

# **'I Don't' Wanna Live in this Place': The 'Australian Cultural Cringe' in *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia***

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Heaven must be there  
Well, it's just got to be there  
I've never, ever seen Eden  
I don't wanna live in this place  
(Eurogliders)

Is Australian identity always and  
peculiarly constituted by dreams  
of elsewhere?  
(McCredden 13)

The year is 1998. I am sitting in class listening to a presentation by a well-known Melbourne journalist. The topic of discussion is Pauline Hanson, who was at that time receiving extensive media coverage on account of her xenophobic politics. 'Hanson is like Dame Edna Everage,' remarked the journalist, to some laughter. 'A kitsch relic of old Australian suburbia.'

Fast-forward to 2012. I am drinking with an Australian friend at a riverside bar in Prague. This bar is a haven for wannabe-cosmopolitan types from around the world. A group of young men at a nearby table break out into a rendition of 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi, Oi, Oi!' Their accents are unmistakeably 'Strine, as is their ditty. My friend blushes. 'This,' she notes wryly, 'is a reason for the cultural cringe.'

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This article explores representations of the so-called 'Australian cultural cringe' in A.L. (Andrew) McCann's *Subtopia* (2005) and Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia* (1995). The youthful protagonists of these novels express the kind of anti-Australian sentiments that were so famously described by A.A. Phillips. Their antipathy towards Australia manifests itself in various forms of abjection. I argue that the most striking aspect of these novels is the fact they have been published at a historical moment in which the whole notion of an 'Australian cultural cringe' seems to have become more or less obsolete. My readings of these texts are energised by a number of questions. These include: do the novels uncritically portray Australia as crude and parochial? Or is something altogether more complex happening in these texts? What do *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* say about the relationship between national identity, place and the body?

## Revisiting the ‘Australian Cultural Cringe’

The term ‘cultural cringe’ was coined by A.A. Phillips in his 1950 essay of the same name, and has become ‘an icon of Australia’s vernacular culture’ in the decades that have followed (Richard Nile, cited in Henderson 105). Phillips provides a wry commentary on a negative mindset which he saw Australians of the mid-twentieth century as holding towards their country. This mindset owes little to, say, an abhorrence of social injustices (for example, the systemic oppression of Australia’s Indigenous people). The ‘cultural cringe’ described by Phillips is premised on the assumption that anything or anyone marked as ‘Australian’ ‘will be worse’ – coarse, less sophisticated, less intelligent – ‘than the imported article’ (2).

Phillips detects ‘cultural cringe’ in various settings, including what would become known as the field of Australian literature. He writes: ‘The Australian reader … hedges and hesitates, asking himself [sic], ‘Yes, but what would a cultivated Englishman think of this?’’(2). Phillips lists several reasons for this perceived sense of crudity and parochialism. These include the ‘isolation’, or what historian Geoffrey Blainey would later describe as the ‘tyranny of distance’ that separates Australia from the ‘world centres’ (13; and see also Blainey). They also include the ‘smallness’ of the Australian population (Phillips 13). As Phillips puts it, the ‘cultural crust’ feels ‘thinner’ for the Australian intellectual ‘because, in a small community there is not enough of it to provide the individual with a protective insulation’ (4).

Phillips goes on to write: ‘Our artists work in the intimidating shadow of the giant Anglo-Saxon communities’ (13). These ‘giant Anglo-Saxon communities’<sup>1</sup> include the United Kingdom, which is referenced several times throughout Phillips’ essay (one example is quoted in the above paragraph). Indeed, these ‘communities’ might encompass much of Europe, for as various scholars have pointed out, ‘Europe’ has historically been portrayed as sophisticated and cosmopolitan in much Australian literature (see Gelder and Salzman 110–121; Ungari).<sup>2</sup>

My decision to use representations of ‘cultural cringe’ in contemporary Australian fiction as the basis for an article was met with raised eyebrows from a few colleagues. They suggested that this ‘cringe’ is a thing of the past, and who could blame them for reaching this conclusion? The Australia of the twenty-first century is one whose national identity has apparently been dramatically refashioned, and shifted far away from the parochial—at least to some extent. (A sense of parochialism is still evident in the media profiles of Pauline Hanson and the fictional Dame Edna. Parochialism and crudity also inflect the footy chant of the Aussie boys in the Prague bar.)

