

Brigid Rooney. *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity*.

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‘One might ask whether both novels and suburbs are obsolete,’ writes Brigid Rooney, at the start of her inquiry into suburban space in the Australian novel (9). Why should we care for the suburbs—those sub-urban spaces ringing the inner city, those in-between feminised spaces neither urban nor rural—when globalism, market deregulation, and the big-four (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) have collapsed the distinction between globe, city, suburb and home. The homogenised and ever-expanding land-creep of late capitalism has nullified ideas of the centre and periphery. The grids, the bungalows, the post-war facades, and the ubiquitous red tile roofs, are earmarked for redevelopment.

And yet, over the course of *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity* (2018), Rooney mounts a case for the centrality of the suburb, and how the ‘ambivalent and contradictory’ representation of Australian suburban space is explicitly connected to the novel form:

The heterogeneity and diversity of suburban community in Australian cities grow with both expanded immigration and widening socio-economic rifts between affluent, globally connected suburban zones and those on the margins; equally, the topographies of contemporary Australian fiction reflect and speak to these seismic rifts and connections. We are not yet past either the novel or the suburb. (3, 10)

In making this argument, Rooney commits to a mammoth undertaking. The project begins with D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* (1923) and its vision of ‘bungalows *en masse*’ (23), before moving to inter-war women’s writing, expatriate travel and the post-war suburban explosion, and ending with contemporary fiction—novels written in a ‘post-suburban’ world. The result is an immense and authoritative account of Australian literature, with a dazzling and kaleidoscopic array of close readings and spatial investigations. But *Suburban Space* also conducts reparative and restorative work: Rooney draws attention to writers who have been lost or ignored by the ‘canon,’ or who seek to denaturalise and challenge the tropes of middle-class suburbia. Taken together, this approach allows for a recalibration of the suburban map—it is a form of recourse to ‘the zone *par excellence* of provincial white settlement’ (54).

A key feature of *Suburban Space* is Rooney’s deft reappraisal of the anti-suburban rhetoric espoused by many Australian novelists (and their academic counterparts) over the course of the twentieth century and into the decades of the twenty-first. Rather than acquiesce to the rigid binaries of pro- or anti-suburbia, Rooney instead argues for a far more tangled and thorny engagement with suburban space. As such, the book draws out the resentments, the horrors, the claustrophobia, the sameness, the boredom, the tired consumerism, and the provincialism of the Australian suburb. But Rooney *also* configures this same Australian suburb as a site of revelation, of enacted desire, of queer sojourning, of reclamation and renewal. When writing about the female protagonist in Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* (1944), Rooney suggests that ‘Teresa turn[s] away from the cultural isolation, privation and emptiness that is the suburban realm. Even so, an implicit contradiction is at work since suburban scenes prove a fertile, if ambiguous, narrative resource, yielding richly and sensuously remembered landscape and

milieux both evocative and uncanny' (54). In considering Patrick White, that oft-quoted proponent of anti-suburban spite, Rooney argues 'it is precisely *within* suburbia that White discovers moments of illumination. His *illuminati*, touched by the burning fire of the real, live in suburbia. These "burnt ones," obscure and ordinary figures, are his vector for the extraordinary' (63).

Indeed, the suburb is a site of compulsive return for Australian novelists, whether it be George Johnston with his Meredith trilogy, Elizabeth Harrower with her domestic 'lighted tomb[s]' (112), or Steven Carroll and his six-part Glenroy series. Rooney points to the dual desire to penetrate and escape the suburb. It is a formative space that functions as a memory-container, simultaneously ambivalent and charged—a site filled with 'muted' and 'metonymic associations' (15). Much of *Suburban Space*, then, is devoted to this kind of uncovering: to finding points or scenes where, in Rooney's words, the meaning 'thickens' (76). In repeatedly pausing on, and unpicking, such moments, Rooney makes a case for a more contrapuntal mode of analysis.

