Honey that he will go with her to Bog Onion Road (181). Harry’s plans change, however, when Bettina secures his release from the institution as part of a deal that allows her to pursue her ambition to create advertisements (182). While in the institution, Harry ceases to care about advertising and finds it “astonishing that he had once thought … [advertisements] were important” (183). He is now preoccupied by thoughts of “Bog Onion Road, Honey Barbara, wholemeal bread. He wanted to be safe. He did not care about his house, his business, his car” (183). However, Bettina imposes a further condition on Harry; he has to sell the advertisements for her (183). When Honey learns the details and conditions of Harry’s deal with Bettina during the drive from the mental institution to Palm Avenue, she jumps out of the car at an intersection and runs away. After examining Bettina’s advertisements and realizing that they are brilliant, Harry sees them as a ticket to financial security and safety (192-93). Despite her anger at Harry’s decision to return to Palm Avenue and go back to working in advertising, Honey, who has fallen in love with Harry, joins him in Mt. Pleasant, where she witnesses his family’s dysfunction firsthand.

Honey thinks Lucy and her boyfriend Ken are decadent but likes them anyway (213). However, she is shocked by the way Harry is treated by his family, even though she does not realize how badly he is being treated: “She did not know that Harry had been, all his life, a protected species … Yet this was the way it was going to be at Palm Avenue for as long as they all lived there … arguing, shouting, laughing, vomiting, attacking, counter-attacking, all too loud, too late, too abrasively” (220). Honey believes that Harry’s return to the advertising industry is having a negative affect on his behavior, declaring, “‘You’re getting poisoned with this shit you’re doing Harry. You can’t fuck
around with it. You’re catching it. You’re becoming one of them”’ (231). By the time Honey has been living in Palm Avenue for three months, Harry spends more and more time away from home due to the remarkable success of his work with Bettina, which has led Harry and Bettina to become “involved in the social life of the town” and Harry to be “elected as a trustee” of the State Gallery; “In less than six months they had moved up that impossible last rung of the ladder and entered the very inner circle of society” (233). Harry is seduced by luxuries such as leather seats, silk shirts and fine wines, and does not want the life at Bog Onion Road, which includes “blistering heat, mud, leeches and hard work” (236-37). Antonella Riem Natale argues that “Harry forgets sympathy for his fellow beings and lets himself be poisoned again by the atmosphere he is living in” (343).

Honey’s nadir at Palm Avenue occurs when she allows herself to be seduced by David: “She had come to this, this seedy betrayal, and she knew it was time to leave these people who had such trunk-loads of dreams, ideas and ambitions but never anything in the present, only what would happen one day, and it was time to get away from it and face whatever might be waiting for her at home and hope that it might be as it had been” (242). The authors of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* claim that Honey’s energy is sapped by “the unhealthy aspects of modern city life,” the dysfunctional Joy family, “and Harry’s rapid moral deterioration,” all of which combine to spur her to go home to Bog Onion Road (Wilde et al. 94). Although Harry catches up with Honey and drives her home to the commune, he returns to Palm Avenue.

While Carey does not explicitly critique suburbia in *Bliss*, he attacks capitalism and consumerism, especially through his descriptions of the role of advertisers and multinational corporations in knowingly selling products that cause cancer. Huggan
posits that advertising "plays a central role in Carey’s moral allegory of consumer culture" (Peter Carey 26). Likewise, Woodcock argues that the advertising industry functions in the novel as "the embodiment of the imperialist forces of Western capital" (45). Sheckels suggest that Carey’s decision to make the Australian setting of the novel implicit rather than explicit "is deliberate, for what the novel depicts is a business world that has become amoral if not immoral. Carey wishes to suggest that this lack of morality is not exclusively Australian; rather, it is characteristic of the industrialized world" (89). Huggan argues that Carey uses cancer to illustrate "the grotesque disjunction between capitalism’s utopian rhetoric and the disease it helps to spread within the collective social body. Cancer is the monstrous by-product of corporate ambition" (Peter Carey 70).

Likewise, Woodcock claims that the theme of cancer is the aspect of the novel "which reveals the nature of capitalist delusions most explosively ... The linkage between capitalism and cancer is part of the satirically apocalyptic side to the novel" (45). Carey depicts the link between capitalism and cancer unequivocally; the only character who questions the link develops terminal cancer and is proved fatally wrong.

Harry first learns about the prevalence of cancer during the period between his operation and his retreat to the Hilton. Aldo, the waiter at Milano’s, tells Harry that he is dying of cancer, names a number of other people he knows who are also afflicted, and declares, "there is a great deal of it around and it makes me wonder ... My theory is that it is being sent to punish us for how we live, all this shit we breathe, all this rubbish we eat. My theory, if you are interested, is that cancer is going to save us from ourselves. It is going to stop us eating and breathing shit" (67). Later that evening, as Harry rides home in a taxi and crosses a bridge, "the river below appeared as black as the Styx."
carried their carcinogens up river and neon lights advertised their final formulations against a blackening sky” (79). From the moment of its first mention in the novel, cancer is repeatedly linked with capitalism, consumption and environmental degradation. When Harry first learns from his employee Alex Duval that their client Krappe Chemicals produces carcinogenic products, he ignores Alex, but as he spends more time in “Hell,” he comes to accept the truth about the link between his client and the increasing incidence of cancer in his community, and becomes more aware of the pollution caused by capitalism (91). While looking out the window of his suite in the Hilton, he sees that “the whole expanse of Hell ... lay under a poisonous yellow cloud” (91, 120).

Eventually, Harry decides to take action and summons Adrian Clunes, the Marketing Director of Krappe Chemicals, to his suite (120). However, the narrator states that Harry does not call Krappe Chemicals out of “any great faith in Goodness, but simply to find a diversion, a person, some action that would take his mind away from the razor-blade tortures of Hell” (120). Harry tells Adrian he is firing Krappe Chemicals because he has evidence that their products cause cancer (123). Adrian does not deny it; rather, he openly admits that the products are carcinogenic and declares, “‘The whole of the Western world is built on things that cause cancer. They can’t afford to stop making them ... Mobil have benzine in petrol which is carcinogenic ... And every time an announcement is made that something causes cancer, it makes people less worried because they can’t believe that half the things they breathe and eat are carcinogenic’” (original emphasis) (124). In order to prove his point, Adrian produces a cancer map that “‘shows the incidence of cancers according to place of residence and place of work. There is a damn cancer epidemic going on ... They will not even sell these maps any
more’” (125). Horrified, Harry is unable to “disbelieve the map” and does not take the time “to study the relative proportions of tumours or understand all the accompanying statistics,” since he is focused on the fact that he and Adrian are currently located “in the epicenter of Hell” (125). Adrian informs Harry that his own wife has cancer and angrily declares: “‘This,’ he tapped the paper, ‘is what we get for how we live. And believe me, it is just hotting up’” (125).

Bettina, who grew up above her father’s petrol station, accepts “exhaust fumes in the air” and does not believe “‘all this rubbish about cancer,’” since she is “convinced that the whole cancer theory … [is] a Communist conspiracy” (217, 226, 227). However, she admits to being terrified of developing cancer and undergoes annual tests (226). When Bettina visits her doctor to obtain the results of her annual check-up, he informs her that she has developed a kind of cancer caused by the benzine in petrol, and states that she might have a year to live (251, 252). Bettina is enraged and decides that her “whole life” has “been built on bullshit” (252). Rather than accept her fate, Bettina decides to take revenge. She takes “three large bottles of petrol” into a meeting with the board of Mobil, who are her clients, and blows up the board members and herself (253). Hassall describes the murder-suicide as “semiotically brilliant” and argues that Bettina’s development of cancer “just at the moment when her career is about to take off” is “both appropriate, and cruelly ironic” (Dancing 77). Ryan-Fazilleau considers Bettina’s revenge “spectacular” and claims that she is a victim of “capitalism’s conspiracy of silence despite her loyal service” (81, 80).

In the aftermath of Bettina’s murder-suicide, the members of the household at 25 Palm Avenue are investigated by the police, who believe Bettina did not act alone and
declare that the household “has been harbouring two terrorists, possible more” (260).

Convinced he is going to be charged as an accomplice, Joel commits suicide by hanging himself beneath the verandah (259).121 After Bettina’s death, Harry continually repeats the phrase, “‘She had cancer,’” (261), and becomes convinced of cancer’s all-pervasiveness: “Harry could feel the cancer in the air. It had been here all the time. It was impregnated in the walls, like spores, like a mould, invisible but always there in what they breathed, what they ate. He could feel the cells in his own body rising, multiplying, marshalling against him, to make him beg for mercy, for death, for release” (261). Harry’s newfound obsession with cancer is echoed in McCann’s Subtopia, in which the protagonist, Julian, also develops an obsession with cancer, although, like Harry, he does not become a victim.

During what the narrator describes as “possibly the lowest, most shameful period of his life,” Harry fights David for a fifty percent share of David’s savings, steals Ken’s Cadillac, and flees to Bog Onion Road, abandoning his children, home and business (262, 263). David also flees, using a ticket to New York stolen from Joel, and is later executed in Columbia for gun smuggling (261, 264, 248). On one of the last pages of the novel, the house at Palm Avenue is described as “deserted,” but the fate of Lucy and Ken is not revealed (292). The narrator provides a glimpse into an apocalyptic future, claiming that Harry’s behavior is “much milder,” than the panic that ten years later sweeps through “the Western world (and parts of the industrialized East) … when the cancer epidemic” arrives during “a time of deep recession, material shortages, unemployment and threatening nuclear war,” and proves to be “the last straw for the West” when “the angry

121 Dominique Hecq argues that Joel is the novel’s “most convincing mouthpiece of American capitalism” and that he “betrayed everyone” (102).
cancer victims” cannot be controlled and take to the streets (262). Ryan-Fazilleau argues that Harry’s flight to Bog Onion Road is driven by his fears of imprisonment and cancer, rather than an ideological rejection of capitalism (81). Likewise, Eustace suggests that Harry sees “going bush” as “the only way of preserving himself” (112). Harry’s escape to Bog Onion Road is not a rejection of suburbia, which is the site where Harry felt most secure and comfortable. Rather, it is a simple act of self-preservation.