There is no space here to describe the many and varied ways in which Australian national identity has been refashioned in recent decades; a few prominent examples must suffice. We could look first at Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Both belonged to the Australian Labor Party and both held the position of Prime Minister during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1990, Hawke famously described Australia as the ‘clever country’ (cited in Holden). Not for him the ‘crudity’ and the lack of ‘protective insulation’ for intellectuals that Phillips had described forty years before. Keating publicly demonstrated support for Australia’s Indigenous people

and helped build economic ties with Asia (Watson). A commitment to enhancing Australian national identity was also demonstrated by John Howard, who succeeded Keating as Prime Minister in March 1996, though Howard spoke from a quite different ideological perspective to his predecessors. Howard criticised the way in which Australian history under Keating's Federal Government apparently had become framed as 'a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism and other forms of discrimination' (cited in Short 104). Most famously, Howard described Australia as a country that was 'comfortable and relaxed' about its 'history', 'present' and 'future' (cited in Jackson).<sup>3</sup>

The refashioning of Australian national identity is also evident in—and to no small extent enabled by—tourism advertising. A case in point is the notorious 'So where the bloody hell are you?' campaign that was run in 2006 by Tourism Australia, and which featured model Lara Bingle. This campaign presents a tongue-in-cheek inversion of the question 'So where the bloody hell is Australia?', the latter of which seems to be the proverbial 'elephant in the room' in accounts of Australia's geographical remoteness. The 'you' of this campaign title refers as much to those already residing within Australia as it does to potential overseas tourists. That is: regardless of where they are based, those who catch sight of these advertisements are encouraged to see Australia as being a fun and exciting place to be, rather than as somewhere that is hidden away from the rest of the world.

What makes *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* striking is the fact that their respective protagonists feel a deep sense of what Phillips might identify as the 'Australian cultural cringe'. Neither McCann's protagonist, Julian Farrell, nor Ettler's protagonist, Justine,<sup>4</sup> would have been born when Phillips' essay was originally published in *Meanjin*. However, they both express sentiments about Australia which are similar (though far more extreme) to those described in this essay. These anti-Australian sentiments are not ideologically motivated; neither protagonist seems terribly interested in political issues or movements. Julian toys with, then quickly abandons, the idea of writing a thesis about 'theories of working class representation' (McCann, *Subtopia* 111). Justine is certainly aware of feminist theories, but dismisses them as unhelpful.<sup>5</sup>

There is a temptation to dismiss both novels as the whining of privileged, white and young folk.<sup>6</sup> Yet this would mean subscribing to the kind of realist readings that both novels have frequently received, and which (as will be argued later in the article) are too straightforward and simplistic. To the contrary, both texts are highly and self-consciously dystopian. Dystopia is that 'no-man's land between satire and tragedy' (Gottlieb 3). Dystopia is also the flipside *and* the logical extension of a utopia, the latter which can be defined as 'that good place that is no place' (Sargisson and Sargent xiii). The antipodean settings of *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* are described by their protagonists in laughably grim ways. Julian and Justine pine for a utopian space that (they surmise) lies outside Australian shores—and always frustratingly out of their reach. To paraphrase the 1980s chart-topper cited at the article's beginning, Heaven must be there—but exactly where is 'there'?

The issue of place is important to my readings of *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia*. I endorse the following argument about urban<sup>7</sup> spaces that is advanced by sociologist Fran Tonkiss:

Cities ... are one of the best examples of the idea that things which are real are also imagined. Social structures, relations and practices are linked in sometimes complicated ways to symbolic urban forms. Cities, after all, are dense material realities which also take their shape in memory and perception. (2)

McCann makes a similar point in relation to so-called 'suburban' spaces:

Suburbia is both a tangible site, a distinct set of social and spatial relations, and a discursive fiction, a facet of various imaginary topographies in which it is stigmatised or mythologised according to certain ideological and aesthetic imperatives. ('Introduction' viii)