This troubling of the poetics of space also works to resituate suburban representations within the larger geographies of the settler-nation. That is, Rooney is suggesting that the suburb itself is an extension, or next-stage development, in the settler-frontier. The quarter acre block becomes a 'synecdoche for colonization' (186); the development, erasure and redevelopment of the suburb (falsely) presents the landscape as a blank slate, denying its history of dispossession and violence. Therefore, a substantial part of *Suburban Space* is devoted to listening to what remains unsaid or silenced or repressed: 'one must necessarily register gaps in the suburban plot, be alert to sounds, sights and uncanny presences either not there, or barely perceptible' (15). Rooney achieves this mode of listening in two ways: firstly, by attending to moments of avoidance or repression, and secondly, by demonstrating how Indigenous writers use suburban tropes as a method for decolonising 'white-settler possessive occupation and sovereignty' (186). Indeed, *Suburban Space* concludes with a study of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) and her redeployment of anti-suburban rhetoric to unground the '(in)hospitable suburban house' (187).

Underpinning Rooney's vast topological survey is a steadfast belief in the potential of the novel form, and the ways in which fictive landscapes refract, reinvent and reproduce lived reality. Far from advocating a form of literary tourism, or the myopic view that a writer's biography accounts for a narrative's meaning, Rooney instead moves *between* the fictive and the real: novel and writer, place and reader, mesh and braid together. 'Landscapes are figuratively mapped in fiction,' writes Rooney, 'conversely, fiction configures the meanings of landscape' (66). Tracking beside this fictive/non-fictive world is the *Bildungsroman*—the coming-of-age tale that surreptitiously mimics the imagined narrative of a young settler nation. It is a form that recurs again and again in Australian suburban fiction, whether it is reversed (as in David Malouf's *Johnno*), refused (as in Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded*), reinvented (as in Omar Musa's *Here Come the Dogs*) or estranged (as in Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*) (92, 159, 164, 172).

Across *Suburban Space*, Rooney charts the real-world locales of Neutral Bay, Newcastle, Thirroul, Wahroonga, Watson's Bay, Mount Pritchard, Hobart and Brisbane (to name but a few), and their relationship to their fictive counterparts. The anxieties of writers and their expatriate longings make their way onto the page, as seen in Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* (1991), George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964), and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978). Over the course of the book, Rooney builds an index of suburban semiotics,

which enables us to discover how contemporary writers render suburbia via a web of allusions and intertextual nods to their antecedents. A reference to Stead's *For Love Alone* reappears in de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2012), while the protagonist of Carroll's Glenroy series is given a copy of *My Brother Jack*. (It is a testament to Rooney's skill as both writer and researcher that she is able to weave together, and sustain, all these threads with such a light touch.)

I read *Suburban Space* at the mid-way point of 2020—the irony being that, in this particular year, many of us have found ourselves contained to a five-kilometre radius surrounding our homes. The suburb, as Rooney attests, is where the majority of Australians live, and a key locus point for meaning making. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with its shrinking horizons and imposed boundaries, has limited our movement to within this space. The elsewhere (the city centre, the state border, the national border, the international flight, the globe) has been shuttered. On the one hand, there is renewed interest in the local, in the suburban community, in the back lanes and flowering shrubs, in the humble park swings. On the other hand, the response to the pandemic has reiterated how the suburb manifests and physically inscribes social structures: 'the patriarchal family, colonizing modernity, national insularity and global capitalism' (181). We have seen how some suburban areas are subject to greater policing and fines, some suburbanites are able to 'work from home,' and some are unable to move beyond their front door. Meanwhile, the inner city betrays its vulnerability. Central business districts remain vacant, the migration to online work has sped up the shift to flexible home 'offices,' and, as already seen in the United States, the pandemic has kick-started another wave of urban white flight.

In 2020, then, the Australian suburb remains a site of contestation—a contradictory space of estrangement, fecundity and isolation. In 2020, the suburb (in both its real and imagined forms) feels more important than ever.

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