The sixth and final part of Bliss, “Blue Bread and Sapphires,” is set entirely in the commune at Bog Onion Road and spans a period of thirty-five years in just thirty pages, in contrast to the first five parts of the novel, which span a period of less than a year. The Bog Onion Road section of Bliss is perhaps the most frequently discussed aspect of the novel in the criticism, with many critics reading the final section as the key to the novel’s meaning. Indeed, in an interview with Philip Nielsen in which Carey discusses critical responses to the novel’s conclusion, noting that some critics have argued that because the conclusion is “lyrical and pastoral, it … [is] in some way not intellectually rigorous,” Carey declares that “the whole book stands or falls” on the final section (70). Rather than being an idyllic, peaceful pastoral retreat, Bog Onion Road is a hybrid community, part-retreat, part-fortress, part-communist, part-capitalist. Although Bog Onion Road is physically beautiful, being located in secluded rural bush land and containing rainforest, the community is guarded with a “barred gate and, sometimes, a lookout” (270), and the residents are fearful of both strangers and the police, and often exhibit paranoia.

Harry’s introduction to Bog Onion Road is anything but peaceful. On the morning after his flight from the city, he is found by Daze, one of the commune’s residents, who has to carry Harry down a hill to the nearest dwelling, since he is physically incapacitated
by heat stroke and exhaustion. The second person Harry meets at Bog Onion Road, Clive, declares that if Harry is a spy he will hang him from a beam and disembowel him (272). Clive brags that he has a machine-gun that he will not hesitate to use on intruders (273). Honey Barbara’s father, Paul Bees, defends Harry and offers to take responsibility for his welfare (277). Harry stays with Paul in his hut in the rainforest, which is considered a safe place to hide a “hunted terrorist,” since it is “guarded on its edges by lantana ... and even from the air, it was thought, the dark roof of the hut would be invisible. The visitor was forbidden to leave the rain forest” (276, 277).

Since Harry seeks security, he is quite content to stay in the rainforest and eventually has to be ordered to leave it in order to work in other areas of the commune (277). The residents of Bog Onion Road are engaged in a project of planting trees on the old forest roads in order to restrict access to their community and thwart aerial surveillance; Harry is given a job as a tree-planter (279). As Harry becomes a member of the community, he plans and builds a hut, and through the process of design and construction, he comes to “know his neighbours and make new friendships” (282). Although Harry finds “a new happiness” in the commune, he is burdened by his past: “he had done bad things in Hell. The guilt he felt about his past was the worst of the pains he now carried, but not the only one, for he had, if not daily, at least weekly, the reminder of Honey Barbara’s hostility towards him” (285). Harry feels “some guilt, some remorse, about almost everybody he had known in Palm Avenue,” but through his work with the trees and gradual integration into the community, he discovers love and tries to make amends (285). Not only does Harry make new friends, but he becomes a necessary
The narrator describes the residents of Bog Onion Road as “refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsam of belief and ceremony to cling to,” who are “hungry for ceremony and story” (291). Harry constructs new stories “grown on their soil” (291). In addition to his role as storyteller, Harry comes to know “as much about trees as anyone in Bog Onion” (292). Harry’s transformation from middle-class suburban businessman to forest worker is so complete that the narrator declares, “He was a bushman” (291). After a number of years, Harry and Honey are reconciled and have children together. He lives through “thirty more wet seasons, seven droughts and two cyclones” (295). After thirty-five years at Bog Onion Road, Harry dies his third and final death at the age of seventy-five, when a limb of a yellow box tree “known to forest workers as widow-makers … because of their habit, on quiet, windless days … of dropping heavy limbs,” performs “the treacherous act of falling on to the man who planted it” (295). When he dies, Harry rises “higher and higher” through the trees (296). As he ascends, the leaves stroke him “like feathers” and he has no desire “to return to his body” (296). Rather, he spreads himself “thinner, and thinner, and thin as a gas” until the trees breath in and take him into them “through their leaves … so that, in time,” he becomes “part of their tough old heart wood” (296). Thus, in death, Harry becomes part of the bush.

In his recent article, “Going Bush: Performing the Pastoral in Peter Carey’s Bliss,” Eustace argues that Harry “quite literally goes bush through his death, attaching himself to the land in a profoundly spiritual way” (108). Recognizing that the pastoral ending is “the most critically controversial aspect of the novel,” Eustace suggests that
“Carey invites readers to recognize the territorial implications of going bush” (108-09). Eustace argues that when Carey declares that “the whole book stands or falls” on the pastoral ending, he is “calling attention to the way his deployment of the pastoral is crucial to the novel’s aesthetic and thematic resolution” (109). Eustace reads Harry’s “journey toward pastoral bliss” at Bog Onion Road “as an elaborate cultural performance” and “a ritual of cultural legitimacy and territorial consolidation” through which Harry becomes indigenous (110). Thus, Eustace posits that Harry is engaged in (and representative of) the ongoing European Australian project of establishing indigeneity, which I discussed in my analysis of Winton’s *Cloudstreet*. Gelder and Salzman argue that *Bliss* “turns away from history in its attempt to offer a kind of ecological vision of fictional production: Harry Joy goes into the forests to turn stories into myth, to plant his stories and make them grow” (124). However, Eustace convincingly demonstrates that Carey’s engagement with indigeneity, belonging, legitimacy and consolidation in *Bliss* has everything to do with history.

Eustace argues that when the narrator describes Harry as “a bushman, his transformation and idealization seem complete” (113). The fact that there are no Indigenous Australians at Bog Onion Road, or anywhere else in the novel, conveniently positions the bush as *terra nullius*, “empty” land ready to be occupied and claimed. In the final line of *Bliss*, the reader learns that the novel has actually been narrated by “the children of Honey Barbara and Harry Joy” (296), rather than a third-person omniscient narrator. Eustace presciently asserts that Harry’s children are “narrators with a vested interest in recuperating him as an ethical subject and legitimizing his position as the patriarch of the meaningful, indigenizing rituals at Bog Onion Road” (112). Thus, the
children of Harry and Honey perform a storytelling role similar to the historians and novelists who have constructed Australia's national narratives, adding, omitting and shaping incidents as necessary in order to construct a narrative that establishes a legitimate relationship with, and ownership of, the land. In a similarly allegorical vein, Hecq reads Bliss "as a medium through which those Australian values, traditions and rituals which were expunged by American imperialism, can be recovered" (102), while Graeme Turner argues that Harry's function within the Bog Onion Road community "can be regarded as a kind of model for the writer within the Australian culture, providing fictions, Australian dreams" ("American" 441). Hassall suggests that Bliss "addresses the ambitious task of substituting an Australian dreaming for a colonial dreaming, whether English, American or Japanese" (Dancing 81).

Although critics agree that the conclusion of the novel is both pastoral and allegorical, there is disagreement over whether Carey's use of the pastoral is effective and whether the commune provides a viable model or alternative to urban life and capitalism. Eustace argues that the novel is structured around "the central binary ... [of] the city and the bush" (111), and thus sees Bog Onion Road in opposition to the city. However, the commune, like the city and the suburbs, contains a mixture of positive and negative elements; none of the three sites is ideal, let alone superior, and the commune is dependent on the city, rather than separate from it. Ryan-Fazilleau argues that Bog Onion Road "is not a Garden of Eden ... and nature is neither innocent nor accommodating there" (81-82). Huggan points out that Bog Onion Road "is a disputed territory, a locus of competing cults," and argues that by "escaping there, Harry Joy has only exchanged one form of captivity for another; in 'opting' out of city life, he is merely contending with
other warring alternatives” (Peter Carey 42-3). Moreover, the community is surrounded by a variety of threats, from the police to neighboring communities and cults; as Carey himself states, “there are evil fuckers around the place. There’re guns and there is witchcraft going on” (Nielsen 70). Carey has indicated that his preferred title for the novel was Waiting for the Barbarians, and argues that it “would have placed the ending in the right context,” presumably by indicating that the peace and security of the community was threatened, and further claims that the ending of Bliss may not have “been misinterpreted” if he had been able to use his preferred title (Nielsen 70).

Woodcock argues that Bog Onion Road “is hardly ... a plausible alternative to the corruptions of the business world” (49) and notes that the commune is “dependent on the capitalist world it rejected” (39). Although the commune claims to have rejected capitalism and the city, it depends on the city for income from the marijuana crop and Honey Barbara’s prostitution. Huggan argues that the commune “is deluded in seeing itself as an anti-material enclave” and claims that Bliss reveals “a paucity of alternatives” to capitalism, illustrating “the paradoxical uniformity of western consumer society, a society in which commodities dominate all aspects of social life” (Peter Carey 6, 27). Hassall claims that Harry does not undergo “a conversion from the values of late capitalism to pastoral communalism, but simply wants to survive at any cost” (Dancing 80). Likewise, Huggan suggests that “Carey’s redemptive allegory is too coy ... to be taken unduly seriously” (Peter Carey 6). Huggan reads Carey’s work as “both a critique and an ironic celebration of consumer frenzy,” and argues that Bliss “is his most explicit satire on contemporary consumer society, and on Australia’s location on the outskirts of a
global commodity culture" (Peter Carey 25). Thus, Bliss addresses the negative impact of capitalism and consumerism, rather than suburbia.

Carey neither rejects nor celebrates suburbia in Bliss; rather, through his examination of capitalism, consumerism, morality, family relationships, alternative lifestyles, and the pastoral, he demonstrates the centrality of suburban life to Australian culture. Moreover, through his use of the suburban setting in Bliss, Carey not only reveals some of the numerous issues and themes available to writers willing to reject the anti-suburban tradition, but memorably demonstrates that authors can engage with serious social issues while employing satire and simultaneously experimenting with narrative technique and the form of the novel. Bliss is irrefutable proof that the suburban novel is anything but boring, conventional and predictable.

**The Tax Inspector: Exposing Suburban Secrets**

Between the publication of Bliss (1981) and his fourth published novel, The Tax Inspector (1991), Carey published two novels, Illywhacker (1985) and Oscar and Lucinda (1988), which catapulted him to global prominence and established him as a celebrity author within Australia. Carey's rapid rise to fame and his first Booker Prize win, combined with his move to New York in 1989, undoubtedly fostered the conditions that caused The Tax Inspector to receive such a controversial reception in Australia. Upon the publication of The Tax Inspector, Carey became the first internationally acclaimed Australian author since Patrick White to set the majority of a novel in an outer suburb of an Australian city, and the first prominent author to write about a suburb and its inhabitants without ridicule or judgment, thus rejecting the anti-suburban tradition. Not only was Carey's decision to set the novel in the fictional outer Sydney suburb of...
Franklin a risky departure from the mainstream of Australian literature and his own previous work, his choice of a single, heavily-pregnant Greek-immigrant tax inspector as his heroine, and his engagement with the themes of incestuous child sexual abuse and political corruption signaled a willingness to challenge his audience and take a major gamble. Moreover, the contemporary setting and the short time-frame of *The Tax Inspector*, the action of which covers just four days, marked a radical departure from the epic neo-Victorian historical novel that preceded it.