Our perceptions of living in 'urban' and 'suburban' spaces are shaped by our memories of past events, by the ways these spaces have been represented in popular culture, and also by stereotypes about certain spaces. The perceptions that I have just described can, in turn, help shape our sense of national identity. The term 'national identity' is used here in the broadest sense to describe the stories, images and ideas that inform our sense of 'who we are' as a nation. National identity is imaginary, though it can be strongly felt. National identity creates the sense of bringing together people who reside within a particular nation-space, of giving these people a common bond.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the article, I emphasise the particular Australian locations which the protagonists of *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* inhabit. Julian grows up in suburban Melbourne, while Justine lives in inner Sydney. The choice of Australia's two major metropolitan centres is significant because of the contrast or 'divide' that some commentators believe exists between them (Wark, 'Two Tales' and *The Virtual Republic* 61-62). This divide is, in turn, based on a collection of stereotypes of both locations. To be explicit: Melbourne has commonly been stereotyped as dour, moralistic and unexciting.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Sydney has frequently been stereotyped as cosmopolitan, libertarian and vice-laden. Also note the perceived distinctions between 'suburbia' and 'city', though these distinctions are not uniquely 'Australian'. However they are overtly invoked in the texts under discussion. As will be explained at greater length soon, 'suburbia' has frequently been stereotyped as an unsophisticated, bland and 'feminised' space. Suburbia is that in-between zone that is meant to separate 'city' and 'country'. The 'city' has been stereotyped as a traditionally 'masculine' space, a site of pleasure and danger.

The chief aim of this article is to look critically at how these very crude and outdated stereotypes about place are invoked in *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia*. To what extent do the novels endorse and/or challenge these stereotypes? How is the sense of national identity held by the protagonists of these novels shaped by their perceptions of their particular surroundings?

There is one more concept that I will introduce before addressing my selected novels, and that is abjection. This concept ties in with the blurring of boundaries that has characterised some understandings of 'suburbia' (a point that will be developed in my reading of *Subtopia*).

Though, as my reading of *The River Ophelia* will emphasise, abjection is not only confined to suburban spaces. In her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva famously argued:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. (1)

For the protagonists of *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia*, embracing abjection—either through substance use (both novels) or violent sex (Ettler's novel)—does represent a form of revolt against their surroundings. Furthermore, in these texts, abjection is itself a *symptom* of these surroundings. Abjection is symptomatic of pain (*Subtopia*) and a sexualised conflation of pain and pleasure (*The River Ophelia*). In focusing on this abjection, I suggest that, just as an individual's sense of national identity can be shaped by their perception of their surroundings within that particular nation, an individual's perception of his or her surroundings can also shape his or her experience as an embodied subject. Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile make this point when they argue that it is useful to 'think of the ways in which bodies and places are understood, how they are made and how they are interrelated ... because this is how we live our lives—through places, through the body' (1). *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* offer provocative literary perspectives on some of the ways in which place, national identity and bodies can be interrelated; and the role which 'cultural cringe' plays in this interrelationship.

### **Around the 'Corpseworld': *Subtopia***

In *Subtopia*'s opening, Julian is a teenager living in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs during the 1970s. As seen through Julian's eyes, suburban Melbourne is a 'corpseworld' (81). Asbestos infests the roofs of houses, giving their inhabitants cancer. Julian spots his uncle inappropriately touching his pre-pubescent sister, Connie, at a poolside party (13). Julian concedes that he has 'manifestly failed' 'assumptions of healthy, Australian boyhood' (28). Relatives describe him as being 'physically unfit', and he develops a 'pale complexion' by spending large amounts of time indoors 'playing war games' (28). By the early 1980s, Julian is a university student residing in St Kilda (in Melbourne's inner-south). His St Kilda days pass in a blur of alcohol and drugs, often consumed in the company of his sometimes-friend, Martin Bernhard. Julian describes Martin as 'the only person more physically unfit for life than I was' (28). Martin is similarly hostile towards Australia, describing this country as a 'fucking hole' (142). The novel follows Julian as he moves to Berlin and New York City, before returning to Melbourne with his girlfriend, Sally, in the 1990s.

