

# Colonising time, recollecting place: Steven Carroll's reinvention of suburbia

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Australian suburbs—like suburbs elsewhere<sup>1</sup>—are attracting renewed scholarly attention during the latest phase of urban transformation. As work by Fiona Allon (2008), Amanda Wise (2010) and others shows, the lived experience, spatial contours and cultural demographics of contemporary suburbia are in flux. It is no coincidence that representations of suburbia are also changing in character and detail, as seen in recent literary fiction. Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap* (2008), for instance, reinvents suburban terrain precisely through its engagement with Australia's diversifying demography and changing urban/suburban modes, in turn conditioned by global capitalism's fluid and precarious present, in what Zygmunt Bauman influentially terms 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 1-15). Yet literary critics and scholars of Australian literature are yet to move far from what has been, since the 1990s, a governing focus on an anti-suburban literary tradition. Critics have used 'pro- or anti-suburbia' as the key—if not sole—rubric for reading fictions of suburbia. Conditioned by the fiction itself, this approach was influentially introduced by Robin Gerster (1990), theoretically honed by Andrew McCann and others (1997; 1998), and continues into the present, albeit with modification and updating (Burns; O'Reilly). Fictions of postwar suburbia depicting the entrapment or flight of their protagonists are routinely read as anti-suburban, as a function of cosmopolitan habitus or artistic elitism. Even such an elusive work as David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975) has been positioned as anti-suburban:<sup>2</sup> there has been no escaping the dominance of this paradigm.

This is not to suggest that the critique of fictions of suburbia lacks validity. It testifies to suburbia as an enduring *topos* in Australian fiction, not least because nation and suburb are so historically and politically correlated: Australia has even been called the first suburban nation (Davison 1995). Literary suburbia remains seriously under-analysed, and avenues for conceptualizing how the novel speaks to the suburb in Australian literature are still too limited.<sup>3</sup> The pro- and anti-suburbia paradigm does not adequately gauge, for instance, how the suburb works as a particular kind of literary topography. It does not account for the persistence of the suburb in fiction nor the emotional power with which even anti-suburban novels conjure lost or forgotten places, or address the contemporary era. The cultural moment at which we appear to have arrived, coinciding with broader urban change, is eliciting fresh approaches in adjacent disciplines of history, cultural geography, sociology and urban studies. Their insights are suggestive for literary studies where a more finely calibrated sense of the sustained role of the suburbs in Australian literature is long overdue. More attention could be given, for example, to how novels map suburban history, and encode the phenomenal or sensory contours of specific suburbs—how do they archive social transformations while reinventing suburban material for mainly literary purposes? The longer view suggests that suburbia has offered writers a surprisingly rich vein for the stylistic renovation of the novel itself. Novels about the suburbs respond to Australian vernacular modernity, occasioning stories of exile, longing and return, often through modernist temporalities that yoke suburban terrain to colonization and forgetting (McCann 146-7). As echoed in the title of Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect* (1958), the longer view can disrupt the provincial frame, revealing the transnational provenance of both suburban topography and literary modernism, and their mutual correlations with settler modernity.































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of the 1895 derailment of the Granville-Paris Express train. See the image at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gare\\_Montparnasse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gare_Montparnasse) Accessed on 13 November 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Sidney Nolan's painting, 'Woman with Tent' (1946) is held in the Nolan Collection, Canberra Museum and Gallery, but is available for viewing online—see slideshow image number 5 of 24— at <http://www.museumsandgalleries.act.gov.au/nolan/> Accessed on 31 January 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

<sup>14</sup> An aerial photograph of Glenroy, with the flour mill and its silos, as well as a picture of the silo under demolition are both available from Picture Victoria: see <http://www.picturevictoria.vic.gov.au/site/moreland/miscellaneous/6730.html> and also <http://www.picturevictoria.vic.gov.au/site/moreland/miscellaneous/6546.html> Accessed on 13 November 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with former resident of Glenroy, Tom Davison, on 5 April 2013. R. K. Morgan is briefly described by Andrew Lemon in *Broadmeadows: A Forgotten History* (215).

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.