Hassall argues that Carey “does not repeat himself” and declares, “no one would have expected the sequel to *Oscar and Lucinda* to be a violent and confronting pyschothriller” (“Peter Carey” 58). Likewise, Woodcock claims that “reviewers seemed to want ... another prize-winning great Australian novel set safely in the past with humour and distance, rather than the savage piece Carey had written” (169). Turner posits that since “the marriage between national author/celebrity and national audience” had been “celebrated through the widespread acknowledgement of *Oscar and Lucinda*’s success, the publication of *The Tax Inspector* must have seemed like an act of betrayal,” especially as it coincided with Carey’s move to New York (“Nationalising” 135). Turner notes that it “has become conventional wisdom ... that the novel received bad reviews in Australia,” but argues that the reviews “were not so much bad as bewildered. For some reviewers ... what mattered was that Carey seemed no longer to be ‘writing in the national interest’” (“Nationalising” 135).

Hassall notes that the reception of *The Tax Inspector*, which remains the only one of Carey’s ten published novels that has not won major prizes or been shortlisted for them, led to “something of a downturn” of Carey’s reputation, since it “was greeted in
Australia with little enthusiasm and indeed some dismay, one reviewer describing it as ‘brutish and nasty’ (Dancing 4). Hassall argues that the “favorable response by English and American reviewers left the local response open to the charge of lopping a tall poppy, though it was clear that some Australian reviewers were puzzled and disappointed rather than hostile” (Dancing 4). Commenting on the reviews, Hassall claims, “there have been a good many readers who have not known how to respond to the seductions and the repulsions of The Tax Inspector” (Dancing 143). Woodcock argues that it “has become almost a commonplace to assume that the reviews … were favourable in America and the UK, but were damning or bad in Australia” and notes that there were “some complimentary Australian reviews, such as Diana Giese’s; but many were highly critical” (167). However, the foreign reviews were certainly not all favorable: writing for Newsweek, M. Jones, Jr. describes reading the novel as “like ogling an epic wreck” and dismisses it as “a shambles of a book” (60), while Bill Marx declares that the novel is “somewhat tiresome” and that it “rattles along … like an apocalypse on cruise control” (347).

Although the tremendous success of Oscar and Lucinda, Carey’s Booker win, and his expatriation to New York all played a role in the negative reception of The Tax Inspector, it is the novel’s subject matter that is the primary reason for the poor reader response. When Larsson describes the novel as “relentlessly brutal” and Woodcock declares that it is “Carey’s most savage novel to date,” they are not exaggerating (“‘Years Later’” 178; 89). As Hassall notes, the novel “sets a grimly detailed account of three generations of incest in the Catchprice family against a broader account of public venality and corruption in Sydney” (“Peter Carey” 58). While child sexual abuse perpetrated by
parents is no longer a taboo subject and has received increased media attention in recent
decades, the topic remains sensitive, "and part of the negative reaction to the book in
Australia resulted from the public's dislike of the deliberate breaking into this particular
silence, and of the suggestion that this private indecency was symptomatic of a wider
social decay in Sydney" (Hassall, "Peter Carey" 58). Turner argues that the novel
"revives aspects of Carey's view of the world which had troubled reviewers of the short
stories and Bliss: the incipiently gothic mixture of absurdity and romanticism, and the
complicated attitude to Australian contemporary culture which seems to both celebrate
and fear the rich details of suburban life" ("Nationalising" 135).

Hassall argues that some readers struggled "with the portrayal of violence and
sexual deviance" in the novel due to the narrative's lack of framing and distancing
devices, such as those used by Conrad in Heart of Darkness ("Peter Carey" 58).
Moreover, Turner claims that "Australians are always going to read Carey's work in an
especially direct relation to the specific social context in which it was written"
("Nationalising" 135); thus, Australian readers are confronted directly with a shocking
portrayal of child sexual abuse and corruption that they may interpret as an attack on their
society, and by extension, themselves. Indeed, Australian readers are not alone in
interpreting the novel as social criticism; Bruce Woodcock, a British academic, interprets
the novel as an "investigation of the state of the Australian nation at the beginning of the
1990s" (90), and Andreas Gaile, a German critic, argues that The Tax Inspector comes
across as "intensely critical" of Australia ("Introduction" xxii).

Carey himself is well aware of the novel's negative reception and has discussed it
in a number of interviews. Carey told Gaile that he has "never forgotten" the reader
response ("The ‘Contrarian Streak’" 9), and in an interview with Radhika Jones acknowledges that Australian readers and critics “got upset about The Tax Inspector”:

“They thought I didn’t like my country, because I said some things about Sydney being continually corrupt from its beginnings. It’s an edgy, unsettling sort of book” (143).

Likewise, in an interview with Ray Willbanks, Carey declares, “I absolutely don’t hate Australia” and states, “They think I’ve said I hate this city; therefore, they’re upset. They take it personally. It’s not surprising the novel gets read this way; in the end it won’t be read this way at all. I think finally this book will survive quite well in Australian society and have a useful place in Australian culture” (“Peter Carey” 14). The Tax Inspector remains Carey’s most disturbing, honest and intense examination of late-twentieth-century Australian society and perhaps will, in time, be acknowledged and respected as such.

Despite the many negative reactions to the novel, a number of critics have acknowledged Carey’s achievement. Citing Veronica Brady, who reviewed The Tax Inspector for Overland in 1991, Turner agrees with her contention that the novel is “adventurous” and declares that it is “a bold rejection of the linear development widely constructed for … [Carey’s] work since the short stories” (“Nationalising” 135). Woodcock contends that The Tax Inspector contains “an urgent narrative … which, along with the urgency of the social issues, marks a dramatic and adventurous shift of direction,” and goes so far as to claim that the novel “is perhaps the most adventurous of Carey’s career so far, and an indication that the acclaim for his work has in no way compromised the risks he takes with his fiction” (89, 107). Larsson argues that the novel is “extremely rich and adds new dimensions to the themes that recur throughout Carey’s
literary production” ("Cross References" 65), while Michael Heyward regards the novel as “a quantum leap in the development of Carey’s art” (Qtd. in Woodcock 92).

The Tax Inspector focuses on the Catchprice family, owners of Catchprice Motors, a heavily indebted car dealership in Franklin (modeled on the outer southwestern Sydney suburb of Campbelltown), which was once a country town surrounded by farmland and bush, but has been swallowed by the suburban expansion of Sydney and transformed into a working-class suburb. The matriarch of the family, Frieda (Gran) Catchprice, has called the Tax Office to report possible irregularities in the family business' accounting practices in an attempt to avert her daughter Cathy's attempts to have her committed to a nursing home. Maria Takis, the tax inspector of the novel’s title, is sent to audit Catchprice Motors, and over a bizarre four days is embroiled in a series of disturbing and violent events involving the severely dysfunctional Catchprice family. The outer suburban setting of the novel allows Carey to engage with a number of the common issues in Australian suburban fiction, including the development and expansion of suburbia, environmental degradation, immigration, class, sexuality, family relationships, violence and crime.

However, despite the fact that Carey focuses on some of the most negative aspects of life in suburbia, such as child sexual abuse, violent crime and environmental degradation, he does not depict suburbia in an overtly negative manner and his narrator does not deliver the kind of diatribes against suburbia that are prevalent in anti-suburban novels such as Johnston's My Brother Jack. Rather, Carey treats the residents of suburbia seriously and sympathetically, even those characters that could easily be demonized, mocked and disparaged. Carey departs from the mainstream of Australian literature by
using the fictional suburb of Franklin as the primary setting for his novel, recognizing that for the majority of Australians, the suburban experience is the Australian experience. By deeming an outer suburb of a large city as a viable setting for a work of fiction, Carey highlights the importance, influence, and prominence of suburbia in the lives of ordinary Australians and thus breaks with the anti-suburban tradition by treating the suburb as one of the most important sites within the Australian experience.

It is important to acknowledge that the western suburbs of Sydney as a whole are a stigmatized locale. In her book, *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs*, Diane Powell examines media representations of the western suburbs, as well as the development of the suburbs' negative reputation and the physical development and social history of the suburbs. Powell argues that Sydney's western suburbs are “seen as the repository of all those social groups and cultures which are outside the prevailing cultural ideal: the poor, the working class, juvenile delinquents, single mothers, welfare recipients, public housing tenants, Aborigines, [and] immigrants” (xviii). Not only are the western suburbs stigmatized in popular culture, they are also the site of rapid development and population growth, which has serious social consequences regarding immigration and environmental degradation, both of which Carey addresses. Writing in 1997, Deborah Chambers states that “western Sydney represents the fastest growing region in the country with 45 per cent of Sydney's total population now living there. It is estimated that over 90 per cent of Sydney's development will take place in western Sydney over the next twenty years” (86).

Powell demonstrates that during the 1990s articles regularly appeared in the print media concerning “the problems of urban sprawl to the west and south-west of Sydney.
The large population, housing estates and industry have apparently created a severe strain on the city, polluting rivers and air, and destroying the natural environment" (33). Noting that the western suburbs bear the brunt of the blame for environmental degradation in the greater Sydney area, Powell argues that authors of articles “about the problem of urban sprawl never describe the typical housing and lifestyles of people living in wealthier Sydney suburbs which have sprawled (or climbed) to the outer north and south of the city. It seems it is not the quarter-acre personal rainforest complete with double garage, in-ground pool and tennis court that is the problem” (34).

In *The Tax Inspector*, Carey explores both the destruction of the natural environment by suburban development and the conflicting emotions residents of suburbia experience as they witness the simultaneous development and destruction of the area in which they reside. The Catchprices have lived in Franklin since it had “a population of 3,000 people and limited commercial potential” (6), and witness its transformation from a country town “twenty miles from Sydney and in the bush” to a suburb “twenty miles from Sydney and almost in the city” (6). The westward expansion of the city consumes the rural and natural environments; moreover, the suburbanization of Franklin causes the demolition of old buildings to make way for the new (a process also described in Malouf’s *Johnno* and Winton’s *Cloudstreet*), and the paving-over of farms and bulldozing of bush land to create housing estates (a common image in suburban novels). Hassall links Carey’s Franklin to Patrick White’s Sarsaparilla due to both locations being defined by “near-city farmland overrun … by suburban sprawl” (*Dancing* 147).