Julian's hostility towards Australia's suburban heartlands has been noted by several commentators. These commentators have tended to assume that this hostility is endorsed (or at least uncontested) by the novel as a whole. In my initial review of *Subtopia*, which was published in 2006, I argued that McCann's novel was ultimately '*too bleak*' in its representation of Australian suburbia (279; emphasis in original). I criticised *Subtopia* for not suggesting the pleasure and 'promise' that can be found within suburban spaces (280). In a more sophisticated analysis, Nathanael O'Reilly locates McCann's novel in what he describes as an 'anti-suburban' tradition in Australian literature (166). O'Reilly argues that 'given

McCann's extensive knowledge of Australian literature,' including fictional representations of Australian suburbia, 'the anti suburbanism of the novel is probably not accidental' (166).

My review was premised on the assumption that *Subtopia* is a realist text: that is, the novel purports to provide a more or less straightforward representation of what Australian suburbia is 'really like' (at least according to McCann). I want to complicate and enrich that initial reading by more closely interrogating the concept of 'subtopia'. This concept emerged as part of the research which McCann has undertaken in his capacity as a literary scholar, and which O'Reilly references in his analysis. McCann coined the term 'subtopia' in 1998 to describe the way in which Australian suburbia has been represented within Australian literature as a site of both 'conformity, repression and authority' and 'increased freedom or belonging away from the flux of public life' ('Introduction' viii). For McCann, both kinds of representation are simplistic; neither can hope to capture the complexities of the Australian suburban experience. McCann is particularly critical of the idea that suburbia—in Australia or elsewhere—is utopian. In an interview that was published around the time of *Subtopia*'s publication, McCann stated that he uses the concept of 'subtopia' to suggest 'the ways in which urban and suburban environments deliver much less than what they promise us' (cited in Vernay). McCann points out that the 'sense of utopia betrayed was as evident to (him) in New York as it was in the outer suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney' (cited in Vernay).

The relationship between suburbia and abjection in *Subtopia* is particularly overt. Suburbia is the kind of place one wishes to escape through substance abuse and war games. Furthermore, the suburbia of *Subtopia* is itself synonymous with abjection. Witness Julian's fixation on cancer and death. A relationship between suburbia and abjection should not be surprising: as Karen Brooks writes, the term 'suburban' encompasses spaces 'where the antithetical geographical and imaginative sites of country and city are both separated and blurred' (88). The blurring of 'borders' and 'boundaries' (imaginary or otherwise) that takes place in suburban spaces evokes Kristeva's work on abjection. Brooks notes that Kristeva's 'notion of the abject exposes the fragility of the boundaries between inside and outside because the abject embodies both the internal and the external simultaneously' (91). Brooks also points out that suburbia has traditionally been 'read as the feminine counterpoint to the masculine (and phallic) city' (88). Throughout *Subtopia*, and particularly in those sections which are set in Melbourne, Julian has a fascination—and perhaps even a kind of identification—with female victimisation. He is fixated on his uncle's treatment of Connie, and suspects that Sally's dissertation supervisor is 'sleazing onto her' (245). Julian develops an acquaintance with Penny, a 'junkie' who (like Martin) dies prematurely (115).

For Martin, it is *Melbourne* suburbia that is particularly nightmarish. Melbourne suburbia is a 'hole' situated in a country that is itself a 'hole'. When used in this sense, the term 'hole' suggests somewhere that is lacking in intelligence, sophistication and excitement. For Julian, Melbourne is a place to leave, as had been done by expatriates such as Germaine Greer, who 'grew up in some bloody awful place on the highway' (73). Further to this, Julian actually personifies a certain, negative stereotype of Melbourne. He is perpetually bleak, and always ready to cast judgment on his surroundings and their inhabitants (with the exception of himself). Yet while Julian's outlook on Melbourne suburbia is bleak, so too is his outlook on just about every other place he visits, be it 'suburban' or 'urban', Australian or otherwise. America is described as

a society that runs on cycles of consumption, anxiety and sickness. People gorge on over-processed, fat-saturated food, they get obese and then they start worrying about some terminal illness like bowel cancer so intensely they get any number of other stress-related conditions. (144)

Julian recounts walking into a New York diner, which is portrayed as a nightmare world of “bull-necks, double chins, burst capillaries and plump red faces...chewing away at mouthfuls of sugar and fat” (216). Julian also travels to Germany, which he perceives as experiencing a ‘perpetual winter’ and as being populated with ‘people who ... schlepped around with decaying teeth, bad skin and mangy scalps’ (145).