Although the development of Franklin results in a massive influx of population (including immigrants from Europe and Asia) and the construction of new freeways,
office buildings, and retail outlets, other parts of Franklin are decaying, causing social and economic problems. Catchprice Motors is “stranded out on the north end of Loftus Street opposite the abandoned boot-maker’s and bakers” while the “commercial centre had shifted to a mall half a mile to the south” (7); this commercial shift contributes significantly to Catchprice Motors’ demise from a relatively successful business to one seriously in debt. Additionally, the displacement of the once well-known local business creates a situation in which newcomers to Franklin have never heard of Catchprice Motors, leaving the family both literally and figuratively disconnected from their community. The construction of freeways, commercial buildings and housing estates contributes to the destruction of Franklin’s natural environment, disconnecting the Catchprices from their rural past and eradicating their connection with nature.

The effect of suburbanization on the natural environment is best illustrated by the transformation of the once-pristine swimming hole known as the Wool Wash. As a child, Benny Catchprice walked along a path across “little hills which had once been known as ‘Thistle Paddocks’” on his way “to the clear waters of the Wool Wash pool” (115). However, the paddocks have been paved-over due to suburban development and replaced with a housing estate named Franklin Heights, cutting off the walking path from Catchprice Motors to Benny’s sanctuary. The collision of the suburbs and the bush leaves the Wool Wash surrounded by “bullet-scarred, yellow garbage bins” and “POLLUTED WATER signs”; its banks are littered with “beer cans and condoms and paper cups” (116). What was once a peaceful recreational site has become an abused gathering place for suburban youth who abandon stolen cars, lose their virginity, and buy and sell illegal drugs such as speed and crack (116). The narrator declares that the Wool Wash is “the
sort of place [where] you might find someone with their face shot away and bits of brain hanging on the bushes” (116). Not only can Benny no longer walk to the Wool Wash, he can no longer swim there either. Suburbanization has transformed a beautiful, clean and treasured environment into a site of pollution, crime and danger, eradicating one of the only positives in Benny’s tragic life.

In addition to the destruction of the bush, suburban development severs the physical and emotional connection between characters and the natural environment. The Wool Wash served as a sanctuary for Benny as a child, allowing him to escape from the emotional and sexual abuse he suffered inside his home at the hands of his father and symbolically purify himself by swimming in the Wool Wash. While walking at night with the Armenian immigrant Sarkis Alaverdian, Gran Catchprice hails a taxi and asks to be taken to the Wool Wash, which she declares is “the most lovely part of Franklin” (97). However, neither the driver nor Sarkis have heard of it, causing Gran Catchprice to be “stricken with that horrible feeling that sometimes came to her on her night-time walks. It was as if all her past had been paved over and she could not reach it” (97). As a young woman, Gran Catchprice dreamed of owning a flower farm; however, the land she purchased was used as a poultry farm instead for twenty years before being partially used to build Catchprice Motors and the rest subdivided to create an estate named Catchprice Heights (86-89). Gran Catchprice tells her grandson Vish (named Johnny before he became a Hare Krishna) that she never wanted the car dealership: “I wanted little babies, and a farm. I wanted to grow things … It was your grandfather who wanted the business” (163). Gran tells Vish that concrete was poured “over perfectly good soil” in order to construct the car yard, “and that’s what upsets me. It’s like a smothered baby”
In Carey’s Franklin, the interaction between the natural and suburban environments causes both locales to suffer, rather than one triumphing over the other.

In her study of the western suburbs, Powell briefly discusses *The Tax Inspector* and erroneously claims that “Carey’s view of the west relies on the stigmatized image; a concrete wasteland, polluted and brutal, where there is no sense of community, nothing attractive about life at all, and nobody who cares about the place” (131). However, Cathy and Howie are the only characters who express any desire to leave Franklin, and their reason for wanting to leave is to pursue success on the road with their band, Big Mack, rather than dissatisfaction with their home suburb. Sarkis and his mother have recently moved to Franklin voluntarily, and Benny has no intention of leaving Franklin. Although his short tragic life has provided him with a plethora of reasons for wanting to escape suburbia, as do the protagonists of so many suburban novels, Benny dreams of being successful on home ground. Benny tells Vish that he is “going to buy a double block at Franklin Heights. There’s some great places up there now. They got tennis courts and everything. Vish, we could do so fucking well” (102). Hassall argues that Benny’s desire to take over the family business and make it a success indicates his acceptance of “the crude ideology of capitalism” and notes that Benny has no desire “to leave for the eastern suburbs or the northern beaches. He wants to stay in the west, to live in a house at Franklin Heights, and make two hundred thousand dollars a year selling cars” (*Dancing* 153). Benny envisions himself rescuing Catchprice Motors “and carry[ing] it into the twenty-first century. He was the one who was going to find the cash to pay for their old people’s home … He would care for them the way they never cared for him” (6).
Like other suburban novels that preceded it, such as White's *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* and Murnane's *A Lifetime on Clouds*, *The Tax Inspector* deals with immigration in suburbia. In fact, a realistic novel set in Sydney's western suburbs would be remiss if it did not address immigration. In 1986, Campbelltown, the model for Franklin, had a population of 121,297, with 26,132 of those residents (21.5%) being foreign-born (Powell 141). A study conducted in 2003 by the Centre for Population and Urban Research found that “Sydney’s ethnic minorities are being locked into ‘concentrations of the suburban poor’ that are becoming even more concentrated as English-speaking migrants drift towards an ‘Anglo heartland’ on the city fringes” (Millett 1). The study contends that Sydney “is battling to cope with the pressures of a national migration intake of more than 100,000 a year,” and reports that immigrants “with poor work and language skills are being ‘trapped’ in the sprawling western and south-western suburbs” while Australian-born residents and English-speaking immigrants are moving out of these suburbs (Millett 1). Woodcock notes that *The Tax Inspector* “gives a significant presence to the non-Anglo/Celtic Australia of the various immigrant communities such as those represented by Sarkis and his mother, or Maria and her father” (97). The novel contains a number of immigrant characters: Maria Takis and her family; Maria’s parents’ Greek immigrant friends; Sarkis Alaverdian and his mother; Pavlovic, the Yugoslavian taxi driver; Gino Massaro, the Italian grocer who almost buys a car from Benny; and Tahleen and Raffi, an Armenian couple who own a corner store in Franklin.

Maria Takis is the most prominent and developed of the immigrant characters. Carey depicts the Greek immigrants as hard working and part of a close-knit community, yet homesick and unconvinced that life in Australia is an improvement over life in
Greece. Maria emigrated to Australia as a young girl with her parents and sister. She has "a very dark olive-skinned face" which her mother describes derogatively as "Turkish," prompting Maria to develop a style of dress that incorporates "gold rings and embroidered blouses," thus accentuating the "look that her mother was so upset by," and instigating her mother to declare, "'You look like a gypsy'" (24). When Maria is twenty, she runs away from "her marriage and her mother" and returns to Greece for six weeks, staying on her home island of Letkos with her mother's uncle (32). While in Greece, Maria tells her relatives stories of walking the streets of Newtown, a working-class inner-suburb of Sydney, looking for work with her mother in a heat "like hell ... so hot and poisonous you could not breathe," but her relatives will not listen because it is "not their way of thinking about Australia" and they believe that all Australians are rich (32).

Maria grew up "mourning" for the "beautiful little house" on Letkos, which is "the place her mother meant when she said, 'Let's go home,' whispering to her husband in bed in a shared house in Sydney" (33). Maria's mother often says, "Let's go home," to her husband, but there is no chance that the family will ever return, since "fifteen men from the village had come to Australia and they were all working on the production line at the British Motor Corporation in Zetland. They were like men in a team" (33). Maria's mother likes to declare, "Your father is crazy," especially while she trudges the streets with her daughters looking for work "in the merciless heat ... She had no English and Maria would walk with her to interpret" (33). According to Maria's mother, life was better in Greece, where the family owned a house and there was "'better oil, better fruit'" (34). Maria's father and his Greek immigrant friends often spend the evening talking in
the kitchen: “They were all from Agios Constantinos. They said, remember the year this happened. Remember the time that happened. They never talked about Australia” (34).

The Greek women from Letkos cannot read English, and thus cannot read the employment columns in the newspapers, so they walk the streets of Enmore, Alexandria, and Surry Hills, “going from factory to factory, following up the rumours … It was all piecework, and her mother hated piecework. Childhood friends competed against each other to see who would get the bonus, who would get fired” (35). Maria’s mother loses eighty-five percent “of her hearing in one ear in a Surry Hills sweat-shop where she made national brand-name shirts. She would say, this machine is deafening me. The owner was Greek, from Salonika. He would say, if you don’t like it, leave” (36). While her mother is in hospital dying from cancer, Maria visits her daily and brings her “flowers and Greek magazines and gossip that would cheer her up” (36). She believes that her relationship with her mother is improving and that he mother is softening, so she reveals “what she had previously thought she could never reveal – her pregnancy” (36). Maria had imagined that her mother “had moved, at last, to a place which was beyond the customs and morality of Agios Constantinos”; however, when Maria reveals that she is pregnant, her mother stares at her with “steely grey” eyes like “a village woman, standing in a dusty street” and declares “We’ll kill you” (36-37). Hassall argues that Maria’s family narrative is one that “offers no forgiveness, no escape, no movement to a kinder country, no softening of a brutal village morality. Like Benny, Maria is a victim” (Dancing 157).

Sarkis Alaverdian, an Armenian, is the other immigrant character in the novel that Carey fully develops. Sarkis has moved to Franklin with his mother from the northern Sydney suburb of Chatswood six months before the action of the novel begins because
his mother wants to get away from the Armenian community (82). When Sarkis meets
Gran Catchprice, whom he finds standing at the foot of his backyard one evening, he is
"depressed and unemployed" and has "not had a pay cheque in ten weeks" (82).
However, Sarkis is "normally optimistic" and possesses the ability to "lose three jobs and
not be beaten ... he always had a way forward. He was a member of a race which could
not be destroyed. He had energy, intelligence, resilience, enthusiasm" (85-86). Sarkis is
twenty years old and has been forced to wait on the back steps of the house he shares
with his mother because she is having sex with a Yugoslavian taxi driver named Pavlovic
(82). When Sarkis was employed as a hairdresser, he had been in Pavlovic's taxi, and
knows that Pavlovic comes to Franklin and cruises the streets looking for women who are
"abandoned and lonely and often just getting used to the idea that they ... [will] now be
poor for ever" (82-83).

The narrator states that Sarkis' mother, who is only thirty-six, is "celebrating her
independence from the Armenian community" by "wearing short skirts and smoking in
the street" (85, 84). She is also unemployed, having lost her job when "Ready-snap Peas"
closed down (84). Sarkis' mother moved to Franklin because she believed there were no
Armenians living in the suburb, but the first people she met were an Armenian couple,
Tahleen and Raffi, who run a corner store (84). Sarkis believes that his mother's hatred
for the Armenian community, the reasons for which are never specified, clouds her
judgment and cannot change the fact that she is one of them, no matter how hard she tries
to assimilate and reinvent herself as an Australian (84). Sarkis' mother is optimistic and
cheerful, and "Even in the worst of the time when his father disappeared, she never cried
or despaired. When she lost her job she did not cry. She began a vegetable garden ... She
triumphed in the face of difficulties” (218). Carey’s portrayal of Sarkis’ mother is consistent with his portrayal of Greek and Italian immigrants, who continue to work hard and hope for a better future, despite setbacks, discrimination and difficult living conditions.

After Sarkis meets Gran Catchprice and walks her home, she offers him a job as a salesman and he reports for work at Catchprice Motors the following day. Sarkis and Benny work together attempting to sell a car to Gina Massaro, an Italian immigrant, but when Benny attempts to squeeze several thousand dollars profit out of Gino through a deceptive financing arrangement, Sarkis uses body language to warn Gino, who pulls out of the deal (175). Furious, Benny lures Sarkis into his cellar where he straps him to a fiberglass contraption he has constructed in imitation of a picture in a pornographic magazine, and tortures Sarkis for eight hours (207). Before Benny tortures Sarkis, he states, “‘I am in control of you,’” to which Sarkis responds, “‘Hey, come on – what sort of talk is that?’” only to receive the reply “‘English’” (175). Woodcock links Benny’s treatment of Sarkis to “the colonial origins of the continuing exploitation of immigrant communities in Australia” (97). Benny’s treatment of Sarkis can certainly be read as symbolic of the treatment of both convicts and immigrants by the English and their descendants, and the torture scene is also reminiscent of the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb in White’s Riders in the Chariot. Woodcock describes Benny as “the victim of a victim who has become a victimizer” and notes that after the torture Sarkis “feels a ‘prisoner’ of the Catchprice estate, trapped in the grid of history embodied in streets named after members of the Catchprice family” (97).
The most controversial aspect of *The Tax Inspector* and the primary reason for the poor reception of the novel is Carey’s engagement with the issue of child sexual abuse. As Karen Lamb notes, most Australian reviewers of the novel focused heavily on the child abuse (50), leading to unfavorable reviews. Apparently, many Australian critics did not approve of Australia’s dirty suburban laundry being aired on the international stage by one of its most famous authors; perhaps such critics would prefer Australian authors to write fiction that does not reflect the serious social problems in Australian suburbia.

When Benny is three years old, his mother, Sophie, catches his father, Mort, sucking Benny’s penis (105). Sophie responds by picking up a rifle and demanding that Mort hand Benny to her. When Mort refuses, Sophie attempts to shoot Mort, but misses and shoots Benny in the shoulder (105-06). Sophie’s response is to try to kill herself by putting the rifle barrel in her mouth and pulling the trigger, but the bullet passes through the back of her neck, missing her spine, and she runs away (107). Benny and his brother Vish (formerly Johnny) grow up without a mother and are both sexually abused by Mort.

During the four days spanned by the action of the novel, Benny tries to seduce Mort as part of a deluded attempt to take control of his life. Mort knows that his actions are wrong, but points out Benny’s complicity and the complex identity of a child molester: “I am the one trying to stop this stuff and he is crawling into bed and rubbing my dick and he will have a kid and do it to his kid, and he will be the monster and they’ll want to kill him. Today he is the victim, tomorrow the monster. They do not let you be the two at once” (158). Throughout the course of the novel, it is revealed that Mort and his sister Cathy were both sexually abused by their father, Cacka, and that their mother, Frieda, “let Cacka poison her children while she pretended it was not happening” (167).
Although Carey’s decision to address the sexual abuse of children stirred controversy and contributed greatly to the novel’s poor reception, a number of critics have recognized the complexity of Carey’s presentation of the issue and praised him for it. In his discussion of domestic violence, incest and sexual perversion in suburbia, John Hartley argues that *The Tax Inspector* is “one of the most sustained and telling analyses of this aspect of suburban life in recent times” (212-213). Likewise, Hassall argues that Carey “portrays the incestuous Catchprices with a degree of insight, compassion and imaginative sympathy that complicates but does not forestall moral judgement” (*Dancing* 144). Woodcock argues that Carey presents child sexual abuse in a complex manner that “belie the response of reviewers and critics who, like Peter Pierce, thought this treatment ‘reductive,’ or who, like Robert Dixon, challenged the representation of sexual abuse” (95). Commenting on the novel’s reception, Hassall claims that “the public conscience seems more tolerant of systemic corruption than it is of the private abuse of children” and argues that Carey complicates “social judgement by insistently humanising his family of child molesters,” and declares that the only devils in *The Tax Inspector* are “the guests at the Rose Bay dinner party” (*Dancing* 150).

In a number of interviews, Carey has addressed his portrayal of child sexual abuse. Carey describes *The Tax Inspector* as being “about a hellish family situation” and declares that writing about incest “was horrible” (Meyer 87). Carey reveals that during the composition of the novel he “spent a lot of time depressed” about what he was doing, wondered whether it was worth it, and “lived with a lot of doubt” (Meyer 87). He admits that he was upset by the negative response to the novel in Australia, but, with the benefit of hindsight, believes that writing *The Tax Inspector* “was really worth doing” and he is
“very proud of it” (Meyer 87). When Carey was asked in a separate interview if he felt a 
“moral imperative” when addressing violence and incest in The Tax Inspector, Carey 
replied: “Well, yes. There had been a sadistic rape and murder in Sydney – really, really 
horrible. At the same time, my first son was born. I had the idea of putting these two 
things in magical opposition … I wanted in my simplistic, sentimental heart for birth to 
triumph” (Jones 144). Carey reveals that he began with the idea that Benny’s 
psychological problems were due to him being abused as a child, but was not aware of 
the “morass” he was creating: “If he had been abused, how had he been abused? Do you 
really want to think about that? Do you really want to see the mother finding the father 
sucking the little boy’s penis? Oh no. I really didn’t want to think about that, and it took 
me forever to write it. It was the most difficult thing I’ve written” (Jones 144). 

In her article on child sexual abuse in The Tax Inspector, Barbara Bode argues 
that Carey utilizes incestuous sexual abuse “as a key element to show the ultimate 
corruption and downfall of an Australian family” (107). Bode points out that at the 
apocalyptic conclusion of the novel, when Gran Catchprice, aided by Vish, uses gelignite 
to blow-up the dealership, Cathy, Mort, Vish, and Frieda are all “huddled together like a 
heap of ill fortune that does not leave room for any other person, not even Cathy’s 
husband Howie” (108). Cathy and Mort’s brother Jack, who was not molested by Cacka, 
is the only family member other than Benny who is absent, symbolizing his distance from 
the corruption at the heart of the family. Benny is not huddled together with the other 
family members who are victims, perpetrators and enablers of child sexual abuse, since 
he is busy terrorizing Maria in his cellar (behavior which is surely the result of the abuse 
he suffered). Hassall argues that Benny’s cellar “is an appallingly vivid image of the
abuse he has suffered and of his junk status in the family" (Dancing 150). Bode points out that Jack has become “so far removed from his family” that he is able to use the abuse of his brother and sister by his father as a topic for dinner conversation with Maria (108).

Bode reads the sexual abuse in the novel as “a metaphor for the corruption … in the Catchprice family, who with their deviousness along with their great helplessness, represent Western society” (109-110). Bode is correct to assert that the sexual abuse represents the moral corruption within the family; however, she is incorrect to claim that the Catchprices represent Western society. There is no evidence in the novel to support such a claim, and it would be difficult to prove that the Catchprices represent Franklin, Sydney or Australia, let alone Western society.

Although Dixon praised Carey’s engagement with the issue of child sexual abuse in his review of The Tax Inspector, describing it as “one of the great achievements of the novel” (Qtd. In Woodcock 95), he criticizes Carey’s portrayal of child sexual abuse in his article, “Closing the Can of Worms: Enactments of Justice in Bleak House, The Mystery of a Hansom Cab and The Tax Inspector.” Dixon argues that The Tax Inspector “creates the impression that sexual violence can be taken as a symbol – the symbol – of corruption in Sydney,” claims that Carey has a “fascination with incest in the western suburbs,” and declares that despite “all its social compassion, The Tax Inspector demonstrates once again that narratives of sexual transgression are seriously flawed as vehicles for analysing the complex problems of social decline. Inevitably, they offer individual acts of sexual violence as metaphors for problems that are really of a different order” (“Closing” 43, 44, 45). Dixon notes that The Tax Inspector reveals the connections between Sydney’s wealthy “and the ‘sewers’ that lie beneath their lives. The extent of institutional
corruption is suggested by numerous characters and events, but Carey does not develop these leads” (“Closing” 41). Dixon argues that the novel “is driven” by the incest in the Catchprice family and that the “revelation of this secret displaces the blame that properly belongs to the wealthy and powerful on to the low-life characters of the western suburbs” (“Closing” 41).

However, both Woodcock and Greg Ratcliffe correctly point out that Dixon mistakenly conflates child sexual abuse with political corruption (96; 191). Woodcock argues that the Catchprices, especially Benny, are not depicted by Carey as “the cause of corruption, but rather as its perpetrators and victims” (96). Moreover, Woodcock argues, the various types and levels of corruption depicted in the novel “are related, interlinked, [and] juxtaposed, but are not necessarily equated with each other” (96). The Tax Inspector “does not offer the simple paradigm that because Mort is a child abuser he will necessarily be involved in corrupt business” (Woodcock 96). Likewise, Ratcliffe claims that Dixon is incorrect to argue that Carey’s use of incest “displaces the blame for political corruption that properly belongs to the upper classes onto the low-other” (Dixon, “Closing” 41), contending that the novel actually “demonstrates the pervasiveness of corruption which cannot be attributed to any one group” (Ratcliffe 191).