This proliferation of morbid imagery helps debunk the very notion of utopianism. As Julian discovers, escape one corpseworld—either through substance use, war games or overseas travel—and you will find yourself in another corpseworld. That is because for Julian, the world *as a whole* is, ultimately, a corpseworld. For him, each nation is constructed of, and defined by ugly cultural stereotypes. Heaven may not be there in Melbourne’s suburban heartlands, but then, it may not be anywhere else. On another level, *Subtopia* challenges the representation of suburbia (in Melbourne or elsewhere) as being perpetually bleak and dull. Julian concedes that he has a ‘near-hysterical’ hatred of his surroundings (56). This hatred shapes his perceptions of these surroundings. So while it is unlikely that *Subtopia* will be endorsed by Tourism Australia anytime soon, the novel does not attempt to essentialise negative perceptions of Australia or, in particular, Melbourne. One subtext of the novel is, neither suburban Melbourne nor Australia as a whole are inherently morose.

### **Pleasure and Pain in Inner-City Sydney: *The River Ophelia***

The central character of *The River Ophelia* is Justine, a literary studies student living in the heart of that ‘world of cafes and nightclubs that stretches from Potts Point to Surry Hills’ (Wark, ‘Two Tales’). Justine is a masochist, and the novel focuses on her painful (physically and emotionally) relationship with a journalist named Sade. Ettler has stated that she framed her novel as a feminist parody of sexually-violent, male-authored literary works such as the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791) and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991) (‘Intervening’; and see also Paviour). For the most part, though, critics have read *The River Ophelia* in very different terms. For McKenzie Wark, Ettler’s novel is a literary contribution to the Melbourne-Sydney ‘divide’ described earlier. According to Wark, ‘Sydney stands for sin’ in Australia’s ‘virtual geography’, whereas ‘Melbourne stands for moralism’ (‘Two Tales’).<sup>10</sup> Wark attempts to support this point by favourably contrasting *The River Ophelia* with Helen Garner’s then-current *The First Stone* (1995). He describes Garner’s text, and the debate which surrounded it, as ‘a cliched version of what the rest of the country finds so tedious about Melbourne culture—the clash of self-important moralists, laying down the law of the land’ (‘Two Tales’).<sup>11</sup>

More commonly, *The River Ophelia* has been classified as an example of what has been variously labelled as ‘grunge’ and ‘dirty realist’ literature (Anderson, ‘Salo in Darlo’; Gelder

and Salzman 205-206; Syson). These labels have been applied to a number of fiction texts published in Australia during the mid-1990s.<sup>12</sup> The texts in question featured protagonists who belonged to the same age group as their authors (late twenties to mid-thirties), and whose lives revolved around illicit drug use, casual sex and perpetual angst. Labels such as ‘dirty realist’ are more or less self-explanatory: they imply that the texts to which they have been applied provided ‘realist’ depictions of ‘young people’ in 1990s Australia in the same way that, say, *Monkey Grip* (1977) might be read as providing a ‘realist’ depiction of ‘young people’ living in inner-city Melbourne circa the 1970s. Reviewer Don Anderson even described *The River Ophelia* as ‘a marriage between Helen Garner and the Marquis de Sade’ (50).

My contention is that reading *The River Ophelia* as literary realism is misguided. This becomes evident by simply looking at the character ‘Justine’. As Ettler herself admits, Justine is ‘unrealistic’: she subjects herself to sadistic sex acts, abuses substances (alcohol, drugs) and ‘hardly eats’ (cited in Hannaford 19). There is greater merit in reading *The River Ophelia* as a dystopian text. As with McCann’s Julian, Justine is searching for a utopia which (for most part) appears to lie frustratingly out of reach. Justine’s attitude towards Australia has gone unremarked by virtually all of the novel’s critics. Perhaps this is because her attitude seems insignificant in comparison to the novel’s depictions of masochistic sexuality. Conversely, I suggest that Justine’s anti-Australian sentiments and her dreams of utopia are significant. Indeed, they are in a continuum with her masochism.