The political corruption, tax evasion and connections between the wealthy, politicians and organized crime that Carey depicts are actually portrayed as quite removed from the Catchprice family as a whole. Jack Catchprice, the property developer and only member of the family to escape the dealership, is involved in corrupt and possibly criminal business dealings and is so well-connected that he can make contact with Wally Fischer, the organized crime boss, with just a few phone calls, and calls off
the audit of Catchprice Motors in the same manner. However, Jack operates in very
different circles than the rest of his family, who are corrupt only in the moral sense.
Moreover, the child sexual abuse that has been repeated for generations in the Catchprice
family is not presented as representative of Franklin or of suburbia in general. While
child sexual abuse certainly occurs in suburbia, it is also perpetrated in the city and the
bush, and Carey does not present it as a specifically suburban perversion. In fact, since
the abuse has been perpetuated by at least four generations of Catchprice males, and the
Catchprices were originally a rural family, if the novel places child sexual abuse as
originating in any geographic location, it is the bush, rather than suburbia.

In addition to child sexual abuse and institutionalized corruption, Carey addresses
the prevalence of crime and violence within suburbia. Huggan notes that sites such as the
Wool Wash are associated with violence (Peter Carey 43). However, suburbanization has
not only turned the Wool Wash into a dangerous place; the entire suburb of Franklin has
become a location for violence and crime. For example, Sarkis Alaverdian is fully aware
that he resides in a dangerous community, even though he has only lived in Franklin for
six months. Sarkis is described as “young and strong,” yet he refuses to walk alone at
night in Franklin, and is scared of “homeless kids wandering around with beer cans full
of petrol” (87). When Sarkis goes for a night-time walk with Gran Catchprice, he takes a
spanner with him for protection and thinks that her family should be ashamed to let her
wander the streets alone at night (87). While walking the streets of Franklin, Sarkis and
Gran encounter a group of “twelve-year-olds ... ripping the insignia off a Saab Turbo”
(93). Sarkis thinks of the twelve-year-olds as “like dogs in a pack ... They were feral
animals. He was scared of them, even now, twenty metres past the Saab. There was a dull
thudding noise. They were running over the roof of the Saab and jumping on its hood and if the owners were smart they would stay in their house and wait for the cops to come” (93). When Sarkis and Gran take a shortcut across a “burnt-out Kmart lot,” he hopes she will keep her voice down because the “piss-smelling [concrete] pipes might hide Nasties, people without a human heart. They might beat you because they thought you had money, or a job, or a handsome face you did not deserve” (94).

The narrator reveals that Benny shares a penchant for petty crime with other suburban youth, and has been in trouble for “lying, cheating, truancy, shop-lifting, selling bottled petrol for inhalation, [and] trying to buy Camira parts from the little crooks who hung about in Franklin Mall” (66). Hassall argues that the “gangs of doped-up twelve-year-olds who strip cars in their owners’ driveways are too close to the daily police record to dismiss as exaggerated fantasy” (Dancing 145). However, Powell contends that the behavior and welfare of suburban youth is “Central to the image of western Sydney and to the stigma surrounding the working class” (87). Since Carey has not lived in the western suburbs of Sydney, it is possible that his depiction of criminal youth draws on exaggerated media reports and the distorted reputation of the western suburbs that circulates in popular discourse. The presence of crime in the suburbs demonstrates that it is not confined to the city or the bush, but the reception of Carey’s novel suggests many Australians are uncomfortable with such associations.

In her essay “The Suburban Problem of Evil,” Jennifer Maiden also links the suburbs with violence, discussing her experience with murder and gang violence in the Western suburbs of Sydney in relation to her novel Play with Knives (1991), which is “about a suburban girl who has killed her younger siblings at the age of eleven ... [and]
her relationship with her male probation officer” (116). Maiden notes that it took eight years to find a publisher for *Play with Knives*, one “rejecting it on the grounds that the Mt. Druitt setting was ‘too parochial’ for an intelligent reader to accept” (116).

Significantly, the publisher did not reject the novel because it contained violence, but rather because it was set in the suburbs. The anti-suburban tradition is clearly present amongst publishers, in addition to writers and critics.

The final violent, criminal act of the novel is Benny’s kidnapping of Maria, who he holds hostage in his cellar at gunpoint and has planned to rape. However, once Benny has Maria imprisoned in his cellar, he no longer wants to rape her, and when the stress of the ordeal triggers early labor, he assists with the birth and lavishes the baby with affection. Hassall argues that Benny’s kidnapping of Maria is the “end result of the family’s refusal to confront the reality of its child abuse” (*Dancing* 158). Furthermore, Hassall compares the climactic cellar scene to the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb in White’s *Riders in the Chariot*, and argues that “the battle between Maria and Benny in the cloacal atmosphere of the cellar is a tour de force in its audacity as well as in its horror” (*Dancing* 160).

A final example of Carey’s serious and detailed engagement with suburbia is his decision to show middle class characters who reside in affluent inner suburbs disparaging the working class outer suburbs. Not only is such condescension a tradition within Australian literature, it is also reflected in the common usage in Australian society of derogatory terms such as “westies” and “bogans” to refer to residents of outer suburbs.

When Maria tells her colleague and friend Gia over expensive cocktails that she has been assigned to investigate the Catchprice dealership in Franklin, she exclaims:
“They sent me to Franklin. Can you believe that?”

“Franklin. My God. Who’s in Franklin?”

“No one’s in Franklin. It was some shitty little G. M. dealer.”

... “They looked like they were Social Welfare clients, not ours.” (77)

Not only does the mere mention of Franklin elicit disgust from the middle-class Gia, Maria perceives the residents of Franklin to be worthless people who could pass more easily for “Social Welfare clients” than tax evaders. Powell notes that “in Australian culture, to live in some suburbs is to suffer an equivalent stigma to that borne by people living in the ghettos of Europe and North America” and explains that the negative image “is generated through publicity given to real events but these events are represented through the discourse, experience and knowledge of the dominant culture, interpreted by people outside the ghettos” (xiv). Thus, the residents of the western suburbs rarely have the opportunity to speak for the suburbs in the public sphere; Powell and Maiden are rare exceptions.

The middle-class perception of the residents of the outer suburbs is readily apparent to Cathy Catchprice, who tells Maria, “‘You come to Franklin and you’ve decided, before you even get off the F4, that we are all retards and losers - unemployed, unemployable’” (139). Cathy seeks to convince Maria that the residents of Franklin are valuable individuals with significant lives and dreams, rather than “retards and losers” to be dismissed and ignored. Hassall argues that Cathy’s defense of Franklin “is at least as persuasive as Maria’s defence of the Tax Office” (Dancing 150). While defending and explaining her role as a tax inspector to Jack Catchprice, Maria states, “I hate all this criminal wealth. The state is full of it. It makes me sick. I see all these skunks with their
car phones and champagne and I see all this homelessness and poverty. Do you know that one child in three in Australia grows up under the poverty line?” (216). Maria declares that she did not become a tax inspector in order to “piddle around rotten inefficient businesses like … [Catchprice Motors]. I never did anything so insignificant in my life. I won’t do that sort of work. It fixes nothing’” (216). Hassall claims that Maria’s “heartfelt apologia” presents her as both an idealist and a snob, arguing that “her contempt for the pettiness of auditing Catchprice Motors sounds uncomfortably like contempt for the Catchprices, Franklin, Western Sydney, and the very people that a fair tax system is supposed to champion” (Dancing 155).

Despite Carey’s bleak depiction of Franklin and its residents, his decision to write without moral judgment about the kind of place where many Australians live and the kind of social and personal problems they face deserves praise and respect. Australian writers have ignored or disparaged suburbia for far too long, and continue to do so. In contrast to his peers Winton and Malouf, predecessors such as Johnston, and younger writers like Lucashenko and McCann, Carey rejects the anti-suburban tradition and treats the outer suburbs as one of the most important sites in Australia. Because the vast majority of Australians “make sense of their lives” within suburbia, as Fiske, Hodge, and Turner argue (52), Australian writers who seek to write realistic fiction about their nation severely limit their choice of subject matter if they choose to disparage the suburbs and their inhabitants, or ignore them altogether. Since the publication of The Tax Inspector seventeen years ago, short fiction writers such as Liam Davison, Jonathan Bennett and Neil Boyack have followed Carey’s example of rejecting the anti-suburban tradition, setting their fiction in suburbia and realistically dealing with issues such as
unemployment, factory work, family relationships, drug use, and the Australian dream of owning a new home. Such recent engagement with suburbia by writers of short fiction suggests that in the future Australian novelists may follow the lead of Carey and Murnane and the aforementioned authors of short fiction and abandon the anti-suburban tradition, producing works that realistically depict the suburban lives of the majority of Australians.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

My analysis of eleven novels by eight Australian authors demonstrates the importance, diversity and complexity of representations of suburbia in the contemporary Australian novel and of suburbia itself. The eleven novels examined in this project provide ample evidence of the wealth of material available to writers due to Australia’s status as arguably the world’s most suburban society. This project proves that although Australian narratives are rarely suburban, a number of Australia’s most canonical and popular novels, such as *My Brother Jack, Johnno* and *Cloudstreet*, are in fact suburban narratives that occupy a central position in Australian culture. While I have shown that literary novels set in suburbia comprise a small proportion of Australian literature, and that Australia’s novelists and literary critics have often ignored suburbia due to the dominance of the anti-suburban tradition, I have also demonstrated that suburbia contains a vast array of subjects for future novels and that suburbia is a subject that is addressed in many Australian novels and has so far been under-analyzed by literary critics.

Since the topic of suburbia is clearly important globally, within literary studies and other academic fields, the time is ripe for new investigations of suburbia in Australian literature, not just within novels, but also within poetry, short fiction, drama, creative non-fiction and autobiography. I have demonstrated that the anti-suburban intellectual tradition has influenced Australian culture as a whole and heavily influenced both the literature dealing with suburbia and the criticism of that literature. The anti-suburban tradition continues to pervade and influence Australian literature and be
perpetuated by it. The most singular effect of the anti-suburban tradition is that it has caused Australian writers to set the vast majority of their works outside suburbia.

Despite the decision by the majority of Australian writers of fiction to ignore suburbia and the tendency of writers such as Johnston, Malouf, Winton, Lucashenko and McCann to disparage it, Murnane and Carey have taken suburbia seriously and engaged with it in a detailed, nuanced and unbiased manner. Utilizing a combination of canonical and little-known works written by both internationally-recognized and emerging authors, I have revealed a progression within the suburban novel over forty-four years from *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) to *Subtopia* (2005), demonstrated that Johnston established the anti-suburban tradition with *My Brother Jack* in 1964, and shown how the anti-suburban tradition has been perpetuated by Malouf, Winton, Lucashenko and McCann.

This project had examined works set in suburbs around Australia, namely in the suburbs of Perth, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, which include representations of a variety of types of suburbs, including inner, outer, working-class, middle-class, established and newly-developed. I have shown that the suburban novel encompasses a variety of styles, from White’s high modernism to Johnston’s journalistic realism to Murnane’s experimental post-modernism. Moreover, I have demonstrated that the suburban setting allows Australian novelists to address central social issues, such as environmental degradation, immigration, Indigenous land rights, non-indigenous belonging, capitalism and consumerism, religion and spirituality, domestic violence, class, and sexuality.

This project began with an analysis of two of Patrick White’s novels, since White was the first prominent Australian novelist to use a suburban setting and White has often been labeled anti-suburban. By examining two of White’s novels, I demonstrated that
White is not anti-suburban, that he did not establish the anti-suburban tradition in the Australian novel, and that suburbia was a central concern for White. By providing a new interpretation of *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* and White's attitudes towards suburbia, which I demonstrate are much more ambivalent and nuanced than critics have previously acknowledged, I hope to initiate a new understanding of White's work and his importance within Australian fiction.

*With Riders in the Chariot,* White proved that a serious work of art can draw on suburbia and its inhabitants for both its subject matter and inspiration. White uses the suburban setting to explore a plethora of themes, including immigration, assimilation, the legacy of colonialism, spirituality, religion, the role of the artist in society, the relationship between humans and nature, family relationships, class, consumerism, racism, intolerance, bigotry, suffering and redemption. White's narrative technique employs numerous points of view and his characters present a variety of attitudes, making it impossible to identify any one position as White's, even if some of his own attitudes and prejudices are present in the novel. White's sympathetic depiction of Alf Dubbo's marginalization, both from mainstream Australian society and his traditional culture, reveals important truths about Australia's treatment of its Indigenous peoples, demonstrating that diversity is not the exclusive province of the urban landscape and discussion of Indigenous issues cannot be confined to the bush. *Riders in the Chariot* undoubtedly contains some anti-suburban material; however, claims that White himself is anti-suburban rely on a reductive interpretation of the novel that conflates White and his narrator and ignores material that either celebrates suburbia or fails to fit into a pro-
suburban/anti-suburban binary. *Riders in the Chariot* presents an ambivalent attitude toward suburbia, containing both celebration and condemnation.

I continue my argument that White is not an anti-suburban writer in my third chapter, focusing on his 1966 novel, *The Solid Mandala*, in which White again utilizes a suburban setting to address social issues, including the role of the artist in society, immigration, family relationships, religion, conformity, consumerism and class. White's narrative technique in *The Solid Mandala*, namely his use of multiple points of view and the use of indirect discourse by the third person narrator, makes it impossible for readers to attribute any anti-suburban sentiments in the novel conclusively to White. Although *The Solid Mandala* has been labeled an anti-suburban novel and an example of White's alleged hatred of suburbia, the novel actually presents a nuanced, ambivalent and at times celebratory representation of suburbia. The characters, relationships and physical settings in the novel reveal White's complex representation of suburban life and his close engagement with social issues, demonstrating that anti-suburban readings of the novel fail to take into account White's subtlety. Once again, White reveals the richness of suburbia as a setting for fiction. Arthur, the most saint-like of all the characters in the novel, clearly celebrates suburbia and does not express any anti-suburban sentiments. Arthur's attitude towards suburbia serves as weighty evidence against claims that *The Solid Mandala* is an anti-suburban novel. The Browns' suburban bungalow on Terminus Road in Sarsaparilla plays a significant role in *The Solid Mandala*, since Waldo and Arthur live in it for more than sixty years, allowing them to develop a deep sense of belonging. The inclusion of Jewish and Chinese characters is a reminder that suburbia is not a homogenous white zone.
My fourth chapter addresses three canonical novels, *My Brother Jack*, *Johnno* and *Cloudstreet*, showing that Johnston, rather than White, established the anti-suburban tradition in the Australian novel, and demonstrating that Malouf and Winton forcefully perpetuate the tradition with their thoroughly anti-suburban novels. As a group of highly influential novels published over three decades, *My Brother Jack*, *Johnno* and *Cloudstreet* illustrate the trajectory of the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction.

From the first page of *My Brother Jack*, Johnston presents an overwhelmingly negative depiction of suburbia, which he sustains throughout the entire text. Although Johnston’s inclusion of domestic violence is groundbreaking in that it is one of the earliest examples of authorial engagement with the issue in suburban fiction, he conflates the violence of Mr. Meredith with the ugliness of suburbia in an attempt to draw a grotesque portrait of the suburban male. In keeping with the anti-suburban intellectual tradition, Johnston presents urban space, rather than suburbia, as the location of beauty and vitality. Johnston presents the typical suburban resident as narrow-minded and conformist, and exaggerates the supposed philistinism of suburbia in order to provide more evidence for his indictment of suburbia. Johnston’s description of the victims of the depression and of the attempts of the more fortunate to exclude the unemployed presents suburbia as an inhospitable environment.

David Meredith, Johnston’s narrator, consistently refuses to take suburban life seriously, let alone admit that suburban lives may possess value. When David refers to his fellow suburbanites, he pronounces them lower than slum-dwellers and slaves to conformity. David takes a pro-working-class, anti-middle-class stance and draws on the anti-suburban tradition of representing the inner-city slums as more vital and non-
conformist than suburbia. Johnston’s narrator and protagonist is undeniably and overwhelmingly anti-suburban. David’s wife Helen may initially seem pro-suburban, since she lives in suburbia by choice, and upholds suburban values. However, Helen is a materialistic, selfish and domestic character created by Johnston as an attack on suburbia. Unlike White’s suburban novels, which present a multiplicity of attitudes regarding suburbia, making it impossible to identify a dominant message, Johnston’s narrative is thoroughly dominated by David Meredith’s voice and presentation of events, characters and settings. David’s portrayal of suburbia is overwhelmingly negative, and other characters who might defend suburbia, or at least present it more neutrally, are not given a voice in the narrative. My Brother Jack is the first anti-suburban canonical Australian novel.

David Malouf’s Johnno, published eleven years after My Brother Jack, is the first novel to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition. Malouf’s novel contains many echoes of Johnston’s work and depicts the suburbs in an overwhelmingly negative manner, becoming the second canonical novel in a developing body of anti-suburban Australian novels. Malouf’s inclusion of tirades against Brisbane and its suburbs perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition, especially when one considers the fact that, unlike White’s novels, they are not countered by neutral or celebratory descriptions. Whereas White’s suburban novels engage with issues such as immigration, religion, racism, multiculturalism, environmental degradation and the role of the artist in society, Johnno largely ignores these aspects of suburban life.

In Cloudstreet, Tim Winton provides a thorough engagement with the postcolonial quest for belonging while following Malouf’s example of perpetuating the
anti-suburban tradition established by Johnston. Due to its tremendous popularity, influence and critical acclaim, *Cloudstreet* plays a major role in perpetuating the anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature, although it does so in a much more complex manner than *My Brother Jack* and *Johnno*. Despite the fact that Winton is perceived as a champion of the working class and does not have an intellectual persona, his attitudes towards suburbia mirror those of numerous anti-suburban intellectuals. *Cloudstreet* demonstrates that suburbia, colonialism, Indigenous land rights and non-indigenous belonging are fundamentally intertwined, since all Australian suburbs occupy land stolen from Indigenous Australians, and the novel examines the conflicts caused by the displacement of Indigenous peoples through suburban development and the settlers’ struggle to establish a legitimate claim to belong to the land. Winton situates the brutal treatment of the Indigenous people by the settler-invaders in the suburbs, rather than presenting the issue as one that only possesses relevance in the bush. *Cloudstreet* reveals characters attempting to establish themselves as Indigenous, and, as a national narrative, the novel itself plays an important role in establishing claims to belonging by non-indigenous Australians. Although *Cloudstreet* deals with Indigenous issues in a problematic manner, it does so in a far more detailed and complex manner than any other novel set in suburbia by a non-Indigenous author.

My fifth chapter utilizes novels by Melissa Lucashenko and A.L. McCann to demonstrate that contemporary, non-canonical novels published since *Cloudstreet* draw heavily upon the anti-suburban tradition and perpetuate it. Published six years after *Cloudstreet*, *Steam Pigs* (1997) addresses issues that Winton explored, especially suburbia, Indigenous identity and belonging. However, *Steam Pigs* examines the issues
from the perspective of an Indigenous writer and protagonist. *Steam Pigs* is a bold and innovative novel that utilizes a working class outer suburban setting to address crucial social issues, including Indigenous identity, racism, belonging, domestic violence, gender and sexuality, and alcohol and drug abuse. However, the novel ultimately presents suburbia as a destructive site that should be rejected in favor of the inner city. Suburbia, class, race and violence continually intersect throughout the novel. The protagonist, Sue Wilson, blames working class suburbanites for the racism and forced removal from their native lands that her fellow Indigenous Australians have suffered. Lucashenko depicts crime and violence as aspects of suburban working-class life that are constant, accepted and taken for granted. The primary type of violence Lucashenko addresses is domestic violence.

Lucashenko also uses the working class suburban setting to examine issues of gender and sexuality, which she intertwines throughout the novel with class, race and socioeconomic status, and presents the pursuit of higher education as an unusual activity. Throughout the novel, Lucashenko repeatedly examines attitudes towards money and employment held by the residents of working-class suburbia, who constantly struggle to meet rent, mortgage and car payments, partly due to their habit of spending large portions of their income on alcohol and drugs. In *Steam Pigs*, Lucashenko does not depict work as fulfilling; it is merely a means to make money, which is valued solely for its acquisitive power. Lucashenko’s depiction of suburban consumerism is consistent with critiques of suburban materialism in the anti-suburban intellectual tradition. Throughout the novel, Lucashenko uses the suburban setting to confront questions of Indigenous identity,
presenting Indigenous history as a cure for Sue's nightmares and the knowledge that will allow Sue to embrace and understand her Indigenous identity.

Lucashenko does not avoid addressing problems within the Indigenous community, such as domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and racism against whites and other groups. Like other Australian suburban novels, *Steam Pigs* contains references to the bush and the natural environment. Although Lucashenko does not directly address the destruction of the natural environment caused by the development of suburbia, she depicts it as the true site of indigenous culture and explicitly addresses the issue of land ownership and Indigenous history. Despite Lucashenko’s engagement with many important social issues and bold use of language, she ultimately adopts a conservative position by presenting suburbia as a locale to be rejected in favor of the inner city, perpetuating the anti-suburban tradition and weakening the novel’s potential to provide a model for a new method of engagement with suburbia.