Early in *The River Ophelia*, Justine contemplates ‘running away to America. Life was better there’ (75). This contemplation comes while reading *American Psycho*, whose author Justine refers to enviously as ‘the wealthy contemporary American novelist’ (74). Of Ellis, Justine further remarks: ‘I wished I was like him. Male, American, wealthy, successful, creative, famous’ (106). At another point, Justine spots a ‘skinny young woman prostitute’, of whom she writes: ‘I realised that I envied her and the chilly distance she maintained between herself and all that happened in the world’ (101). Justine’s animosity towards Australia is shared by several other characters. These include her psychotherapist Juliette, who declares that she will sell a collection of rare books in Europe because ‘(t)here just isn’t the market in Australia’ for them (335). Justine’s mother dismisses this statement, arguing that ‘people spoke like that about Australia years ago, but ...things have changed’ (335).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, while Justine might not describe Australia as a ‘hole’, that colloquialism encapsulates her perception of this country—to some extent. For Justine, Australia does not foster creativity or intellectualism. Australia does not value writing, or writers, or readers (and see also Juliette’s comments above). As a result, Justine wants to ‘distance’ herself from her surroundings. The ‘distance’ she achieves is suggested by her substance use, as well as a shift from first-person to third-person narration early in the novel. Though, and not unlike Julian in *Subtopia*, Justine’s fantasies of escaping to a heavenly overseas place never do come to fruition. Her limited income makes it difficult for her to pay her bills, let alone purchase an airfare out of Australia. And to state the obvious, Justine cannot transform herself into a famous American man. However, whereas Julian could only see the horror in his surroundings, Justine is more ambivalent. This ambivalence is very relevant to my reading of *The River Ophelia*, and thus bears closer examination. Consider the following passage:

There wasn't a high-rise that was high-enough – there wasn't a high-density suburb that was high-density enough ... she wanted to be right up close, she wanted to hear the sound of the horns and the hum of huge electric generators. She wanted to look out her windows at night and see miles and miles of brilliantly lit offices and apartments. (310)

For Penelope Fredericks, this passage suggests how '(t)he constant input of the urban environment becomes a necessary part of the psychic lives of its inhabitants' (103). I would go further and suggest that, in passages such as this one, Sydney's urban environment becomes a source of pleasure and pain for Justine. She doesn't want to live in this place, she wants to move to America—'life was better there.' At the same time, Justine wants to be 'right up close' to her urban Sydney surroundings. For, as she puts it towards the novel's end, her neighbourhood is 'the only place I can stand to live in this country' (385).

How to explain the differences between Julian and Justine's responses to their surroundings? To answer this question, we might first consider the gendered differences between 'suburbia' and 'the city'. Earlier, it was noted that 'suburbia' has been understood as a traditionally 'feminised' space, whereas 'the city' has been theorised as being a traditionally 'masculine' space. Fran Tonkiss elaborates on this point in her book *Space, the City and Social Theory* (2005). Tonkiss argues that 'many women's perceptions and use of urban space are restricted by logics of sexual dominance and fear' (95). This is particularly true of urban space that is deemed to be accessible to the 'public', for example, city streets. The threat of male violence which is described by Tonkiss helps to 'reproduce' traditional gender roles (put simply, these are the sexually dominant male and the vulnerable, passive female) (94).

In *The River Ophelia*, certain urban districts of Sydney are portrayed as sites of male dominance and female subjugation, at least to some degree. Justine is physically assaulted while walking home one evening (108-9). Later, she reads a newspaper article about a woman who is brutally murdered in her neighbourhood (158). A telling comparison can be made with *Subtopia*. In that novel, Julian was obsessed with female victimisation, but was himself never victimised. In *The River Ophelia*, Justine is victimised in public places. She fantasises about becoming a male American author whose most famous novel focuses on a wealthy man who prowls another city, brutally killing women.