I argue that A. L. McCann’s *Subtopia*, published eight years after Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs*, combines innovative and provocative content with an overwhelmingly negative depiction of suburbia. Although McCann does not address issues of Indigenous identity or the struggle for both Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians to develop a strong sense of belonging, thus ignoring several important contemporary social problems, *Subtopia* provides a fascinating engagement with radicalism, terrorism and expatriation. Like Johnston’s *My Brother Jack* and Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs*, *Subtopia* contains many explicitly anti-suburban passages, and presents suburbia in a one-dimensional manner. Both the plot and content of *Subtopia* reveal the influence of *Johnno* and *My Brother Jack*. All three novels are explicitly anti-suburban, featuring protagonists who reject
suburbia and escape to Europe. Moreover, the relationship between Julian and Martin in Subtopia is remarkably similar to that of Johnno and Dante in Johnno and David and Jack in My Brother Jack.

McCann does not include any passages in his novel celebrating suburbia to offset his narrator’s constant negativity. In typical anti-suburban fashion, Julian, the narrator, associates the physical infrastructure of suburbia, capitalism, and industry with slavery, thwarted desires, disintegration, the loss of agency, and, ultimately, death. For Julian, a fulfilling, healthy and interesting life is impossible in suburbia. He depicts capitalism and consumerism as a disease, conflating them with his fear of cancer, and refers to suburbia as the “corpseworld.” In an attempt to transcend what he perceives to be his mundane suburban existence, Julian develops a fascination with radicalism and terrorism. Although McCann does not present radicals and terrorists who succeed in their quest, he depicts their ideals, characteristics and actions as more exciting, appealing and worthy of emulation than capitalism, consumerism and suburban life. However, the novel is conservative in its overwhelmingly negative treatment of suburbia.

Having demonstrated that White is not an anti-suburban novelist, shown that Johnston established the anti-suburban tradition in the Australian novel, and proven that Malouf, Winton, Lucashenko and McCann perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition, I turn my attention in my sixth chapter to two works by Gerald Murnane, arguing that he has eschewed mainstream literary traditions and created unique works of suburban fiction in A Lifetime on Clouds (1976) and Landscape with Landscape (1985). Murnane’s suburban fictions are predominantly set in Melbourne’s suburbs, revealing the immense creative possibilities for suburban fiction that rejects or ignores the anti-suburban tradition.
Murnane’s unique and intensely personal relationship with Melbourne’s suburbs, where he has lived for almost sixty years, is a prominent feature of both *A Lifetime on Clouds* and *Landscape with Landscape*. Murnane’s examination of suburbia, sexual fantasies and Catholicism in *A Lifetime on Clouds* illustrates the remarkable potential for suburban fiction that rejects the anti-suburban tradition and uses suburbia as a setting.

*A Lifetime on Clouds* contains numerous detailed descriptions of Melbourne’s suburbs. Almost all of the physical action of the novel occurs in suburbia, with the protagonist, Adrian Sherd, only leaving Melbourne’s suburbs once. Adrian does not wish to escape suburbia, and the dominant, extended fantasy of the novel centers on his imaginary relationship with Denise McNamara, a Catholic schoolgirl who resides in his suburb and travels to and from school on the same train as Adrian. The location of Adrian’s outer suburban home literally situates it in the midst of two of the most important and commonly addressed issues in Australian suburban fiction: environmental degradation and immigration. Although Adrian’s perception of the inner suburbs reveals misconceptions and prejudices, he does not conform to the precepts of the anti-suburban tradition, which holds that the slums are the source of vitality and authenticity, and thus superior to middle-class suburbia. Rather than depicting the outer suburbs as isolated, repetitive and boring, a common trope in suburban novels, Murnane presents them as symbols of modernity and progress. *A Lifetime on Clouds* is perhaps the first Australian novel set in suburbia since White’s *The Solid Mandala* that is not anti-suburban.

Murnane continues his explorations of suburbia in *Landscape with Landscape*, once again demonstrating the enormous variety of creative possibilities for fiction that rejects the anti-suburban tradition and utilizes suburbia as a setting. Murnane’s fictional
experiments in *Landscape with Landscape* are even more radical than those in *A Lifetime on Clouds*, since he not only investigates a range of suburban settings, he also conducts experiments with genre, abandoning the novel as a form and utilizing six versions of an unnamed first person narrator. Rather than viewing suburbia as an unworthy site for fiction or a location to mock, Murnane perceives suburbia as the location in which limitless manifestations and permutations of life can be endlessly imagined, revised and re-imagined. *Landscape with Landscape* demonstrates that suburbia contains an infinite number of stories for fiction writers to utilize and reveals the evolving nature of individual suburbs and suburbia as a whole. In one of the six pieces that comprise *Landscape with Landscape*, the narrator chooses to dwell in exactly the kind of house and suburb that Johnston’s narrator violently rejects in *My Brother Jack*. In another piece, the narrator perceives the suburban infrastructure as containing endless possibilities for exploration and the discovery of secret knowledge, contrasting markedly with anti-suburban depictions of suburbia as conformist, repetitive and shallow. Although Murnane is not the only Australian writer to reject the anti-suburban tradition, he is the most unique.

My seventh chapter analyzes two more novels that reject the anti-suburban tradition and take suburbia seriously, both by Peter Carey, arguably Australia’s most influential living writer. Carey’s first and fourth published novels, *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector*, are both set in fictional suburbs of Australian cities. The settings Carey utilizes in *Bliss* play crucial roles in the construction of meaning and the development of themes, yet critics have almost totally ignored the suburban setting of the novel, and the vast majority of the scholarship on the novel fails to address Carey’s engagement with
suburbia. Bliss contains many negative depictions of the society in which it is set, but the negativity is aimed at the city and capitalism, rather than suburbia. Carey’s decision to reject the anti-suburban tradition and refrain from attacking suburbia, even though his characters engage in negative behaviors, including infidelity and incest, reveals that he takes suburbia seriously as the site in which most Australian lives are lived. In Bliss, Carey never depicts suburbia as a boring or repressive environment. The negative descriptions of the city conveyed through Honey Barbara and other characters are not accompanied by negative depictions of the suburbs. Like White and Murnane, Carey uses suburbia as a setting in which to examine issues concerning religion and spirituality.

One of the primary subjects of Carey’s investigation of suburbia, both in Bliss and The Tax Inspector, are dysfunctional families. While Carey does not critique suburbia in Bliss, he attacks capitalism and consumerism through his descriptions of the role of advertisers and multinational corporations in knowingly selling carcinogenic products. Carey repeatedly links cancer with capitalism, consumption and environmental degradation. Harry Joy’s escape to Bog Onion Road is not a rejection of suburbia, the site where Harry felt most secure and comfortable. Carey neither rejects nor celebrates suburbia in Bliss; rather, through his examination of capitalism, consumerism, morality, family relationships, alternative lifestyles, and the pastoral, he demonstrates the centrality of suburban life in Australian culture.

With the publication of The Tax Inspector, Carey became the first internationally acclaimed Australian author since White to set the majority of a novel in an outer suburb of an Australian city. Carey’s engagement with themes such as child sexual abuse and political corruption signaled a willingness to challenge his audience and take massive
risks. The negative reception of *The Tax Inspector* in Australia was primarily due to the novel’s treatment of child abuse and depiction of Sydney as corrupt. The novel remains Carey’s most disturbing, honest and intense examination of late-twentieth-century Australian society. The outer suburban setting allows Carey to engage with issues common in the Australian suburban novel, including the development and expansion of suburbia, environmental degradation, immigration, class, sexuality, family relationships, violence and crime. Although Carey focuses on some of the most negative aspects of life in suburbia, he does not depict suburbia in an overtly negative manner and his narrator does not deliver the kind of diatribes against suburbia that are prevalent in anti-suburban novels such as *My Brother Jack*. Rather, Carey treats suburbia seriously and sympathetically. By choosing an outer suburb as a viable setting for a work of fiction, Carey highlights the importance, influence, and prominence of suburbia in the lives of ordinary Australians and breaks with the anti-suburban tradition by treating the suburb as one of the most important sites within the Australian experience.

This project has addressed a long-neglected and under-examined area within Australian literature and analyzed some of the most important novels in Australian literature from a new perspective. I have provided new insights and interpretations of eleven novels, several of which are canonical works that have already been analyzed extensively. Of course, the scope of this project has not permitted the analysis of every Australian novel set in suburbia, and there are a number of novels that other scholars may choose to examine or re-examine after reading my work. Since I have only addressed one novel by a female author, it is important to note that Australia’s female authors have not failed to write novels set in suburbia. The following novels by female authors are set in...
suburbia: Amanda Lohrey's *Camille's Bread* (1995), Lillian Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds* (1997), Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981), Judy Pascoe’s *Our Father Who Art in a Tree* (2002) and Sonya Hartnett’s *Of a Boy* (2002). I did not address any of these novels because they all focus heavily and narrowly on domestic issues, such as family relationships, rather than addressing broader, external issues, such as immigration, environmental degradation, Indigenous rights and religion. Moreover, I sought to demonstrate how suburbia has been addressed by prominent novelists and in canonical novels, and where I used emerging or lesser-known writers, such as Lucashenko and McCann, to support my arguments, their novels more closely addressed the anti-suburban tradition and suburbia in general than the aforementioned works by female authors. The novels by Lohrey, Ng, Jolley, Pascoe and Hartnett would certainly make for a fascinating study of domestic relationships and spaces in contemporary Australian fiction by women, but they did not fit into the scope of this project.

Hopefully, my work will lead to a reassessment of the novels and authors addressed in this project and inspire further research into suburbia in Australian literature. I hope to reinvigorate the debate regarding suburbia in Australian literature and move it beyond Gerster, Kinnane and Wetherell’s calls for Australian authors to engage more closely with suburbia. I have shown that the authors who have explored suburbia since 1961, even those who wrote anti-suburban novels, have moved the Australian novel in a new direction, away from the traditional focus on the bush and the city, demonstrating that the space between the city and the bush contains some of the most interesting and important subjects within Australian culture. The novels addressed in this project and my analysis of them clearly demonstrate that suburbia is not homogenous, repetitive, shallow
and boring; rather, suburbia contains a wealth of fascinating, diverse and constantly evolving lives.
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