Yet simultaneously, the urban environment of *The River Ophelia* is the site of sexual hedonism and pleasure-seeking for Justine. Ettler's protagonist seeks and engages in sexual encounters in nightclubs, house parties and apartments. An example is Justine's first dalliance with Sade, which is described in the following terms:

I hadn't even managed to lock the front door behind us when Sade grabbed me and started tearing all my clothes off. He kissed me hard and I tasted blood in my mouth. He dragged me to my bed and ripping my underpants in half pushed me down on the bed and fucked me, plunging right in up to the hilt so that it hurt ... I didn't come but was very close as he held my hips onto him and thrust in harder than before... (11-12)

The conflation of pleasure and pain that characterises sexual encounters such as these, as well as in Justine's existence more generally, is self-consciously invoked in the use of the term 'exquisite'. Witness the following conversation between Justine and her friend, Ophelia.

'The thing is,' Ophelia said ominously, making (Justine) turn around, 'the thing about all this pain (women) go through, all this love that just hurts all the time, the thing about all this pain is that it's really exquisite. It's exquisite pain. That's what makes us keep going back for more' (134).

The *Oxford Concise Dictionary* defines 'exquisite' thus: 'Of great excellence or beauty; acute, keenly felt (*exquisite pain, pleasure*); keen (exquisite sensibility) ...' (Sykes 366-367; emphasis mine). The 'exquisite pain' that Ophelia refers to invokes a stereotype of feminine masochism and suffering. Nevertheless, this 'exquisite pain' also sums up Justine's (and, indeed, Ophelia's) experience of living in inner Sydney. Living in this environment can be hurtful for Justine on a physical and emotional level, but it can also be pleasurable and 'keenly felt'—enough so to 'come back for more.' Tellingly, Justine and Ophelia are discussing sex and sexuality in a city bar. In doing this, they have reclaimed urban space for women, at least to some minor and temporary extent.

Not much has yet been said about how Sydney has been represented in what Wark refers to as Australia's 'virtual geography'. Yet some of these representations are important to my reading of *The River Ophelia*. Earlier, I cited Wark's opinion that 'Sydney stands for sin' in Australia's 'virtual geography'. A correlation between urban Sydney and sexual excess is certainly drawn in *The River Ophelia*, but there is not the sense of moralism that tends to surround the term 'sin' (Wark, 'Two Tales'). For example, Justine is not punished (e.g. by death) for her sexual transgressions. The sexuality that is given greatest emphasis throughout Ettler's novel is female sexuality.<sup>14</sup> As Wark puts it, this novel 'goes right to the limit of a woman's experience of her body, smeared across the surface of the world' (26). And, perhaps, smeared across the surface of her city. Additionally, as John Connell observes, Sydney is commonly regarded as Australia's 'global city' (1). This has long been the case (Genoni 1; Wark, *Virtual Republic* 60-83).<sup>15</sup> In his article, Connell cites relatively recent phenomena such as Sydney's rapid urban expansion and the city's 'growing role as the headquarters of a range of transnational businesses ...' (1). In *The River Ophelia*, Sydney is home to readers of 'rare books' whose popularity is perhaps strongest in 'cosmopolitan' Europe. Look also at the novel's literary style. The novel borrows characters and ideas from literary works published in the US and Europe, and plays these out in an Australian—and, specifically, a Sydney—setting. Finally, in Ettler's novel, the name 'Sydney' is never mentioned. This omission helps create the impression that Justine might be living in any major Western metropolitan centre. In one sense, then, the place that Justine wants to escape from becomes (ironically enough) the kind of place she wishes to escape to. Sydney becomes a sort of transnational utopia, even if Justine does not always recognise or experience it as such.

I have argued that *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* are striking because of the 'cultural cringe' expressed by their protagonists. McCann's Julian and Ettler's Justine both long for a

heaven that (they figure) must be there, probably somewhere outside Australia. Abjection—whether it manifests as drug use, morbid fantasies, war games or rough sex—becomes a source of rebellion and a way for them to transcend (even if only mentally) the Australian surroundings they so despise. Abjection is also a symptom of these surroundings, at least as they are perceived by Julian and Justine. However, both novels go some way towards unsettling these protagonists' 'cultural cringe' and their dreams of an overseas utopia. In *Subtopia*, Julian's hostility towards Australia says more about his own state of mind than it does about this country or (in particular) suburban Melbourne. The novel emphasises that representing suburbia in purely negative terms and pining for utopia are both equally futile. In *The River Ophelia*, Justine associates pain and pleasure with her experience of living in inner Sydney, and this is manifested corporeally in her masochism. The urban Sydney environment depicted in Ettler's novel becomes a site of 'exquisite pain'. This Sydney is also revealed to be a transnational space. This transnational space may not be too far removed from the heaven that Justine craves.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Anglo-Saxon communities' is problematic for the obvious reason that it disregards those who are not marked as 'white'.

<sup>2</sup> Ungari looks at how this stereotypical vision of Europe appears in Patrick White's novel *The Aunt's Story* (1948). Gelder and Salzman investigate how the vision of Europe as 'cosmopolitan' has featured in more recent literary works such as Robert Dessaix' *Night Letters* (1996) and Gail Jones' *Black Mirror* (2002). They also point out that a very different image of Europe is presented in Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005). In that novel, Europe is portrayed as 'literally vampiric and decayed' (119).

<sup>3</sup> In his book *The Land of Plenty* (2008), cultural theorist Mark Davis provides an astute critique of Australian political culture and national identity during Howard's tenure as Prime Minister (see especially 277-326).

<sup>4</sup> I refer to *The River Ophelia*'s author as 'Ettler' and her protagonist as 'Justine'. Ettler has certainly not discouraged an autobiographical reading of her novel (see Paviour), but this is not a reading that will be pursued here.

<sup>5</sup> Justine muses: 'Nothing can help me. Not feminism, not psychoanalysis. I'm never going to be happy' (366).

<sup>6</sup> *Subtopia* follows Julian from his teens to his late twenties. In *The River Ophelia*, Justine is described as being in her mid-to-late twenties.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the article, the terms 'urban' and 'city' are used relatively interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup> This understanding of 'national identity' owes a great deal to work by Anderson (1991), Davis (2008) and Elder (2007). Davis and Elder focus specifically on Australian national identity and culture. Anderson has famously investigated the role which imagination plays in constructions of 'the nation'.

<sup>9</sup> Though, in stating this, Melbourne's literary culture paints a different picture. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has named Melbourne as one of its 'cities of literature'. Criteria for this honour include '(a)n urban environment in which literature plays an integral part' and '(e)xperience hosting literary events and festivals, promotion foreign and domestic texts' (Arts Victoria). These descriptions do not support the stereotype of Melbourne as boring and moralistic.

<sup>10</sup> Wark has elsewhere used the term 'virtual geography' to describe a sense of geography which is 'not bound by rules of proximity, of "being there" ... It is about the expanded terrain from which experience can be instantly drawn' (*Virtual Geography* vii). Wark attributes the rise of this 'virtual geography' to various factors, including the expansion and increased sophistication of the global media during the late twentieth century.

<sup>11</sup> Wark's argument is deliberately provocative, but also erroneous. Even a cursory glance at the critical responses to *The First Stone* reveals that not all of this book's critics were living in Melbourne. Garner herself was based in Sydney at the time of her text's publication in 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Other texts that have been labelled 'grunge' or 'dirty realist' include *Praise* (1992), *Nature Strip* (1994) and *Loaded* (1995). For an incisive analysis of this minor literary phenomenon, see Syson.

<sup>13</sup> There is no room here to tease out what Ettler may be suggesting about contemporary Australian readers. On the most basic level, she rejects the idea that these readers are unable to appreciate her intertextual and poststructuralist writing style. This point is made again in her interview with the tabloid magazine *Who Weekly*. In this interview, Ettler is quoted as saying: 'Australians are sophisticated enough to understand my writing' (Paviour 56). This quote is juxtaposed with a shot of the author sitting at her computer, with a copy of Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995) in close proximity.

<sup>14</sup> Specifically, it is female heterosexuality which the novel is most interested in. For an amusing 'queer' reading of *The River Ophelia*, see Costigan. In my 2006 review of *Subtopia*, I point to that novel's homoerotic subtext.

<sup>15</sup> Wark describes the historical influence of various overseas thinkers on different strands of libertarian thought in Sydney. These thinkers include Wilhelm Reich, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In his investigation of how the Sydney Harbour Bridge has been represented in literature over time, Genoni describes Sydney as Australia's 'most recognisable international city' (1).

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